Since the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, scholars and practitioners of American civil–military relations have been busier than most would like to be. They have observed—or participated in—friction between the senior military officers and elected leaders who sent American Soldiers to war and kept them engaged in Afghanistan and Iraq for nearly two decades. They have watched norms erode as retired generals took center stage at both parties’ nominating conventions and as a president openly courted active duty service members to join his political coalition. And they have questioned long-held assumptions about the durability of America’s civil–military institutions in the days leading up to the Capitol attack that took place on 6 January 2021. These challenges can be difficult to talk about—let alone understand—but now is a time to reflect and learn.

Fortunately, some of the busiest and most insightful scholars and practitioners in the field have taken the time to share their reflections with the rest of us in this special edition of Strategic Studies Quarterly focused on the state of American civil–military relations at this time of uncertainty. Two central themes emerge from the contributions in these pages. First, both elected civilian officials and senior military leaders share some of the blame for the trust deficit that has emerged over the last two decades. And second, both civilian and military leaders will need to recommit themselves to rebuilding that trust if they hope to successfully navigate the challenges they will face together in the future.

Retired general Martin Dempsey, the 19th chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, begins this edition with a reflection on how loyalty and different cultures shape interactions between civilian and military leaders. Although divergent cultural backgrounds can be a source of conflict and confusion, Dempsey emphasizes that understanding and appreciating these differences help provide a necessary foundation for the open communication and trust that make civil–military relationships work.

As Kori Schake documents, however, open communication and trust often were missing at the highest levels during the Trump administration. Although senior military leaders made some significant mistakes, Schake maintains that the health of civilian control in the United States may have become stronger as the generals and admirals leading the institution held the line and learned from their mistakes.

In the feature article, Peter Feaver and Richard Kohn argue that there is room for improvement on the military side of the civ–mil equation, but the contours of the challenges senior military leaders will face remain manageable. Drawing on insights from their interactions with newly minted generals and admirals over decades in the CAPSTONE and
PINNACLE professional military education courses, Feaver and Kohn document the insights they believe senior military leaders need to know—but usually do not.

Pauline Shanks Kaurin’s essay asserts that civil-military challenges often arise not because senior military officers lack understanding but rather because civilian leaders—or “principals”—do not possess the necessary moral values to lead the relationship. Kaurin argues that an “unprincipled principal” can manifest in different ways, but she contends that scholars of American civil-military relations have not fully contemplated this challenge in theory or developed effective ways to address it in practice.

Risa Brooks offers a potential source of inspiration to address this challenge and others. After noting that scholars have often drawn stark distinctions between the character of American civil-military relations and those of other nations, Brooks maintains there is value in studying US civil-military relations through a comparative lens. She illustrates the value of this approach by applying insights from the comparative politics literature to explain civil-military dynamics during the Trump administration and encourages other scholars to look to comparative scholars for fresh insights about US civil-military relations.

Mackubin Owens contends that Trump’s civil-military failings have already been widely exposed; however, Owens also believes that retired officers share much of the blame for the tensions that arose over the last few years. Although many Trump critics hailed opposition from the so-called adults in the room (most of them retired generals serving in the president’s cabinet), Owens argues that the policy obstruction Trump faced from both active and retired officers had corrosive impacts on civil-military trust.

In the concluding essay, James Joyner assesses the actions of those same retired generals but from a different perspective. After Trump appointed Jim Mattis, John Kelly, and several other retired officers to key national security positions, some scholars and pundits feared the generals’ presence would create acute problems. Joyner argues that—based on what we know so far—the presence of retired generals in cabinet positions did not create or magnify any significant civil-military problems outside of those Trump created for himself.

The diverse perspectives and arguments expressed in this issue suggest that debates about what occurred during the Trump administration are far from resolved. Yet they also point to challenges that remain. Running throughout the essays, however, is a shared sense of optimism that the lessons of previous civil-military controversies might enable healthier
civil-military interactions in the future. Those interactions are not inevitable, but they remain possible. We hope this issue will help launch the candid dialogue that civilian and military leaders must have with one another if they are to successfully face future challenges together.

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*A note from the Air University Press director and the SSQ team: Dr. Jim Golby superbly spearheaded this special CMR edition during the vacancy of the editor in chief position (which was filled after this issue was completed). We are grateful to him for his guidance, insights, and leadership.*

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