

Then Vice President Joe Biden (center) is seen during the national anthem at a welcome home ceremony for the XVIII Airborne Corps 8 April 2009 at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Biden, joined by Lt. Gen. Lloyd J. Austin III, then XVII Airborne Corps commanding general, and Command Sgt. Maj. Joseph Allen, welcomed the soldiers home from Iraq after their second deployment. (Photo by Gerry Broome, Associated Press)

Who's the Boss?

Defining the Civil-Military Relationship in the Twenty-First Century

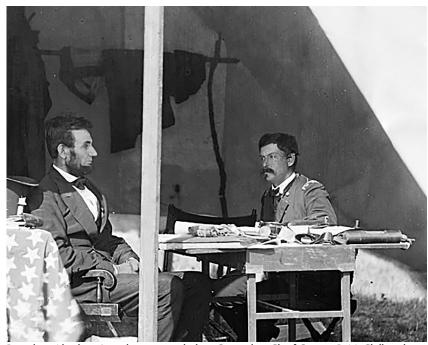
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n the summer of 2020, prominent scholars of civil-military relations publicly debated the role of the military if a sitting commander in chief refuses to leave office upon losing an election.¹ Unfortunately, the events of 6 January 2021 verified the precarious balance present in America's civil-military relationship. Exacerbating this debate is a polity removed from serving in the conflicts the public authorizes their elected leaders to pursue, with concerning implications for American democracy.² These challenges reinforce Risa Brooks's call to develop a new framework for military professionalism.3 When entering an era of great power competition and increasing political polarization, the military must decide how it will interact with the rest of the American political system.

The roles of senior military leadership and their civilian counterparts trace back to constitutional authorities as well as traditions established throughout American history.⁴ In addition to preserving the values of the republic, the articulation of this relationship has implications for the effectiveness of strategic decisions in pursuance of national interests. The military is more than simply an agent to its civilian principals. Instead, the most accurate description is that of principal-steward.

The Civil-Military Relationship

The civil-military relationship is, at first glance, a simple proposition: the civilians are always right and retain supreme authority. The Anti-Federalist Papers explain the fears that led to that conclusion, and the Federalist Papers rightfully argue how the new republic would ensure the execution of that proposition. This is one of the easiest dilemmas in American history. The cases of George McClellan and Douglas MacArthur defying Abraham Lincoln and Harry Truman are tropes so simple that they elicit very little argument for the merits of the military versus the civilian elites. However, the relationship remains complex and



President Abraham Lincoln meets with then General-in-Chief George B. McClellan about a month before relieving McClellan of command on 5 November 1862 for perceived lack of initiative and incompetence in leading the army against more adroit and audacious Confederate forces. (Photo by Alexander Gardner, courtesy of the Library of Congress)

abstract. How civilians manage the military, how the military offers advice, and what areas the military is given less oversight muddle the picture. Likewise, the information asymmetry between military elites and civilian authorities, compounded by increasingly separate cultural ideals and experiences, complicates this relationship further.⁶

Therefore, the debate over the civil-military relationship inherently involves discussion over how these two actors interact. Richard Kohn noted over two decades ago how the military had begun to actively oppose the agendas of its civilian authorities and aimed to further its own military agenda. The gap at the elite level is composed of knowledge and trust, exacerbated by civilian leadership that routinely overexaggerates military capabilities.8 The statements of military elites can affect public opinion, and much like the media, interest groups, and public opinion, the military has an influential role in policy making, though how it conducts that role is open to interpretation. The military must, to paraphrase Aristotle, both lead and be led in the political process governing the military. 10 Douglas Bland supposes that this resembles a division of labor, dividing responsibilities and sharing control between military

and civilians based on regime type.11 Meanwhile, James Burk complains that each theory of civil-military relations is incomplete, positing that any unifying theory lacks consensus along separate levels of analysis.¹² The debate has moved beyond Samuel Huntington's model of objective civilian control of the military through professionalization of the officer corps and Morris Janowitz's "constabulary" model in the last sixty years.¹³ This proposition of civilian control is less a fact than a process, cultivated over successive generations of military and civilian elites, recognizing that "effective national defense requires social, political and military harmony."14

Feaver's Agency Model of Civil-Military Relations

Peter Feaver's conceptualization of this relationship utilizes agency theory, which describes the relationship between principals and their agents. The information asymmetries and competing demands of the military and civilian actors create a principal-agent problem. To account for this, monitoring should reduce the moral hazard inherent when the military may act in its own perceived best interest, in contradiction of the desires of

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the principal. Feaver's conclusion is that in the absence of effective monitoring, the military will "shirk," following its own preferences rather than the principal's. The military is "working" when it aligns with the civilian principals, which is more likely when those principals put added effort into monitoring the military agents. For example, Feaver argues that the schism between the military and the Clinton administration stemmed from military

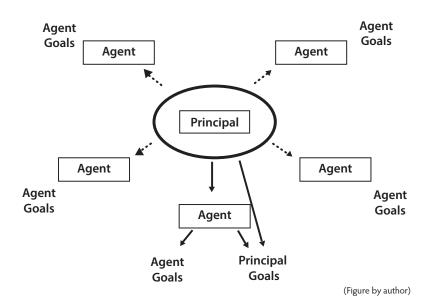


Figure 1. Centrifugal Agency Model

leaders seeking to make military considerations such as the Weinberger Doctrine paramount to political considerations in a post-Cold War era. ¹⁵ There are a few implications of taking this stance toward the relationship.

First, the agency model accurately depicts private market transactional relationships. There are usually numerous potential "agents" that the principal can hire, and there is inherent goal conflict between the principal and the agents. In addition, this information asymmetry allows the agents to use their knowledge for gain at the cost of their principal. Monitoring therefore becomes a tool of the principal to align the agents. The problem with applying this to the civil-military relationship is that military services and counsel are not bought in anything resembling a market—the military is already there the day a civilian principal steps into office. There is no competition among militaries to become an agent. In addition, the agency model negatively portrays the agent's moral and collective behavior as self-seeking, ignoring worker loyalty, pride, and identification with the organization's mission and goals, as well as ignoring the possibility of opportunistic behavior on the part of the principals.¹⁶ While the agency model may be effective at describing how the government contracts out defense to private military contractors in an era of increased privatization, it is more awkward when applied to public servants that the government has already "made."

West Point.

Figure 1 (on page 28) presents a conception of agency theory that places the principal at the center of a market with multiple agents capable of exercising on the principal's behalf. The principal can only pick one of the agents—hence, the solid lines—but that agent has its own goals that may not align with the principal. In this model, the force of movement is outward. That is to say, the only factor keeping the agents and outcomes of the relationship aligned with the desires of the principal is the hold that the principal decides to keep on the agent. Absent attention from the principal, there is nothing holding this system together. All forces are centrifugal, pulling away from the center.

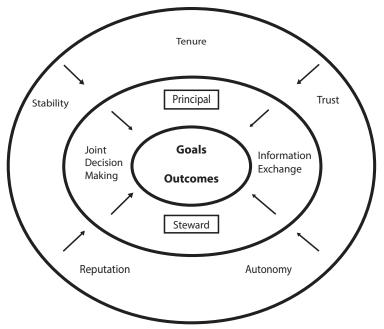
Second, civilian principals are themselves agents of the American people, contracted through the U.S. Constitution. A major tenet of civil-military relations applies to how this relationship fits with in specific regime models. How then, does one become a principal and another an agent? The "master contract" outlines the roles of all the major institutions of U.S. government but is itself cautious to grant a single branch of government the ultimate authority normally bestowed upon a principal. Congress, as possibly the most powerful branch, is given only partial authority over the military, while the president retains the rest. Further complicating this is the roles of state governors, granted their own authority over their respective state's national guards. Simply put, "The People" remain the ultimate principal in American politics, yet their representatives in the legislative, executive, and judicial spheres at the federal and state levels claim the legitimacy to speak on their behalf. The military must therefore speak to these multiple principals as well as to the American people.

Last, the agency model neglects a simple fact: government is different than private markets. Applying private practices to some public endeavors is an apples-and-oranges dilemma. There is little discussion of how public values shape decisions and affect the relationship between principals and agents. The security of the state is not only a goal of both actors but also of their ultimate principal as well. If government is doing a task, it must be because of a failure of the market to provide that task either within the confines of the market structure or due to values inherent to the regime and held by the people. Agency model does not accurately reflect this dynamic.

Conceptualizing the Military as Stewards

Stewardship theory offers a better conception for describing civil-military relations. Stewardship theory "defines situations in which managers are not motivated by individual goals, but rather are stewards whose motives are aligned with the objectives of their principals," and individual psychological attributes and organizational characteristics drive the choice to be a steward rather than an agent. 18 Similar to agency theory, it focuses on using tools such as monitoring, trust, reputation, incentives, and sanctions in contract relationships in order to achieve goal alignment between the parties to the contract. However, stewardship theory is an organizational behavior counterweight to rational action theories of management.¹⁹ While agency theory assumes goal divergence, stewardship theory assumes convergence, based in part on shared collective interests. Rather than focus on short-term arrangements centered around a zero-sum relationship, stewardship theory assumes that "long-term contractual relations are developed based on trust, reputation, collective goals, and involvement where alignment is an outcome that results from relational reciprocity," and "stewards are motivated by intrinsic rewards, such as trust, reputational enhancement, reciprocity, discretion and autonomy, level of responsibility, job satisfaction, stability and tenure, and mission alignment."20 This takes a much more long-term view, with an appreciation of a longer-term relationship. This necessarily requires higher transaction costs at the outset of the relationship, especially from the principal, "involving the steward in problem formulation, joint decision making, information exchange, and generally attempting to understand the needs of the steward" but increasing trust and reducing the need for intrusive monitoring in the long term.²¹

Stewardship theory is more amenable to describing the relationship between the government and agencies that perceive themselves as promoting the public good. Scholars have identified the unique relationship between nonprofits and the governments they work with, in relationships that resemble stewardship more than agency.²² Members of the military similarly espouse a desire to serve the public good. An organization that prides itself with ethos of selfless service and personal sacrifice inherently shares the same goals as its civilian principals.



(Figure by author)

Figure 2. Centripetal Stewardship Model

Figure 2 presents a conception of stewardship theory that places goals at the center of the system. These goals have their own gravitational force, coalescing the parties and actions in orbit around them. The principal and the steward are placed at the same level, bound together by joint decision-making processes and less-hindered exchanges of information. In the outer ring are factors such as trust and stability that exert pressure on each party to converge on the same goals. All forces are centripetal, pulling toward the center.

This poses a very different conception for the civil-military relationship. The military is neither working nor shirking in relation to the goals of the civilian principals. The military acts as a steward of the Nation's defense and the values of the Constitution. The military, to maintain its reputation, must police itself vigorously. Failure to do so may result in increased oversight and lead down a path akin to Huntington's conception of subjective control, which places legal and institutional restrictions on military autonomy.²³ The military does not have an incentive to shirk as that would only lead to a decrease in reputation. Whenever that happens, the loss of reputation and trust is of greater damage than anything gained by shirking. Civil-military literature frequently places Eliot Cohen's "Supreme Command" theory into the agency model, perceiving that

presidents meddle with and fire their military agents until they find one that will run a war as the politician sees fit.²⁴ In reality, the successful general/presidential relationships had no extra enforcement methods to ensure compliance with the political imperative than the unsuccessful ones, which the agency model would require. Instead, the successful generals were the ones that were good stewards, sharing the goals of their presidents through deliberate collaboration.

The goals that anchor the stewardship model may vary based on the three levels of regime power in American democracy: fundamental sovereignty, primary powers, and the policy making process.²⁵ On the first level, all actors can agree that the ultimate sovereign is the people. On the second level, the military must interpret regime goals from how the executive, legislative, and judicial branches exercise their specific

powers. On the third level, the military finds itself as one of many actors involved in the planning, initiating, and mobilizing support for a policy. As one looks across each level to identify the goals—or better define them, as in the nebulous term "security of the state"—the answers move from concrete to abstract, and are open to greater debate, but they are still present.

One of the most important jobs of the military is to maintain the trust of both its civilian principals and the American public. This is most important whenever there is a transition between principals. More time must be spent early on developing this trust before anything substantive can occur. Trust goes beyond simple comparisons between institutions. The principal must trust that the steward's goals are aligned.

The Call for a New Model

The old conceptions of the military relationship hinder how senior military leaders give advice to their civilian superiors. William Rapp argued this same point, noting six realities of national security policy making:

- there is rarely clear policy guidance,
- the process is iterative rather than linear,
- political decisions are rarely timely,
- mutual trust is not automatically conferred and is the result of personal relationships built over time,

- civilian and military leaders need each other, and
- the civil-military divide neglects strategy.²⁶

These realities are problematic because they conflict with the agency model. However, these realities are much more in line with the centripetal stewardship model. Rapp's realities rely on longer-term relationships and accept that people in the policy making process value their reputations more than an individual transaction as espoused by the traditional model. Further, the dialogue required in the stewardship model increases understanding and reduces the civil-military divide so that each side understands the capabilities of the other.

Embracing the stewardship model can mediate the problem of Rapp's six realities. The tenets of joint decision-making and information exchange address Rapp's first, second, and third realities. The long-term, habitual relationships stressed in the stewardship model ameliorate Rapp's fourth and fifth realities. In national security, there is a common goal between civilian and military leadership, and a lack of honest dialogue can obfuscate that fact. Military leaders who strive to be true stewards can combat that.

Implications for the Civil-Military Relationship

This discussion can offer prescriptions for how the civil-military dynamic must improve. For the military to move from agents to stewards, the burden must rest on the military. The adage still exists that the civilian principal has the ultimate authority as well as the right to be wrong. So, the burden cannot be on the principal. It must be on the steward. Embracing itself as stewards forces the military to recognize the burden it bears in ensuring healthy civil-military relations.

First, the centripetal stewardship model is a new way for officers to understand civil-military relations. Rapp argues that senior officers do not lack moral courage, but their voice is limited by a culture that emphasizes conformity and evasion from assignments with civilian thought leaders. He asserts that "personal relationships, experience, and education all matter because they lend weight and credibility to dissenting opinions." The centripetal stewardship model should be a new part of officer education early on because understanding it can change the culture that currently assumes an agency model pitting itself against civilian principals. Much

like the theories of Huntington, Janowitz, and Feaver affected how generations of officers perceive their role in the republic, so too can the stewardship model shape the next generation's perceptions.

Second, the military must identify what factors can promote stewardship within the Department of Defense. There are structural and psychological antecedents that can encourage stewardship in an organization. Leaders need to identify what those are for the military to drive organizational change. Few—if any—military leaders would claim they are not stewards of the profession of arms, but they either may not fully understand what stewardship is or their actions might be constrained by existing structural and psychological characteristics that discourage stewardship behavior. Among these could be bureaucratic politics, political or social narratives, misaligned incentive structures, or a bevy of other factors.

Third, the military must reengage the development of its trust and reputation with civilian principals. The "bargain" between the American people, the president, Congress, and the military is under a constant renegotiation that relies on trust.³⁰ Popular polls about trust in the military institution suffer from an appraisal of the tasks the military executes rather than how it conducts them. Therefore, the military is not a good instrument to measure this. If civilian leadership cannot trust that the generals are—within the constraints of the Constitution— "on their team," then the military has failed. In the debate leading up to President Barack Obama's surge of troops in Afghanistan, the president did not seem to trust the advice of his generals, feeling they were manipulating his options.³¹ Likewise, the military must avoid gaining trust based on which political party is in power.³² Finally, the tenor of negotiation in the civil-military bargain is more important than who controls it, and military leaders must show leadership by emphasizing the tenets of the stewardship model rather than posing themselves as agents competing with their civilian principals.33

The military divide from American society is concerning. The military was successful in improving public confidence since the Vietnam War due to reforms, marketing, and battlefield success.³⁴ However, confidence in the military varies inversely with contact. Less than 50 percent of civilian elites in the government with no military service had confidence

in the military.³⁵ This is a crisis of "ghettoization" reducing reciprocity between institutions.³⁶ Colford and Sugarman's suggestions aimed at greater crosspollination across civil and military institutions is a start at breaking this divide.³⁷ In policing, this resonates with the concept of community policing, where officers proactively engage with the community rather than simply respond when crimes occur. For the military, "community engagement" forces interaction at a substantial level.

The military must actively prepare for transitions in civilian leadership. Under stewardship theory, new presidents, congressmen, and civilian appointees will require greater involvement at the beginning of their terms. This is not a burden; it is an opportunity. Higher engagement at the onset must have an aim of aligning goals with the newly elected or appointed civilian principals. The fact that many civilian principals now have very little military experience makes this even more important. The military must actively engage its leaders and receive guidance. There is no need to frame threats. Military leaders must understand that their issues may be only one of many national interests their leaders are trying to address. Perhaps much of the failures associated with Afghanistan related to a lack of consensus over what goals we were trying to achieve.

Conclusion

A stewardship approach might be the ideal, though in many cases we can observe the military acting as agents. Therefore, the challenge is to get those prone to act as agents to be more collectively oriented instead and to act as defense-wide/national stewards. The military must become stewards to improve the civil-military relationship.

The description of the civil-military relationship is an abstract concept with tangible implications. Most important is how it drives the discussion of the profession of arms. Theory and scholarship drive how the profession teaches its own and perpetuates its own corporateness. Utilizing a paradigm of agency to describe how the military fits into the American political system is detrimental to the development of the profession. Instead, military officers must understand at an early point of their development how they fit within the larger context of American bureaucracy, government, and society. This better informs how officers should deal with the gray areas that they will face in their careers. Most importantly, it makes officers better prepared to deal with national security dilemmas in the twenty-first century.

Future scholarship should focus on testing stewardship theory across the Department of Defense. Certain organizations in the military undoubtedly exhibit higher levels of stewardship than others. Identifying them and determining how this develops can inform new directions for the military profession and serve as learning points for civilian leadership to understand how to cultivate a better relationship with the military. In-depth case studies articulating how a positive civil-military relationship allowed achievement of democratic goals or national security are necessary to illuminate how certain forces can push the military and its civilian principals closer together rather than farther apart.

Notes

1. Jim Golby and Kori Schake, "The Military Won't Save Us – and You Shouldn't Want Them To," Defense One, 12 August 2020, accessed 1 November 2022, https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2020/08/military-wont-save-us-and-you-shouldnt-want-them/167661/; John Nagl and Paul Yingling, "... All Enemies, Foreign and Domestic': An Open Letter to Gen. Milley," Defense One, 11 August 2020, accessed 1 November 2022, https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2020/08/all-enemies-foreign-and-domestic-open-letter-gen-milley/167625/.

2. Andrew Bacevich, Breach of Trust: How Americans Failed Their Soldiers and Their Country (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2013), 193.

3. Risa Brooks, "Paradoxes of Professionalism: Rethinking Civil-Military Relations in the United States," *International Security* 44, no. 4 (Sp8ring 2020): 7–44, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00374.

4. For brevity and simplicity, "military" refers to all services of the Armed Forces, and "civilian principals" refers to elected and appointed leaders in both the executive and legislative branch. The military is a conglomeration of disparate bureaucracies with varied missions that constantly compete with one another, while the actual stance of "civilian principals" can be hard to discern in an increasingly polarized political environment. For more discussion, see James Q. Wilson, *Bureaucracy* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); or Bartholomew H. Sparrow, "Who Speaks for the People? The President, the Press, and Public Opinion in the United States,"

- Presidential Studies Quarterly 38, no. 4 (December 2008): 578–92, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5705.2008.02665.x.
- 5. Alexander Hamilton, "Federalist Papers: Primary Documents in American History," nos. 10, 24–28, 69, Library of Congress, accessed 8 November 2022, https://guides.loc.gov/federalist-papers/full-text.
- 6. Information asymmetry is a central tenet of agency theory. In the civil-military context, military elites have a much greater knowledge about military operations than the civilians who direct them to conduct those operations. The decreasing number of veterans in Congress only exacerbates this dilemma. Even without that trend, the modern battlefield is more complex and dynamic than ever before, making it even harder for civilian elites to fully understand or stay attuned to military operations compared to military elites.
- 7. Richard H. Kohn, "Out of Control: The Crisis in Civil-Military Relations," *The National Interest*, no. 35 (1994): 3–17.
- 8. Rosa Brooks, "Civil-Military Paradoxes," in *Warriors & Citizens: American Views of Our Military*, ed. Kori Schake and Jim Mattis (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2016), 21–68.
- 9. James Golby, Peter Feaver, and Kyle Dropp, "Elite Military Cues and Public Opinion About the Use of Military Force," *Armed Forces & Society* 44, no. 1 (January 2018): 44–71, https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X16687067.
- 10. Aristotle, *The Ethics of Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics* (London: Penguin, 1976), 275–9.
- 11. Douglas L. Bland, "A Unified Theory of Civil-Military Relations," *Armed Forces & Society* 26, no. 1 (Fall 1999): 7–25, https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X9902600102.
- 12. James Burk, "Theories of Democratic Civil-Military Relations," *Armed Forces & Society* 29, no. 1 (Fall 2002): 7–29, https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X0202900102.
- 13. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1957); Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait*, reissue edition (New York: Free Press, 18 July 2017).
- 14. Douglas L. Bland, "Patterns in Liberal Democratic Civil-Military Relations," *Armed Forces & Society* 27, no. 4 (Summer 2001): 525–40, https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X0102700402.
- 15. Peter Feaver, "Domestic Politics and the Long War," in Lessons for a Long War: How America Can Win on New Battlefields, ed. Thomas Donnelly and Frederick Kagan (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2010), 11–32.
- 16. Lex Donaldson, "The Ethereal Hand: Organizational Economics and Management Theory," *Academy of Management Review* 15, no. 3 (July 1990): 369–81.
- 17. Paul H. Appleby, "Government Is Different," in Classics of Public Administration: Seventh Edition, ed. Jay Schafritz and Albert Hyde (Boston: Wadsworth, 2012), 122–26.
- 18. James H. Davis, F. David Schoorman, and Lex Donaldson, "Davis, Schoorman, and Donaldson Reply: The Distinctiveness of Agency Theory and Stewardship Theory," *Academy of Management Review* 22, no. 1 (July 1997): 21, https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1997.9707180258.

- 19. lbid.
- 20. David M. Van Slyke, "Agents or Stewards: Using Theory to Understand the Government-Nonprofit Social Service Contracting Relationship," *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 17, no. 2 (2007): 157–87, https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/mul012.
 - 21. Ibid.
 - 22. Ibid.
 - 23. Huntington, The Soldier and the State, 690.
- 24. Eliot Cohen, Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime (New York: Free Press, 2002), 4–8.
- 25. James W. Ceasar, "In Defense of Separation of Powers," in Separation of Powers: Does It Still Work?, ed. Robert A. Goldwin and Art Kaufman (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1986), 168–93.
- 26. William E. Rapp, "Civil-Military Relations: The Role of Military Leaders in Strategy Making," *Parameters* 45, no. 3 (Autumn 2015): 13–26.
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- 29. For a great example of how narratives can affect how services view themselves and what they think they must do, see Conrad Crane, Avoiding Vietnam: The U.S. Army's Response to Defeat in Southeast Asia (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2002), 14–19.
- 30. Mackubin Thomas Owens, "Is Civilian Control of the Military Still an Issue?," in Schake and Mattis, *Warriors & Citizens*, 69–96.
- 31. Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 324–88.
- 32. For more evidence and discussion, see Jason K. Dempsey, *Our Army: Soldiers, Politics, and American Civil-Military Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 152–92.
- 33. Mackubin Thomas Owens, US Civil-Military Relations after 9/11: Renegotiating the Civil-Military Bargain (New York: Continuum, 2011), 158–70.
- 34. David King and Zachary Karabell, *The Generation of Trust:* Public Confidence in the U.S. Military Since Vietnam (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 2003), 80–85.
- 35. Peter Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, eds., Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security, BCSIA Studies in International Security (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 459–68.
- 36. The decrease in percentage of Americans serving in uniform combined with basing consolidations because of base realignment and closure decisions have created pockets of military communities segregated from the rest of American society. This physical separation from most Americans may save money but it also prevents contact between society and military communities that could foster integration, dialogue, and understanding.
- 37. Matthew Colford and Alec J. Sugarman, "Young Person's Game: Connecting with Millenials," in Schake and Mattis, *Warriors & Citizens*, 245–64.