

Down the Tubes?

How Failed Leadership Succession Harms National Security

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If you are thinking one year ahead, plant rice. If you are thinking ten years ahead, plant trees. If you are thinking a hundred years ahead, educate your people.

—Ancient Chinese Proverb

On 4 September 2023, three senior political appointees, military service secretaries, penned a controversial opinion piece in *The Washington Post* decrying the continuing “hold” on senior leader promotions by the U.S. Senate. The authors argue that blocking the confirmation of a growing number of senior military leaders puts national security at risk by preventing leadership succession at critical posts around the world by the military’s most experienced, battle-tested leaders. The op-ed authors identify and warn readers how dangerous inaction by the U.S. Senate to approve the succession of senior military leaders will have long-lasting consequences to national security and for those that continue to serve and their families, for civil-military relations, and for bipartisan efforts in the future.¹

No doubt, this is a politically charged issue that is much more nuanced than the debate readers see unfolding in the mainstream media. Some of the explosive, tangential wedge-issues connected with this issue have engaged citizens on edge. Despite tangential political issues, the current “standoff” in the U.S. Senate is about political positioning, and political and electoral advantage. This article tries to negotiate this minefield to focus on foundational concerns related to

civil-military relations and leadership succession. The U.S. Senate’s hold on military promotions is interesting from a civil-military relations perspective because it offers the most current example of how the military is increasingly politicized by both sides of the political spectrum in an attempt to achieve political and electoral advantage with the American public. It is interesting from a leadership (or lack of leadership) perspective because of the challenges associated with ensuring deliberate strategic leadership succession strategy implementation.

While the issues identified by the service secretaries are certainly and critically important, there are equally concerning problems that need to be addressed. For one, other important federal government institutions like the State Department have historically and consistently suffered from the same Senate inaction and have for decades. The Senate confirmation process is broken; foolish, partisan, political brinksmanship is to blame. Probably most important to note, internal institutional leadership succession management may be broken as well. In the end, there is a great deal of “house cleaning” that must be done, both within our political processes, as well as within our institutions.

First, consider the Department of State. The American Academy of Diplomacy recently circulated an article published by *The Dallas Morning News* excoriating the U.S. Senate confirmation process and arguing that rabid partisanship and polarization are damaging U.S. national security interests. The author, Ambassador John Feeley, criticizes the U.S. Senate for

failing at a basic constitutional responsibility—ensuring the succession of leadership in U.S. ambassadorial posts around the world. He writes, “In today’s politically polarized environment, politics has putrefied our diplomatic statecraft.” Political leaders now prioritize and

is with the U.S. Senate’s extended delay and hold on military promotions, what are the consequences? The answer is simple. When the Senate fails to fulfill its constitutional responsibilities to ensure the deliberate, informed, advised, and timely succession of military

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pursue partisan ideological differences rather “than any genuine American national interest.”²

As elected officials remain embroiled in partisan politics, unwilling to fund governmental institutions adequately and predictably, experts suggest that America’s diplomatic power suffers from “unilateral reduction” in its State Department civilian workforce. While Chinese diplomatic posts are funded at record levels with more diplomatic stations around the world than the United States, the American Foreign Service Association reported in early August that nearly 25 percent of American embassies have no Senate-confirmed ambassador.³ As of this writing, thirty of 194 embassies remain vacant with no Senate-confirmed ambassador.⁴ The message is clear—from a diplomatic perspective, America is “missing in action,” failing to show up and compete in a self-proclaimed era of great-power competition.

Second, consider the private sector. When a large, multinational corporation fails to properly plan for and execute timely leadership succession, studies show that they can “forgo an average of \$1.8 billion” in value.⁵ Across S&P 500 companies, poorly managed leadership transitions in corporate America cost nearly \$1 trillion a year in lost market value.⁶ When public or private institutions fail to plan and prepare for leadership succession, it creates internal crisis and turmoil, loss of institutional confidence, weakened competitiveness, questions of leadership viability, and enormous opportunity costs. It is a fundamentally flawed, false, dangerous, and costly proposition to argue that orderly, deliberate leadership succession does not harm an organization.

Third, consider the military institution. When leadership succession is negatively impacted, as it currently

leadership, real harm can be done. The negative effects of leadership gaps slow down the “business” and process of national security and military operations. A process that may already be perceived as inefficient becomes more laborious and glacial in pace. Decisions are delayed, planning efforts slow, progress stops, and America’s enemies and adversaries gain short- and long-term advantages. To emphasize the issue, at the senior executive level, strategic decisions are being made each and every day. In the current standoff, these decisions are delayed.

Fourth, consider military elites. When military senior leaders are designated to “plug the hole” and take on additional responsibilities and authorities, their workload multiplies exponentially, and critical “checks and balances” are voided. The higher the rank, the higher the significance and gravity of decisions. To avoid failure and poor decisions, many of which may be existential for military service members, important actions, operations, and initiatives decelerate and atrophy as organizational bottlenecks develop, and the bandwidth of leadership is constrained. Big decisions are being made by fewer senior executive officers. The risks inherent in this dynamic are significant!

Fifth, consider collateral damage. Consequences of Senate inaction also affect military morale, retention, and recruitment; individual soldier welfare; and the welfare of military families as promotions and pay

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are negatively impacted, financial stress mounts, retirements are stalled, transitions are disrupted, and families are stuck in limbo. Military families are forced into geographical separation. The costs of maintaining multiple residences destroys financial savings, college funds, and safety nets. Military spouses face employment challenges, and families

players on the field and having holes and gaps in the offense and defense. Howard asks, “What sort of coach would force the concept that other players can fill” holes on a team by dividing up critical responsibilities? “It is amazing that a head coach would minimize the impact of missing positions on a team,” she concludes.¹¹ Ramping up the political rhetoric, advocates

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stress over questions related to where they will live and where their children will attend school. Future military leaders are watching, taking notes, and seeing how political charades can have real impacts on their families. These future senior leaders are questioning how long they will continue to serve. They are increasingly deferring or withdrawing from leadership and promotion opportunities. And, for the first time, military families, one of the largest sources of military recruits, are increasingly advising their sons and daughters not to serve.⁷

Dr. Peter Feaver, an expert on civil-military relations and national security, states that recent political antics to freeze military promotions is “a gift” to U.S. adversaries, “a gift that keeps giving day in and day out.”⁸ A host of active-duty generals concur, some calling partisan actions that create gaps in military leadership succession “reprehensible, irresponsible, and dangerous.”⁹ The incoming chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Charles Brown Jr., testified that ill-informed, elected-official actions can and will cause the military to lose experienced, seasoned talent, while the recently retired commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen. David Berger, called on the Senate to “do their job” in confirming qualified military leaders for promotion and succession.¹⁰

Retired senior military officers are also calling out partisan political antics. Using a simple football analogy, Adm. Michelle Howard, former vice chief of naval operations, recommends senators try to think like a successful football coach, understanding the challenges and impacts that would be created by missing

for military families have called such actions “highly inappropriate and unpatriotic,” while veterans’ groups lament that senators “who never served in uniform” should not be able to hold hundreds of military families “hostage.”¹²

Finally, every former secretary of defense has reinforced the message that playing politics with military leadership succession harms U.S. national security. And, it harms civil-military relations. In a letter to Senate leadership, these senior civilian leaders expressed the dangers of “leaving these and many other senior positions” vacant and in doubt.¹³ They argue that “at a time of enormous geopolitical uncertainty,” playing politics with military leadership succession debilitates U.S. strategic deterrence and signals weakness and divide to U.S. enemies and adversaries.¹⁴

Yet, for the U.S. Army, these issues beg the question—what is the state of leadership succession management internally? The U.S. Army is not perfect when it comes to ensuring a deliberate succession of leadership. In the Army’s capstone doctrinal field manuals, succession of leadership and command is an afterthought relegated to an appendix. For most of the Army, “succession management” is really about “replacement management.” For most of our careers, we see a rigid, “command centric,” “seniority-based,” “up or out,” “next leader up,” and “plug and play” replacement strategy implemented. As Army War College studies have demonstrated, the Army has significant room to improve and implement succession management, which is more complex and focused on strategic, long-term forward movement of an organization.¹⁵

Visionary leaders like Gen. George Marshall believed in “deep succession planning,” placing huge emphasis on officer education and professional development.¹⁶ Interestingly, from 1995 to the post-9/11 era, the percentage of general officers with graduate degrees from in-resident, full-time, civilian academic institutions dropped by nearly one-third, leading the Army War College and former U.S. Army Training and Doctrine (TRADOC) commander, Gen. Robert Cone, to write and talk about “a rising anti-intellectualism in the Army officer corps.”¹⁷ Cone stated that he was “truly disturbed” by reduced civilian graduate schooling for senior officers and a general disdain for institutional assignments.¹⁸ Likewise, this same internal war college study found that officer education is “dead last” in priority of officer attributes, and “the most prized officer attribute is combat experience.”¹⁹ While this may make sense to a degree, it is debilitating to real institutional leadership and institutional leadership succession strategy.

Lacking a leadership succession strategy results in leadership that is insufficient to “develop expertise critical to the Army profession,” particularly as it relates to the Army institutional arm responsible for U.S. Title 10 mandates.²⁰ The result may be the assignment of repetitive cohorts of senior officers that lack institutional expertise needed to contend with strategic issues. Superbly talented warfighters that excel in brigade, division, and corps-level command are now filling senior executive positions within the Army, but may be exceptionally challenged or “unable to lead institutional adaptation.”²¹ Many may blindly call for driving change, but do not have a vision for the change they want to drive, are “unable to provide change leadership,” and, at the end of tenure, have little impact on moving the Army forward.²²

While a vast majority of military service-members are promoted on merit, at the most senior levels, promotion through the ranks can be increasingly reliant on personal relationships, networks, or legacy last names.²³ A former TRADOC commanding general expanded on this charge in a 2018 interview. He describes the Army’s strategic leadership selection process as having critical flaws. Describing newly minted one-star generals, he states,

They’ve done an exceptionally good job in their career to this level but just find it very difficult when they pin on a star because up

until this point they’ve been doing a lot of things that they’ve been doing all along, just on a larger scale. And some officers just aren’t intellectually prepared to make the transition. ... We promote maybe forty out of 4,000. In that group of forty, you’ll have maybe one or two [who] are capable and intellectually equipped to think and perform at the strategic level. You may not have any. And not every great Division Commander is meant to be promoted either. They just don’t necessarily see the world strategically. ... We still promote GOs to four stars that are “frozen in time” as great brigade commanders.²⁴

The TRADOC commander’s colleague added, “The military has a lot of two- and three-star senior leaders that were confident, charismatic commanders at the O-6 level. But that’s the end of the story. One in fifty, maybe one in a hundred truly have what it takes to operate successfully at the strategic level and make a real difference for their service. The problem is that they all tend to think that since they have stars on their shoulders they’re the one.”²⁵

A former chief of staff of the Army echoed concerns about how the Army develops and promotes senior leaders. He states, “The services tend to develop leaders more in the context of ‘what to think,’ not ‘how to think’.. and it hurts our flag officers when they reach three- and four-star level.”²⁶

Clearly, failure to provide strong leadership or ensure deliberate, well-planned leadership succession and continuity is a constant challenge and charge for both public- and private-sector organizations and their respective appointed leaders. For governmental institutions, particularly the Departments of State and Defense, or for military institutions like the U.S. Army, there will always be room for improvement in how leaders, ambassadors, generals, and admirals are educated, developed, and selected to serve in positions of greater responsibility. These internal challenges will persist, and military leaders and senior civil servants will remain accountable for meeting these charges.

Doing the job well, ensuring best efforts to fulfill fiduciary responsibility, and posturing organizations and institutions for long-term success and security is hard enough in the current, complex, competitive,

international environment. Dutiful oversight and accountability by political overseers adds another dimension of complexity. Our elected officials must be up to the task of meeting their constitutional responsibilities. Unfortunately, not all are.

On 11 September 2023, Congressman Michael McCaul described the hold on military nominations as a paralyzing national security problem for the nation, as well as for the Department of Defense.²⁷ McCaul has not shied away from criticizing extreme partisanship in Congress, previously describing the current political environment as a circus populated by “clowns” that spew vile, slanderous rants and demonize opposition, all in an effort to gain media attention and raise money.²⁸

In the context of leadership succession, for both military and diplomatic posts, partisan interference causes self-inflicted and purposeful political wounds. It creates strategic imbalance and disadvantage, intentionally hobbles American competitiveness, and negatively impacts American diplomacy and national security. This destructive brand of partisan politics and the prioritization of electoral advantage over national interests must be viewed and negotiated as a domestic threat to our Constitution and national security. ■

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the Army University, the Department of the Army, or the U.S. government.

Notes

Epigraph. Anonymous, commonly attributed to Confucius.

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