

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and not of the Department of Defense.

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PHOTO: Governors Chet Culver, from Iowa, and Martin O'Malley, from Maryland, greet soldiers from the 573rd Clearance Company, 1st Engineer Battalion, from White Sands, N.M., at Contingency Operating Base Speicher, Iraq, 27 February 2010. (U.S. Army, Spec. Jessica Zullig)

ROR SERVING U.S. military officers in particular, the distinction between political *understanding* and political *involvement* is crucial to fulfillment of their professional obligations embodied in the oath. According to Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 1, *The Army*:

Through this oath, soldiers affirm subordination to the Nation's elected civilian leadership and *abstain from* public political involvement. Soldiers voluntarily give up freedoms fellow citizens take for granted and become subject to military discipline and regulations. Soldiers accept unlimited liability in the service of our Nation. This becomes the foundation of our profession.²

While accepting the necessity of U.S. Army soldiers' abstention from "public political involvement," or partisanship, this essay argues for more nuanced understanding of what it means to be *political* while serving in uniform and suggests that the current aversion to "politics," broadly conceived, creates a paradox that threatens the effectiveness of the Army in the decades to come.

We conflate "political" and "partisan" at our Nation's peril. As ADP 1 notes:

The land domain is the most complex of the domains, because it addresses humanity—its cultures, ethnicities, religions, and politics . . . Soldiers . . . accomplish missions face-to-face with people, in the midst of environmental, societal, religious, and political tumult. Winning battles and engagements is usually insufficient to produce lasting change in the conditions that spawned conflict.³

Rather than seeking to remain aloof from politics in a quixotic quest for ill-defined "professionalism," American soldiers have an obligation to seek greater understanding of the political context in which they operate, whether domestic, multinational, or hostnation. As Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 6-22, *Army Leadership*, notes, "In today's politically and culturally charged operational environments, even direct leaders may work closely with unified action partners, the media, local civilians, political leaders, police forces, and nongovernmental agencies."

The Army must remain both professional and nonpartisan, because we are in danger of being politically uninformed professionals, not uniformed professionals. The Army's reticence to acknowledge the political dimension within which strategy, operations, and tactics nest is a significant contributing factor to our shortcomings in Iraq and Afghanistan, a mistake we can ill-afford to repeat should we find ourselves in Syria or other emerging hotspots in the coming decades.

The "Apolitical" Myth

To a large degree, the modern myth of the American military's "apoliticism" is rooted in Samuel Huntington's thesis from *The Soldier and the State:* the more "professional" an army, the less likely it is to intervene in domestic politics. His thesis includes a corollary: political intervention in the military's professional sphere jeopardizes its apoliticism by treating it as merely another political interest group, while respect for a distinct area of professional competence ensures an "apolitical," noninterventionist military.⁵ If the politicians only stay out of the military's affairs, the military will not meddle in the domestic politics of deciding who ought to rule.

Huntington's justification for an inviolate military sphere stems from a selective quotation of Clausewitz. Huntington writes, "The political objective is the goal, but in Clausewitz's words, it 'is not on that account a despotic lawgiver; it must adapt itself to the nature of the means at its disposal. . . ." This quotation from Huntington is in the context of a discussion about the imperative for politicians to set achievable goals for the military, but it fails to capture the ultimate point Clausewitz was making, as the full quotation demonstrates:

If we keep in mind that war springs from some political purpose, it is natural that the prime cause of its existence will remain the supreme consideration in conducting it. That, however, does not imply that the political aim is a tyrant. It must adapt itself to its chosen means, a process which can radically change it; yet the political aim remains the first consideration. Policy, then, will permeate all military operations, and, in so far as their violent nature will admit, it will have a continuous influence on them.⁷

Rather than justifying a military sphere devoid of political or policy interference, Clausewitz is arguing quite the opposite, despite Huntington's attempt

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to demonstrate otherwise. However, the military has fully embraced the Huntingtonian myth, and used it as a justification for a "membrane" between the political and military in order to create an autonomous professional sphere, contrary to Clausewitz. The result has been the U.S. Army's obsession with tactics and the operational arts, arguably to the detriment of strategy, "A prudent idea or set of ideas for employing the instruments of national power in a synchronized and integrated fashion to achieve theater, national, and/or multinational objectives."

In the academic literature, Huntington's normative thesis has been roundly criticized for its theoretical and empirical shortcomings. Despite this, his ideas continue to influence many practitioners on both sides of the civil-military divide in America, such as during the first Gulf War, when President George H.W. Bush remarked: "I did not want to repeat the problems of the Vietnam War (or numerous other wars throughout history), where the political leadership meddled with military operations. I would avoid micromanaging the military." ¹⁰

In contrast, then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell lamented the lack of guidance from Bush in response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. While the military as an institution might prefer latitude to constraining guidance, as Powell recognized, it creates the danger of military operations becoming divorced from the strategic and policy objectives of our civilian masters, which is arguably what happened when the first Gulf War failed to unseat Saddam, the implicit policy goal of the first Bush administration. There are similar critiques of U.S. policy objectives in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Contrary to this conventional wisdom on professional, apolitical armies, the author of this essay accepts Hew Strachan's thesis "that armies are inherently political institutions only restrained from intervention by the political environment in which they find themselves," irrespective of their level of professionalism. Theo Farrell likewise notes it is possible to have a "professional" military that does not adopt "norms of civilian supremacy as part of its professional identity and

practice," depending upon "circumstances . . . peculiar to the state in question." The institutional construct and norms internal to the military may reduce its propensity to intervene in domestic politics, but more important are the institutions of the wider polity.

In the context of the United States, the danger of the most explicit form of military involvement in domestic politics—a coup—is unthinkable. However, this is because of the health of democracy and its institutions and not because of an inherent unwillingness of the state's military to intervene (though the military itself continues to cultivate the "apolitical" myth). ¹⁶

Thus, so long as the domestic political structure maintains its legitimacy in the eyes of the electorate, efforts to increase the political understanding of the military should not threaten democracy in America. Rather, it should be possible for the military to be political, but nonpartisan.

Whether by Huntingtonian professionalization or other means, attempts to depoliticize the military jeopardize the ultimate effectiveness of the



President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama applaud U.S. service members and their families at Pope Field at Fort Bragg, N.C., 14 December 2011, during a speech about the end of the war in Iraq and military families' sacrifices.

fighting force. At some level, all armies are ideological. The superior's exhortation to more junior soldiers that they must be "above," "outside," or "aloof from" politics might be well intended, but it fails to acknowledge the fact that defense of a regime by force of arms is inherently political and grounded in the political ideology of the state.

American soldiers and officers do not take an oath to their government. Rather, the oath is to the Constitution. Thus, from enlistment or commissioning onward, a soldier is engaging in politics by defending the state and the ultimate authority on which the state rests. Such allegiance therefore cannot be "apolitical." However, it is possible to engage in the political act of defending the state "against all enemies, foreign and domestic" without engaging in the partisanship that undermines civilian control of the military.

Being called "political" by one's military peers is almost universally considered a slur on one's character in the American military, though it seldom refers to the partisanship ADP 1 cautions against. Given the widely held suspicions of the media and its perceived liberal bias among many American service members, the slur was likely reinforced when The New York Times used the term as a form of praise when discussing General David Petraeus during his command of Multi-National Force-Iraq (MNF-I).¹⁷ From the other side of the domestic political spectrum, The Wall Street Journal editorial page roundly criticized the current chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff for his endorsement of his then likely future boss, former Senator Chuck Hagel, on the Sunday morning shows not long before his successful nomination as secretary of defense.18

The difficulty is that the term "political" has many meanings. The understandable desire to avoid a *politically involved* armed hierarchy—a potential genuine threat to a democratic government—has meant that those in uniform who express *political understanding* are suspect in the eyes of their peers (and, often also, their civilian masters). Both of these terms might be described in short hand as "political," despite the difference in meaning. The lack of nuance when lumped together under the catch-all term has catastrophic potential in three spheres: domestic, multinational, and host nation.

The Domestic Context

In the domestic sphere, the risk of an "apolitical" military is that it will produce senior military officers willfully unaware of the political context in which they operate, thereby enabling them to give "purely military" advice to their civilian masters that may be wholly inappropriate to achieving a given policy objective. However, in some cases this is the fault of politicians because of requests for such "purely military" advice. Often though, it is because senior officers hide behind "professionalism" in refusing to consider the politics of a situation when offering counsel to civilian leadership. In the American context, one of the most damning examples of this was the failure of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during Vietnam to provide the secretary of defense and the president with the candid advice they needed to formulate successful policies. 19 Likewise, Paul Yingling's critique several years ago about the general officer corps in the modern era suggests this might not be a uniquely historical problem.²⁰

Particularly in "limited" or "small" wars, the successful conduct of the campaign rests on the government's ability to sustain political will and popular support at home; in comparison, it is relatively straightforward to maintain political will and



U.S. Army captains, Nathan Dyer, left, and Jonathan Dyer, twin brothers, take the oath of office 2 July 2011, at Forward Operating Base Salerno, Afghanistan (U.S. Air Force, 1st Lt. Bart Lomont)

popular support in a war of survival. This is the second domestic component of political understanding required of those in uniform. Service men and women at all levels must understand that anything they do or fail to do during operations in the field or in garrison could in some way affect this delicate balance.

At the end of the 20th century, the commandant of the United States Marine Corps, Gen. Charles C. Krulak, coined the term "strategic corporal" to capture the idea that those in the lowest tacticallevel unit had the potential to affect outcomes at the highest strategic level, disproportionate to the rank on their sleeve.21 While the term would be anathema to the U.S. military, perhaps more accurate than "strategic corporal" might be "political corporal," because the ultimate level—and ultimate commander—is not strategic, but political. Military hierarchies incorporate the need to understand "commander's intent" down to the lowest levels, yet fail to recognize that the ultimate commander—the president of the United States—likewise has his or her own political "commander's intent" that must be understood in order to ensure success of a military mission. Political ignorance may result in tactical success yet strategic failure—winning battles, but losing the war. A service member unaware of the political context in which he or she operates is in danger of inadvertently damaging the domestic political consensus upon which a mission is based, just as subordinates might undermine a "purely military" objective if they fail to understand the higher commander's intent. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, however, casualties per se are not what undermine domestic political support for operations. Rather, it is the American public's assessment of the likelihood of success.²²

The Multinational Context

The danger of politically ignorant service members is only compounded in a multinational context.²³ Contemporary operations require military personnel to interact with the multinational partners at all levels of command, whether the American Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) and his British deputy SACEUR, or British and American forces fighting side-by-side for Musa Qala during Operation Snakebite in December 2007.²⁴ As the former deputy commanding general

of MNF-I, Lt. Gen. Sir John Kiszely, notes, "in a coalition the commander, particularly the force commander, has a job that is significantly more complex, arguably more demanding, *certainly more political*, requires the commander to exercise command in a very different way, and places considerable additional demands on his time."²⁵

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At the most senior ranks, an example of the apolitical myth mindset in action is Gen. David McKiernan's interview with Der Spiegel in August 2008, when he was then double-hatted as the commander of NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and U.S. Forces-Afghanistan. When asked about the national caveats on German forces under his command, McKiernan responded:

If there is something the German military cannot do that the American military can do, then the decision has been a legal and political decision back in Germany, and I accept that. But as a soldier, I don't understand it. I don't understand ever putting your men and women in harm's way without their having the full ability to protect themselves. That also means operating on actionable intelligence to defeat insurgents and protect your forces. That's how you keep your soldiers alive.²⁶

Despite being the most senior strategic commander of all alliance and coalition forces in the field, McKiernan continued to operate under the false premise that domestic politics in the capitals of the troop contributing nations might somehow not intrude into his headquarters. Moreover, he was willing to publicly doubt German tactical limitations "as a soldier," to a German publication, no less, failing to recognize the constitutional limitations on the Bundeswehr's ability to deploy to "wars," owing to the country's complicated relationship with the legacy of Nazi aggression and the institutional checks the United States helped install during post-World War II occupation.²⁷

While the potential impact is generally less at the lower ranks, Krulak's "strategic corporal" waits in the wings. Better that the corporal is cognizant of the potential strategic—or, as this essay would argue, political—impact of his or her actions and interactions with multinational partners. In the author's experience serving alongside coalition partners in Multi-National Force-Iraq, it was vital that even company grade officers and soldiers understand the domestic political constraints of other troop contributing nations. The ability of particular contingents to travel outside the wire might be more limited in the run-up to an election in the contingent's home capital, for instance. If American service members were unaware of the context of such limitations, it could lead to friction when one coalition partner had unrealistic expectations of what another contingent could offer tactically at a particular point in time.

If the "apolitical" service members of each state are ignorant of the political context in their own capitals, what is the likelihood they will understand the political context in the capitals of their alliance or coalition partners? This is not to suggest that service members should take a normative position about domestic politics, whether in their own capital or those of a coalition partner. This is long-standing advice, as even the *Instructions for American Servicemen in Britain* cautioned in 1942 against criticizing the English King. ²⁸ In a modern context that is the partisanship to be avoided in the interest of good order and discipline. Instead, what is required is political awareness and understanding.

The Host-Nation Context

Operationally, contemporary conflicts in which America has been engaged in the post-Cold War era have frequently been with the government of the state in which they are operating as an ally rather than enemy, most obviously MNF-I in Iraq and NATO ISAF in Afghanistan with the Maliki and Karzai governments, respectively. As the British chief of the General Staff, Gen. Sir David Richards, emphasized when he was the commander, ISAF—

The close Political/Military interaction with the Government of Afghanistan [GOA]...[is a] defining factor of NATO's operations in Afghanistan ... the multinational force in Afghanistan has to listen to civil partners, both from the international community and, more importantly, the Afghan Government and people themselves, for without their buy-in we will never have a lasting solution.²⁹

Richards went on to assert, "this is where NATO will, in the final analysis be judged . . . Did we work tirelessly, *in partnership with the GOA* and Afghan people, for culturally acceptable solutions to Afghan problems?" The implication of Richards' observations is that political ignorance within the ranks may be a serious complicating factor in the accomplishment of the alliance's mission on the battlefield. Just as service members at all levels need to understand the political context of their own country and of their multinational military partners, understanding is required of the political context of the host government on whose behalf those in uniform are fighting, bleeding, and dying.

Soldiers advising in the establishment of ministerial-level security forces who are politically ignorant are likely in danger of replicating the creation of "professional" but politically involved armed forces, such as those of Pakistan, owing to the weakness of Pakistani civilian political institutions into which the professional army was introduced following the division of the British Indian Army. The same could be said of Mali, where the "professional" troops trained by American Special Forces were instrumental in the coup overthrowing the civilian government and contributing to the deteriorating security situation that ultimately led to the French-led intervention and eventual UN peacekeeping mission. ³²

Likewise, the U.S. military's ability to devote resources to capacity building of a host-nation military dwarfs that of our civilian counterparts, and could actually be working at cross-purposes to the wider mission of creating political stability. In the author's experience advising within the Iraqi Ministry of Defense, our ability to train intelligence officers far exceeded the wider U.S. government's ability to assist the Iraqi government with creating the necessary democratic institutions to exert civilian control over the Ministry of Defense. Contrary to Huntington, our implicit assumption that the way to ensure the Iraqi military's nonintervention in domestic politics was through the creation of a "professional" Iraqi military may have laid the seeds for Iraqi democracy's eventual demise by creating a relatively cohesive organization that could ultimately usurp power from elected civilians leading weak institutions.

Moving Forward

While apoliticism is arguably one method of ensuring military aloofness in domestic politics, the

result, particularly in highly politicized "small" or "limited" wars fought by multinational forces, is an increased likelihood that service members—whether generals, majors, sergeants, or privates—will misunderstand their domestic, multinational, and host-nation environment out of political ignorance. Returning to Clausewitz, "The less involved the population and the less serious the strains within states and between them, the more political requirements in themselves will dominate and tend to be decisive."33 Service members might inadvertently engage in activities that are tactically appropriate but damaging at the strategic and political levels in their home capitals, those of the other multinational forces, and the capital of the state in which they are waging the campaign. In the words of Gen. Sir Rupert Smith, the former UN commander in Bosnia and later NATO deputy Supreme Allied Commander, Europe, force will lack utility.³⁴

To ensure political understanding, particularly in the officer corps, the U.S. Army ought to expand interagency and multinational broadening



Participants of the 2013 Army Congressional Fellowship Program receive a familiarization briefing from Egon F. Hawrylak, deputy commander of the Joint Force Headquarters-National Capital Region and the U.S. Army Military District of Washington, about the command's vast roles and responsibilities within the National Capital Region, 26 November 2012.

opportunities. Just as a select few captains and majors immerse themselves in the American legislative process on Capitol Hill through the Army Congressional Fellowship Program, so too ought we send such liaisons to the legislatures of our closest allies, certainly to the Australian, British, Canadian, and New Zealand Parliaments. The same could be done at the state level with National Guard officers completing fellowships in a state legislature or governor's office. Likewise, the Army should expand its Interagency Fellowship and create similar programs with allies' counterpart civilian agencies. Just as a U.S. Army interagency fellow at the U.S. Agency for International Development gains a greater appreciation for the complexities of working across departments, so too would a multinational fellow learn the difficulties of working across national boundaries in the British government's Stabilisation Unit or Department for International Development. Finally, for regionally aligned brigades, senior noncommissioned officers (NCOs) and officers should habitually rotate and embed as one-year liaisons in the units of the countries alongside which those brigades would likely deploy on contingency operations, developing an understanding of the domestic context in which those troops serve and bringing such expertise back to the liaisons' home-station brigades.

This exhortation for political understanding must come with caveats. "To reject Huntington's ideas of sequestering issues of policy from those of military administration and operations is to open the way to a military that is politicized and, by virtue of its size and discipline, a potentially dominant actor in the conduct of foreign and international affairs."35 Cohen's warning, though, returns to the term "political," and this is where the distinction between political *understanding* and political *involvement* is crucial. In no way does this essay argue for anything that undermines the norm of civilian control of the military inherent in the American political system. The legal limits on free speech for service members have been upheld in courts of law and the degree of permissible participation in domestic politics must remain sacrosanct if elected civilian leaders are to be able to trust the military as an institution following a change of administration.

Just as a subordinate officer salutes and follows orders once a decision has been made regardless of personal opinion about the order (so long as it is a legal order), so too must the military salute and obey its civilian leadership, regardless of the outcome of an election. But equally, just as a commander must understand the higher commander's intent, the military must understand civilian intent; doing so requires political understanding, not partisanship. According to ADP 1, the political-cultural field [of professional knowledge] prescribes how personnel and units operate effectively across and outside the Army's institutional boundaries. Land operations require cooperation with other Armed Forces, foreign militaries, other government agencies (our own and those of other countries), and all manner of human societies."36 Our neglect of the politicalcultural field of professional knowledge is the greatest threat the U.S. Army faces in 2020 and beyond. **MR**

NOTES

^{1.} Title 5, U.S. Code, Section 3331.

Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 1, The Army (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO] September 2012). Emphasis added.

^{3.} Ibid., 1-1. Emphasis added.

^{4.} Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 6-22, Change 1, Army Leadership (Washington, DC: GPO, 10 September 2012).

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).

^{6.} Ibid., 68.

Carl von Clausewitz, On War, ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), 87. Emphasis added.

^{8.} Joint Publication 1-02: Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms (Washington, DC: GPO, 8 November 2010 [as amended through 15 April 2013]), 268. For the U.S. Army's post-Vietnam focus on the operational level of war, culminating in Operation Desert Storm, see Shimon Naveh, In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory (London: Frank Cass, 1997), particularly chap. 7 and 8 and the afterword. For the strategic shortcomings of Operation Desert Storm, see Eliot A. Cohen, Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leader-

ship in Wartime, 1st Anchor Books ed. (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 188-99.

^{9.} For a review of the criticisms of Huntington, see Eliot A. Cohen, Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime, 241-55; Peter Feaver, Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations (Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 2003), 16-38; Dale R. Herspring, The Pentagon and the Presidency: Civil-Military Relations from FDR to George W. Bush, Modern War Studies (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 5-11.

George H.W. Bush and Brent Scowcroft, A World Transformed (New York: Random House, 1998), 354.

^{11.} Colin Powell and Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), 449.

^{12.} For the influence of Huntington's ideas on the practice of American civil-military relations in the Gulf War, see Eliot A. Cohen, Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime (New York: Free Press, 2002), 188-99. For the tendency of bureaucracies—especially uniformed services—to prefer autonomy, see James Q. Wilson, Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It (N.p.; Basic Books, 1989), 179-95.

^{13.} For Iraq, see Thomas E. Ricks, Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq (New York: Penguin Press, 2006); for Afghanistan, see Seth G. Jones, In the

Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010).

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- 22. Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler, Paying the Human Costs of War: American Public Opinion and Casualties in Military Conflicts (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).
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- 24. Stephen Grey, Operation Snakebite: The Explosive True Story of an Afghan Desert Siege (London: Viking, 2009).
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 - 36. ADP 1.



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