

Civil-Military Relations: “What Does It Mean?”

I remember one of the secretaries of defense for whom I worked telling me stories about his time as an undergraduate at a prestigious Ivy League university. One of his most vivid memories was of “movie night” each Sunday when dorm rooms would empty into common areas and students would watch the movie of the week together. One of his classmates would always sit in the last row of seats and at some opportune moment in the movie scream out, “What does it mean?” As he described it, the outburst was always met with some combination of laughter and jeers, but he always marveled at his classmate’s ability to pick just the right moment to make his noisy intervention.

There is an analogy there somewhere about the topic of civil-military relations. After two decades of war, dramatic changes in the information environment, creeping and sometimes lurching political polarization, and declining trust in the institutions of government, it feels like an opportune time for us to collectively ask of civil-military relations, What does it mean?

For the past 20 years, since I first became a general officer, I have thought deeply about what it means. I conclude that civil-military relations should not be taken for granted. They really are important, will remain intensely scrutinized, and are much more about relationships than rules.

So here are a few thoughts about the subject from my own journey as a practitioner and steward of civil-military relations to introduce the remarkable assembly of national security experts in this anthology.

The importance of civil-military relations is self-evident but bears repeating. Frequently. The Department of Defense is the biggest department in the United States government with the biggest budget share. It is the nation’s (and world’s) largest employer, with most of its “employees” serving all across the country and globe. It relies on the goodwill of the American people to fill the ranks of the all-volunteer force. And, of course, it is the only department in government that, if it chose to do so, could physically threaten our democracy.

It is for these reasons—especially the popularity of the United States military—that politicians seek to burnish their image as advocates and supporters of the military. It is for these reasons that managing the relationships between senior military and senior elected officials can be very challenging. It is for these reasons that not only the concept but also the

practice of civilian control of the military—the essence of democratic civil-military relations—is so vital.

Civil-military relations have always been challenging, but in my judgment they have become progressively more difficult in the twenty-first century. In 2011, just before I became chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, retired Army general Fred Franks pulled me aside at an Army football game and asked if I'd thought about the challenges of providing military advice to civilian leaders in the information age. He reflected that in his time, strategic plans, policies, and decisions were generally private matters among national security professionals and elected officials until the moment of execution. He lamented that recently everything seemed to be played out in plain sight, under intense scrutiny, and with relentless and sometimes demeaning partisan criticism that he feared influenced decisions and adversely affected the relationship of the military with the population it serves in an unhelpful way. And that was 2011!

Clearly, civil-military relations do not exist in a vacuum. They respond to the times. To be sure, there is always some friction between senior elected officials—who are in control of the instruments of national power for some limited amount of time—and senior military officials with decades of experience managing one of those instruments of national power.

However, some factors can increase this friction. Periods when the nation and its military are engaged in foreign conflict understandably heighten interest in civil-military relations and complicate them. So too do periods of social change. Obviously, times of acute pressure on the federal budget put added pressure on civil-military relations. Perhaps less obvious is the effect of midterm and national elections. For example, when both the White House and the Senate are in the hands of the same party, oversight of senior military leaders in Washington is generally "kinder," perhaps even "gentler." When the White House and the Senate are in the hands of different parties, oversight is generally more contentious.

The goal is to keep the friction productive. That goal requires both civilian and military leaders to acknowledge the implications of civil-military relationships not just for themselves in their particular moment in time, but on behalf of the American people and for future generations of civilian and military leaders.

In my time as chief of staff of the Army and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, I advised senior military leaders that they are responsible for 60 percent of the task. In simplest terms, I suppose that would be the corollary of Eliot Cohen's assertion that the discourse between the military and elected officials is always an "unequal dialogue." But because

civil-military interactions often rise and fall, or succeed and fail, on personal relationships, that simple assertion doesn't do justice to the complexity and difficulty of managing and measuring the effectiveness of civil-military relations.

Actually, civil-military relations seem to me to be best measured in the willingness of senior leaders—civilian and military—to do the hard work necessary to achieve a common understanding of two important factors impacting national security decisions in a political environment. These factors are the *loyalty question* and the *hidden hand of culture*.

Factor #1: The Loyalty Question

Whether we acknowledge it or not, the first thought that crosses the minds of civilian and military leaders when they first meet is the question of loyalty.

Civilian leaders enter the relationship worried that their military colleagues may be either too assertive or too passive with them, that they are likely to be wedded to existing policies and unwilling to consider alternatives, and that they will be uncompromising on matters of resourcing. Civilian leaders—especially politically appointed civilian leaders—are expected to demonstrate considerable loyalty to those who appointed them, and they worry that their relationship with the military might rub uncomfortably against that loyalty.

Military leaders enter the relationship worried that their civilian colleagues may be either too assertive or too passive with them, that they may want to change existing policies based on politics regardless of whether existing policies are working, and that they will disrupt the carefully crafted future years' defense budget for some pet project. Military leaders remind their civilian colleagues frequently that their loyalty is to the Constitution and to the American people, and they worry that their relationship with civilian leaders might rub uncomfortably against that loyalty.

Their second and distant thought is whether they believe their colleagues are competent. For the most part, they each take that as a given in the relationship.

Considering that military and civilian leaders begin to interact frequently with each other as decision-makers at the colonel and GS-15/SES levels, our interest in helping them understand the loyalty question should begin there and continue throughout the remainder of their careers.

At the pinnacle of my career, I built a relationship with President Obama—and with President Bush before him while serving at Central Command—aware that I would only be effective if I could gain his trust

through a shared understanding of loyalty. I ensured him I understood that it was my duty to give advice but that he didn't have to take it. I added that he would never hear my opinion about issues in the media or in congressional testimony before I had discussed it with him in the Situation Room or the Oval Office. Finally, I stated that once he made a decision, I would execute it without hesitation unless it was illegal. In return, I suggested that I could only fulfill my responsibilities to him if he were as open as possible with me and included me in deliberations about the use of military power. He agreed. As one White House chief of staff described it to me later, we came to an understanding that we would discuss "nothing about you without you."

The relationship wasn't without its challenges, but it worked. What is essential to understand is that the loyalty question is always present in the room and that a positive civil-military relationship takes consistency and transparency.

Factor #2: The Hidden Hand of Culture

Much has been written about the military's powerful and unique culture. Military leaders dress, talk, and often act alike. As a profession, the military has its own system of values reinforced by a career-long education system. It is expected to police itself, an expectation reinforced by its own military justice system.

One of the most predictable influences of military culture is in the way military leaders confront problems, whether in peace or in war. This is part of the hidden hand of culture that sometimes creates tension and breeds mistrust between civilian and military leaders.

In confronting problems, military officers are trained to deliberately chart a course from an expected outcome or objective backwards to ensure that any course of action considered will accomplish the mission within acceptable boundaries of risk and resources. In our interactions with civilian leaders, military leaders will therefore always want to know what objective our civilian colleagues are trying to achieve first—what end state they are trying to create—before offering options to decision-makers.

To the extent that civilian elected and appointed officials have a common culture, it is a culture that seeks to create opportunities and preserve options for those who hold political power. To be sure, our civilian colleagues obviously want to succeed at whatever task they are assigned, and I have always found them to be sensitive to the human cost of military operations. At the same time, I have found that civilian leaders generally do not want to be pinned down to a particular path—and in so doing

become immediately accountable in the court of public opinion—until absolutely necessary. Therefore, when confronting a problem—especially a national security problem—they are likely to ask for options first. As a result, civilian and military leaders can often find themselves in a chicken-and-egg conundrum debating which comes first, objectives or options.

A corollary to this disconnect about whether to begin civil-military deliberations with objectives or options is the potential for disagreement about how much civilian oversight is appropriate once military options are undertaken. Military leaders generally believe that the less civilian oversight in the conduct of operations the better. Not surprisingly, civilian leaders generally believe that they should have whatever oversight they deem necessary to keep senior civilian leaders informed. Consequently, there can often be an unhelpful debate about what constitutes oversight and what constitutes micromanagement.

Furthermore, civilian and military leaders often disagree about how to assess and respond to risk. At times, civilian leaders strongly advocate for the use of the military, and at times they argue against it. The argument is often based on risk. In those arguments, the military can be portrayed as either too cautious or too cavalier about risk. In the eyes of the military, civilians can be either dismissive of risk or risk averse. Such debates can become a difficult cycle.

Actually, it is debatable—and often debated—which group is more risk averse, civilians or the military. But what is not debatable is the certainty that civilian leaders will want to know their options before committing to an end state, and military leaders will want to know the end state before presenting options. It is not debatable that civilian leaders will want more oversight, and military leaders will complain about micromanagement. It doesn't make either of them wrong, or malicious, or negligent. It is just how they see the world.

Another important aspect of this hidden hand of culture phenomenon is the way it is viewed by junior leaders not yet in the civil-military arena and by retirees who have left the arena. Junior leaders—civilian and military—are often the most critical of the state of civil-military relations. Some of this mindset stems from an innate and healthy idealism. It also arises from limited access to the information available to their seniors who are actually making the decisions. In any case, in the information age, they have a voice that affects the way the public comes to understand civil-military relations.

Retirees, too, have a voice. Because of their experience and credibility, their voice matters in defining the state of civil-military relations in our

democratic system. Nevertheless, I have long argued that retirees, in particular, must take care not to make things more difficult for their successors—those actually accountable for our national security—than they tend to be even under normal circumstances. That does not mean that they should never speak. But when they do, their message must justify that risk.

The effect of the hidden hand of culture on civil-military relations can be quite corrosive. Debates about national security are always high stakes and often highly emotional affairs. If cultural differences are not addressed—preferably before issues arise—military leaders can conclude that their civilian colleagues are motivated solely by politics, perpetually intrusive, and an unnecessary impediment to successful military operations. Civilian leaders can conclude that their military colleagues are excessively defensive, reflexively uncooperative, and always resistant to oversight. Since we are far more likely to guarantee our national security when civil-military relationships are strong, we owe it to those we serve to do everything we can to make and keep them strong.

In the course of my duties as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, I saw the hidden hand of culture at work frequently. There was a point where I began to describe myself as the dash that separates the words *civil* and *military* in references to civil-military relations. The good news is that the hidden hand of culture can become a positive influence in decision-making and contribute to developing trust between civilians and the military. In a political system built to generate friction, an understanding of disparate cultures can be the start point for better communications, better understanding, and better decisions. But it takes time, and it takes work.

I consider interest in civil-military relations to be a good thing, and I am optimistic that with occasional exceptions they will remain positive over time. Similarly, and not just because I am no longer affected by it, I consider the intense scrutiny on our national security decision-making process to be healthy for our democracy—uncomfortable at times, but healthy.

Finally, there is much more to civil-military relations than the two factors I have chosen to highlight here. There are many more stakeholders than those I have discussed in this introduction. I entrust the task of explaining that to those who follow. **SSQ**

Martin E. Dempsey

General, USA, Retired

18th Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

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