AFTER IRAQ:
The Politics of Blame and Civilian-Military Relations

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PHOTO: Family and friends wait for their loved ones to disembark the USS *Pinckney* during a homecoming ceremony in San Diego, 30 September 2007. The ship returned from a six-month deployment as a part of the USS *Nimitz* Carrier Strike Group. (U.S. Navy, Mass Communication Specialist Seaman Matthew N. Jackson)

WHILE AMERICANS ARE widely distributed across the political spectrum and are closely divided between the Republican and Democratic parties, our all-volunteer military is more politically conservative and more Republican. Regardless of which party Americans endorse, their attitudes toward U.S. military members are more favorable now than they have been in modern memory. Public approval and appreciation of the U.S. armed forces has increased as military service has become the exclusive province of volunteers. However, the differences between military and civilian society may be cause for concern when the war in Iraq winds down. This discussion explores how competing post-Iraq narratives may lead to a broadening of divisions between military professionals and the civil society they defend.

The differing perspectives of Samuel Huntington and Morris Janowitz have framed thinking about civil-military relations for the last four decades.[1] Huntington saw the professional military as a national institution entrusted with the power to apply lethal force on a nation's behalf. He saw it as a warrior caste that could and should differ from civilian society in certain important respects. Huntington considered this difference as instrumental to achieving the military's goals and argued that an effective military's officer corps should stand apart from the society that it is meant to protect.

Janowitz, on the other hand, favored a conception of civil-military relations that integrated military and civilian institutions. In his view, civilians and members of the military interact with one another extensively. Here the prototype of the senior military leader is the warrior-scholar-statesman well versed in the contingencies of both war and national politics. Further, Janowitz considered military service a key responsibility of male citizens and one that provided a vital crucible of common experience similar to that in classical Greek city-states' citizen armies. Concerned that the bonds between military and civil society might weaken, Janowitz questioned the wisdom of moving to an all-volunteer force when the United States abolished the draft in 1973. Such a force could make the loyalties of Soldiers eventually diverge from the society they protected.

It is now clear that what Huntington advocated and Janowitz feared has happened: the military has indeed become different from civilian society in many respects, including politically.

Competing Narratives

Within the military, the U.S. struggle in Iraq has provoked searching appraisals and examinations of preparations for the war and its conduct. This

is especially true of the Army and Marine Corps, who are finding that understanding and assimilating the lessons of the Iraq war will be as complicated and controversial as was coming to grips with the lessons of Vietnam. For example, Greg Jaffe of the *Wall Street Journal* has described what he calls "failure narratives," or potential explanations, for our difficulties in Iraq that reflect nascent analyses internal to the military.[2] As military institutions grapple with the lessons of Iraq, a parallel process is taking place in the political arena. Those outside the military, especially politicians responsible for national policy, are also constructing narratives, and this process, too, has potentially far-reaching implications for the U.S. military.

In addition to the failure narratives, a competing "success narrative" is also under construction. The decline in casualties and improved stability in Iraq, which are attributed to General David Petraeus's troop surge and shift in strategy, have encouraged a sense of vindication among many of the war's most vocal advocates. Increasingly, the surge's success is cited as evidence of the wisdom of the administration and the weakness (or worse) of its critics. Just as assessments on progress in the war became a matter of partisan dispute, the surge and its long-term effects will become controversial, especially when questions about future courses of action in Iraq return to the front burner.

As the public debate about Iraq unfolds, there is a risk that the currently cordial relations between civil and military society may be threatened. One cannot yet know exactly how or when the Iraq war will end, or how most Americans will eventually judge the venture, but one can speculate about the future. The blame game is well underway, and it does not bode well. Many who have not yet taken the field in this contest of competing narratives are warming up on the sidelines.

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The Blame Game

Discussions and debates about the conduct of the war will have a greater impact on civil-military relations over the next several months. The mistakes the U.S. made in the run-up to war are shared, by commission or omission, broadly across the political spectrum. However, ending the war will more clearly be the responsibility of the victors in the 2008 elections (or their successors). America will have to make important decisions about its future role in Iraq over the next several months, as the strains on its forces build and as American expectations of the Iraqi government increase. The United States will make these decisions against the backdrop of a presidential election campaign during which some politicians may attempt to use the military to legitimize their policies or candidacies (at least rhetorically).

At issue will be who to blame for what has gone wrong up to that point, and who to blame if things go wrong in the future. The question, "Who gets the blame for mistakes made in prosecuting the war in Iraq?" has shifted focus since the surge. The 2007 increase in the number of boots on the ground and the new counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy in Iraq mark an important transition in public perceptions of the war. The administration's decision to surge additional troops to Iraq despite congressional and public opposition provoked an acrimonious debate that foreshadows the next phase of the blame game. Congress debated the inclusion of timelines for withdrawal from Iraq in legislation and the administration's plan to surge additional troops to Iraq. The administration and its supporters attacked those who advocated timelines for troop withdrawals or reductions (mainly congressional Democrats) by portraying them as opponents of our troops in the field, determined to cut off funding for Soldiers in harm's way, to "cut and run," and to offer our enemies easy victory by setting a "surrender date," thus throwing away our chances for "victory."

The administration also worked hard to identify the surge as the preferred strategy of respected, competent military authorities, not politicians. They frequently invoked the views of commanders on the ground to justify the policy and praised General David Petraeus' COIN expertise, academic credentials, and earlier successes in Iraq. As a result, the public's perception of the military (particularly

its leaders) is now linked to the success or failure of the surge (and the war). The post-surge blame game will implicate senior military leaders far more directly than they have been thus far.

Of Endings Bad and Less Bad

The focus of the blame game is now shifting to exit strategies. The manner, timing, and consequences of the inevitable withdrawal from Iraq will be the ultimate points of contention over which blame will be assigned. It seems likely that when this war concludes, it will not be widely seen as a decisive victory for the United States. According to a December 2007 poll, a majority of Americans think historians will eventually judge the Iraq war to have been a failure.

Surprisingly, a survey of military families in the fall of 2007 found that 60 percent of them thought that the war had not been worth the cost.[3] Even the attitudes of active-duty military members reflect substantial skepticism about the prospects for success in Iraq, although active-duty military members are more optimistic about the outcome than is society as a whole.[4] Approval of Bush's administration among service members is surprisingly low, despite the strong Republican Party leanings of many service members (although it is still higher than the Bush administration's approval rating among civilians). As the prospects for clear military victory have slipped away, the political focus has shifted to the contest over perceptions. How will the cultural legacy of this conflict be shaped?

Stab in the Back?

The German Imperial General Staff consoled itself with the "stab-in-the-back" myth after Germany's capitulation in World War I. It viewed Germany's surrender as wholly political and not justified by military circumstances. This idea resonated powerfully with ultranationalist groups throughout the Weimar era and contributed to Hitler's rise to power in 1933.

The Vietnam War was a social and cultural watershed for America. Many Vietnam veterans felt betrayed when they returned home amid controversy over the war. Today some feel the U.S. accorded them little of the respect and gratitude now so generously given to veterans of current operations. Some Americans and many veterans believe "stab-in-the-back" antiwar protests at home led to restrictions on the use of military power that tied the hands of the military and caused South Vietnam to fall to the Communists. Others point to misguided policies that top civilian and military leaders pursued at the time. In the coming months, variations of these two failure narratives about Iraq will likely surface.

When the inevitable drawdown begins in Iraq, the battle to interpret the war will begin anew. Thus far, respect for the troops in the field has somewhat muted partisan conflicts over the war. However, divisive, destructive instances of social conflict have occurred. Some compare those who question current administration policy in Iraq with participants in the Vietnam antiwar movement and counterculture. Others on the political right seek to lay exclusive claim to the loyalty of military members by asserting that the media, "liberal elites," and others who oppose administration policy have anti-military, antiwar, and anti-American tendencies. Similarly echoing policy disagreements in the Vietnam era, many on the left summarily dismiss the administration's vision of an achievable and sustainable political-military solution in Iraq.

Military Attitudes

As the war ends, the military community may become much more vocal in this debate. Many people who have served in Iraq or in the military want to help shape the war's historical legacy, as do family members, veterans' groups, and advocacy groups. The nature of military opinion depends on who is in the military. The Vietnam era military brought career Soldiers and volunteers together

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with draftees. (Approximately 25 percent of those who served in Vietnam were draftees; in World War II, 66 percent were draftees.) Soldiers in Vietnam were younger than today's are, almost exclusively male, less likely to be married, and generally served for shorter periods than in Iraq.[5] Another important shift in the military is in its geographic and ideological demographics: the members of our volunteer military come disproportionately from the South, tend to be politically and religiously conservative, and are more politically aware and active than previously. Between 1976 and 1996, the percentage of military officers who described themselves as non-partisan or politically independent dropped from more than 50 percent to less than 20 percent, and the percentage that identify themselves as liberals or Democrats is a fraction of that in the larger population.[6] Hence, the military today appears to be more politically and religiously conservative than ever before.[7]

That said, some question the extent of the divergence between military and civilian political leanings.[8] However, Admiral Mike Mullen's recent letter to service members reminding them of the importance of the military's staying outside politics bespeaks a certain degree of concern about political attitudes within the military.[9] According to Thom Shanker of the *New York Times*, "Admiral Mullen said he was inspired to write the essay after receiving a constant stream of legitimate, if troubling, questions while visiting military personnel around the world. He said their questions included, "What if a Democrat wins?" and, "What will that do to the mission in Iraq?" and, "Do you think it's better for one party or another to have the White House?"

What ultimately matters is not just demographics, but the respective cultures of the two groups. As we consider the end game in Iraq, some characteristics of contemporary military culture are also worth considering. The view among some service members that the military is not only different from civilian society but also morally and culturally superior to it is especially pernicious.[10] Some in the military envision a culture war pitting conservative, often religious-based beliefs, argued to be more compatible with military

DOD, Cherie A. Thurlby

Antiwar protesters at the Senate Appropriations Committee hearing in Washington, D.C., 9 May 2007. Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates is in the foreground.

life, against the liberal, permissive views allegedly rampant in U.S. society.[11]

Because service members are volunteers, and civilians do not share the hardships service members accept, many in the military are not especially receptive to civilian opinions. Some are tempted to ask the illogical but emotionally charged question, "If I'm in Iraq, and you're at the mall, which of our views has more moral authority?" There is also a strong sense among military members that average Americans simply do not know what is going on in Iraq because they are too far removed from the military experience or because the media distort news reports from Iraq, focusing only on sensational, negative events while ignoring good news.

In spite of the substantial skepticism about the war's costs within the military, service members also view the Iraq war as a success in a way that civilians do not or cannot. The repeated, lengthy deployments, the hardships of service members and their families, and of course, the casualties, motivate many service members to see the sacrifices they and their families have made in an unerringly positive light. American Soldiers are willing to sacrifice, but for a noble purpose—no one wants to waste their lives and livelihoods on a moral mistake. In this case, while critics repeatedly suggest, "the war has been lost," the only acceptable narrative for sacrifice is the administration's rhetoric about noble victory. Even though these critics do not blame the

military for this predicament—the administration is at fault—service members find it nearly psychologically impossible to agree with them. Civilians have less of a personal stake in seeing things the administration's way.

Such views suggest that as the end game unfolds, military members' opinions are not likely to conform to external ideas, opinions, or interpretations of the war, or coincide with those of the body politic. Because the military appears demographically different from civilian society and the interests of service members and civilians do not completely overlap, military opinion in the blame game may reflect a more insular perspective derived from the conservative institutions that serve as many members' emotional and intellectual homes.

Yet, although its politics are far from representative of American society, the military is also far from politically monolithic. Beliefs and attitudes of military members vary across different services, ranks, positions, specialties, and experiences. Strong conservative voices in the military community tend to squelch those that are less hidebound (e.g., consider the ostentatiously religious shift that has occurred in the military over the last several years). A countervailing belief held by many service members is that allegiance to the Constitution of the United States supersedes political party affiliation and religious ideology. Furthermore, the strains of the last five years have probably altered the cultures of the services (especially the Army's) in ways not yet fully appreciated. Therefore, the ultimate shape and form of the military's contribution to the end game discourse can only be a guess.

Veterans' Attitudes

A wider range of considerations than those dominant during the war may determine the military community's attitudes after the war ends. During the war, the focus is on security and defense policy. With troops in harm's way, the military's main concern is wise stewardship of our armed forces. Is the mission a reasonable one? Are we giving our troops the resources they need to accomplish it? These considerations have helped produce the conservative views of many service members. After the war, though, increasing numbers of service members who served in Iraq will transition into the veteran community. The Iraq war's scale and duration ensure that the veteran community will be a sizeable one.

The interests and attitudes of veterans will be more diverse than those of the military community during the war and may even conflict with them. Estimates of the costs of caring for the Iraq war veterans range into the hundreds of billions of dollars. Competition for federal budget dollars is always intense, but veterans will be eager to secure benefits for their service in the war. Post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury are difficult to diagnose and expensive to treat, a combination that, like Agent Orange after Vietnam or Gulf War Syndrome in the 1990s, has the potential to alienate some veterans from the government if they perceive that the country is breaking faith with them, for example, by inadequate funding of research and treatment programs.

How will veterans respond as the veteran community begins to coalesce in the aftermath of the war? Perhaps we can find the best clue to what lies ahead in the groups that have already come together. One such group, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), has staked out a centrist/left of center position on war policy, but it is staunchly pro-troops in its fundamental orientation. In contrast, the focus of the Iraq Vets against the War is on resisting and ending the war. Another group, VoteVets, is a registered political action committee with the goal of electing Iraq veterans to public office. Still another group, Vets for Freedom, takes an ideologically conservative, staunchly pro-administration line. The existence of these groups illustrates the political complexity within the veteran community. Which voice will become the "official" voice of Iraq and Afghanistan vets?

A crucial factor here is the refusal of any of these groups to yield the moral high ground with regard to patriotism. In the 1960s and 1970s, Vietnam Veterans against the War advanced critiques of the Johnson and Nixon administrations' conduct of the war that many Americans perceived as anti-American, disrespectful to the military, and insulting to the sacrifices made by veterans. The Vietnam antiwar movement's willingness to concede the American flag to supporters of the war sharpened this perception. Indeed, the burning of the American flag remains an enduring symbol of opposition to Vietnam War policy. Today, Paul Rieckhoff of IAVA

Vice President Dick Cheney, left, President George W. Bush, and Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates meet with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Peter Pace, right front, and the Joint Chiefs in the Pentagon on 31 August 2007.

we worked hard to achieve. Whatever lies ahead, the United States Army will have all the equipment, supplies, manpower, training, and support essential to victory. I give you this assurance on behalf of the President. You Soldier for him, and he will Soldier for you."[13]

Secretary Gates reminded freshly minted military officers of the strong connection between the military and the society it serves, by identifying the Constitution, the Congress, and the press as bulwarks of our freedom. This perspective contrasts, at least in emphasis, with the vice president's invocation of a bitter partisan fight in Congress over a funding measure that a Republican president won against Democratic opposition, an invocation that concluded with an affirmation of mutual loyalty between the Army and a man: the President.

and others oppose Bush administration policies but have thus far been successful in speaking for veterans without being attacked as left-wing bomb-throwers. More than anything else, the veterans' refusal to be proxies in a larger cultural and political struggle offers hope for positive civil-military relations as the blame game begins.

The View from the Top

In his 30 May 2007 commencement address at the United States Air Force Academy, Defense Secretary Robert Gates reminded the graduating class that the Congress and the press are "two pillars of our freedom under the Constitution," that "members of both parties now serving in Congress have long been strong supporters of the Department of Defense and of our men and women in uniform," and that "as the Founding Fathers wisely understood, the Congress and a free press, as with a non-political military, assure a free country".[12]

Four days earlier, Vice President Richard Cheney had addressed the graduating class at West Point at their commencement. The vice president alluded to the political disagreement and controversy that had raged over Iraq policy: "Last night, President Bush signed into law the war supplemental that

This is the fulcrum on which the prospects for good civil-military relations will likely turn in the immediate future: however asymmetric the respective demographic profiles of the military and civil society may be, so long as the tradition of a non-political military is honored and respected, cordial and stable relations between our military and society can be maintained. The wild card that may trump the traditions established over two centuries is the conjunction of a politically imbalanced professional military with aggressive partisan attempts to exploit that imbalance during a time of great turmoil and uncertainty.

Discussions of civil-military affairs nearly 40 years after the force became an all-volunteer force and a half-century after Huntington's book *The Soldier and the State* must embrace new realities: the force is different from the society it serves, and national leaders are attempting to exploit those differences in service of their political objectives. Moreover, we stand on the threshold of an uncertain but probably unsatisfying conclusion to a grinding, unpopular war. What lies ahead for civil military relations?

Discussion

The failure narratives described by Jaffe currently focus on the military itself. To be sure, there are different perspectives and competing interests represented: those of the military services, senior and junior officers, and officers with different views on the right way to do counterinsurgency, but none of the narratives focus on the role of civil society. In the future, the political right may find it expedient to deflect blame for what has happened or what might happen away from the Bush administration and onto the next administration, the media, or the majority of Americans skeptical of the war. They may try to do this by articulating a new "stab-in-the-back" theory that focuses on the news media, liberal elites, and a permissive and decadent civilian society as the source of the rot.

While it is too early to tell what the long-term effects of the strategic shift associated with the surge will be for stability in Iraq, the surge's effects on domestic discussions of the war are now plain. Media coverage of the war has taken on a more muted, if not positive, tone in the last few months, and is likely to remain so for the next several months, barring any dramatic change in the situation (such as an Iraqi Tet Offensive).

The lull at home resulting from the surge in Iraq will ensure that however we began the Iraq war and conducted it, the administration that takes office in January 2009 will manage its resolution. Those who see the Iraq glass as half full now may later see it as half empty (or worse) if there is a partisan shift in control of the government this fall.

Tensions between the public and the military may grow after the war. The new administration may be Republican, and if so, a "stay-the-course" strategy will conflict with the weight of public opinion and the realities of an increasingly strained defense establishment. The ensuing disputes over Iraq policy will rekindle the debates that erupted over the surge. If the new administration is Democratic, right-wingers will probably attack its new Iraq policies as evidence of a lack of concern, support, and respect for military members and their sacrifices. Members of the military may be politically disposed to respond to such representations by adopting attitudes consistent with the seductive "stab-in-the-back" way of thinking. Such a development would be both divisive and destructive of the great progress in civil-military relations that has taken place since the Vietnam War.

As the end game unfolds, there is every reason to think that the blame game will intensify. Once the war is over, the stakes will be the historical and cultural interpretation of what happened, an interpretation that has the potential to shape American political fortunes for years to come. On the surface, civil-military relations have never been better, but the underlying structural asymmetries between military and civil society could be crucial under certain conditions. Let us hope that our politicians and generals will resist the temptation to make good relations between our citizens and our Soldiers the last casualty of the Iraq war. *MR*

NOTES

1. See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957) and Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier* (New York: The Free Press, 1971).

2. Greg Jaffe, "Critiques of Iraq War Reveal Rifts among Army Officers," *Wall Street Journal*, 29 June 2007. These narratives include an institutional failure to internalize the proper counterinsurgency lessons from Vietnam, overuse of large conventional formations instead of special operators and precision munitions, and an institutional leadership culture that is straining relationships between junior and senior officers and preventing adaptation to new conditions.

3. Faye Fiore, "Bush Loses Ground with Military Families," The Times/Bloomberg Poll, *Los Angeles Times*, 7 December 2007.

4. Tobias Naegele, "Poll: Despite Misgivings, Troops Optimistic On Iraq", *Army Times*, 7 January 2008.

5. Richard K. Kolb of *VFW Magazine*, cited in "Military Mirrors Working-Class America," David M. Halbfinger and Steven A. Holmes, *New York Times*, 30 March 2003.

6. Triangle Institute for Security Studies, cited in "Military Mirrors Working-Class America," David M. Halbfinger and Steven A. Holmes, *New York Times*, 30 March 2003.

7. Military leaders do not appear to be dramatically different from civilian leaders demographically when it comes to religious identification, but there are substantial differences in attitudes between military leaders and civilians on many issues that are religiously charged. In authoritarian institutions, numbers do not tell the whole story, as the influence of a few increases, if they are in high positions. (See Ole Holsti, "Of Chasms and Convergences: Attitudes and Beliefs of Civilians and Military Elites at the Start of a New Millennium," in *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security*, Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, eds. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

8. D. Driver, "The 'Military Mind' and American Political Discourse: Case Studies in the Public Philosophies of Soldiers and Citizens," presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, Town and County Resort and Convention Center, San Diego, California, USA Online, <www.allacademic.com/meta/p100548_inex.html>.

9. Thom Shanker, "Military Chief Warns Troops About Politics," *New York Times*, 26 May 2008.

10. See, for example, Thomas E. Ricks, *Making the Corps* (New York: Scribner, 1997).

11. The finding recently that seven officers (four of whom were generals) improperly participated in a fundraising video for a Christian evangelical organization in the Pentagon illustrates the point. Air Force Major General Jack Catton, one of the officers singled out for criticism, stated, "I'm an old-fashioned American, and my first priority is my faith in God, then my family, and then country." Catton contended that the Christian Embassy, which reportedly has held prayer meetings with the military for 25 years, was a "quasi-federal entity." (Cited in Josh White, "Officers' Roles in Christian Video Are Called Ethics Breach," *Washington Post,* 4 August 2007). Many Americans may be surprised to learn that some of their generals hold such attitudes. (See Louis Hansen, "Langley General Could Be Punished for Role in Christian Video," *The Virginian-Pilot*, 8 August 2007).

12. Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, "Air Force Academy Commencement: Remarks Delivered by Secretary of Defense, Robert M. Gates," 30 May 2007, <www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1157>.

13. Office of the Vice President, "Vice President's Remarks at the United States Military Academy's Commencement," 26 May 2007, <www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/05/20070526-1.html>.