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FOREWORD FROM GUEST EDITOR JIM GOLBY

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.

Dr. Jim Golby
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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.
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.

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General, USA, Retired
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Civil-Military Relations in the United States: What Senior Leaders Need to Know (and Usually Don’t)

Peter D. Feaver
Richard H. Kohn

Abstract

Most flag and general military officers participate in civil-military relations (CMR) daily whether or not they realize it. Yet while these leaders recognize and support the principle of civilian control, they have thought little over time about how it works or the difficulties involved, much less the larger framework of civil-military relations. Likewise, civilian leaders in the national security establishment, whether career civil servants or political appointees, contribute—for good or for ill—to American civil-military relations. They seem to think about CMR even less. This article analyzes the two broad categories of interaction that compose CMR using several discrete topics within each area. The article highlights the paradox in CMR and the best practices that previous generations of leaders experienced and learned in navigating CMR issues successfully.

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Upon commissioning into the US armed forces, every military officer swears to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States. Upon promotion, all officers repeat that oath, again committing their loyalty and, if necessary, their lives to a system of government that at its foundation is based on civilian control of the military. While those words do not appear in the Constitution, the structure of the government, the powers assigned to each branch, the limitations on those powers, and the many individual provisions, authorities, and responsibilities put the military—active duty and reserves—under the control of civilian officials atop the chain of command. Those civilian authorities are defined by laws duly passed under constitutional procedures. Thus, civilian control is the defining principle of the relationship but not the sum total of civil-military relations, as senior leaders quickly discover.
Civil-military relations is a broad subject encompassing diverse issues and innumerable topics. It includes the legal foundations for the use of force and the psychological processes that turn ordinary citizens into fighters. It also encompasses ethical conundrums regarding professional obligations in a hierarchy that asks individuals to risk their lives and how press statements by senior military officers affect public opinion. Military leaders must understand the fundamentals of the civil-military relationship in order to fulfill their duty as custodians of the nation’s defense and the military profession. They can develop a stronger understanding of this relationship by appreciating two broad sets of dealings. The first is civil-military interactions in making policy and executing strategy at the senior-most levels of government. The second is civil-military interactions across societies, from the individual and group to military and civilian institutions. Each of these sets of interactions contains discrete topics that all senior military leaders can expect to confront at some point in their professional careers. And each has a paradox that frames relations between the civilian and military spheres in the United States today.

**Civil-Military Relations for Setting Policy and Strategy**

Since the founding of the republic under the Constitution, the United States has enjoyed an enviable and unbroken record of civilian control of the military. When measured by the traditional extreme of civil-military relations—a coup-d’état—there has never been a successful coup or even a serious coup attempt in the US. Academics and pundits may debate whether the violence at the Capitol on 6 January 2021 met a definition of “attempted coup.” However, in the terms that most concerned the Framers of the Constitution and that have dominated American civil-military relations ever since, those attacks—horrible as they were—in no way fit the definition of a coup. That is, military leaders were not using military units under their command to attempt to seize political power. There is much to criticize about whether the military prepared adequately or adapted quickly to the unfolding events. Certainly, a few veterans and reservists took part in the violence, much to their shame and dishonor. But it was not an attempted seizure of political power by the military. America’s record of unbroken civilian control stands if measured by the absence of coups.

Nonetheless, since the United States has become a global superpower, almost every secretary of defense from James Forrestal to today (with the possible exception of President Trump’s defense secretaries, as discussed below) has come into power with concerns that civil-military relations under his predecessor got out of balance, with the military gaining too
much influence. Hence, the paradox is this: the unbroken record of civilian control and the nearly unbroken record of worry about civilian control.

There are many reasons for this paradox, beginning with the simple fact that the military establishment in the superpower era has enjoyed remarkable power—in fiscal, political, and prestige terms—far in excess of what the Framers of the Constitution would have thought was proper or safe for the preservation of a free republic. Such power may be necessary to meet the constellation of threats but poses a latent threat of its own. Political leaders naturally and rightly fret about this concern in an “ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” sort of way. It is also true that the regular turnover of administrations, sometimes involving a change in the party in control, brings with it doubt about the reliability of current senior civil and uniformed officials.

We think the root of the paradox lies in the differing worlds, experiences, and priorities exacerbated by the contradictory expectations civilian and military leaders bring to the relationship. Since the participants from the two realms do not share expectations, each ends up disappointing and disturbing the other. Leaders are a bit like a newlywed couple, each spouse having some idea of what his or her own—and their partner’s—role in the relationship would be. Unfortunately, if the spouses do not share the same role expectations, each is surprised to discover that the other keeps getting it “wrong” by behaving in unexpected ways.

American military officers enter the relationship with a view of “proper” civil-military relations derived from the classic argument laid out by Samuel P. Huntington in the mid-1950s. His Soldier and the State proposes a relatively clean division of responsibility. Civilians should properly determine policy and grand strategy matters with advice from the military. The military should decide on issues largely centering on weapons, operations, and tactics according to the dictates of war, experience, and professional expertise. In Huntington’s view, the military voluntarily subordinates itself to civilian direction in exchange for civilians respecting this division of responsibility. Civilians decide the weighty matter of who to fight and when, how much military budgets will be, what weapons will be purchased, and what policies will govern the military. They then give the military autonomy on the implementation of how to fight and how to execute civilian decisions. As one experienced journalist explained to us, “Civilians tell us where they want to go but leave the driving to us.” Huntington’s real genius was in describing an approach that already aligned with a traditional military point of view. His argument is still taught in professional military educa-
tion as the “normal” theory of civil-military relations, leaving attentive officers to assume that this is the approved model. Nevertheless, few civilian leaders—including those assigned to senior national security posts—have spent much time, if any, thinking through civil-military relations either in theory or practice. Even those who have thought about it generally act in a way that aligns with a very different model. The rest simply act according to a logic internally consistent with the dictates of civilian politics. Civilians know that there is no fixed division between what is “civilian” and what is “military.” The dividing line is where civilian leaders say it is at any given time, and where they draw it can change. This line may fluctuate with the president’s personal interests, the threat and political stakes, changes in technology, larger national security considerations, and even with what is going viral in social media that day. Frequently, the dividing line between a decision that civilians believe is theirs to make on strategy and operations can fall far into the domain that the military believes is best insulated from civilian encroachment. In such cases, the recurring lament of American military leaders is that civilians misunderstand or are misplaying their role. They especially call out those civilians involved in the national security policy process who are not in the formal chain of command as are the president and secretary of defense. Faced with civilian oversight from anyone other than the narrow chain of command, the military may think or say, “I believe in civilian control, but you are the wrong civilian.” Or if the president or secretary of defense is in the scenario, the military may counter, “You are violating best practice by micromanaging us.” Of course, it is the president and secretary of defense’s prerogative to micromanage if they deem it necessary. Moreover, while it would be inappropriate for any civilian other than those two to issue an actual order to the military, it is not inappropriate for other civilians to request information for and visibility into military matters if the president or secretary of defense has tasked them to oversee military affairs. The point stands: service members and civilians in the policy-making process often believe they are acting properly while the other is falling short in some way, and those beliefs derive from different standards and expectations of how relations ought to go in the ideal.

Likewise, civilian policy makers attempt to make decisions as late as possible in the interest of flexibility to preserve the president’s political options. The priority for the military is to seek clarity and secure a decision as soon as possible to maximize the time for, and effectiveness of, the plans or strategy that follows. The priority for civilians, particularly those closest to the president, is not to tie the hands of the president by committing to
a course of action that cannot be adjusted, walked back, or abandoned if circumstances warrant. In response to adverse geopolitical surprises, civilians seek options while the military leans strongly toward one clearly defined choice. The military’s failure or delay in providing alternative looks like foot-dragging. Civilians’ failure to provide clear objectives looks like purposeful delay that could compromise strategy and operations, perhaps undermining the objectives, and lead to the unnecessary waste of lives and treasure. It can be a dialogue of the deaf, sometimes made even more frustrating by each side speaking in jargon, acronyms, and code incomprehensible to the other.

Such competing expectations make for a rocky relationship until civilian and military leaders understand one another. This helps explain why American civil-military relations in practice has so many episodes of friction and mistrust even when both sides strive for outcomes important to both, and even when the specter of allowing the military to dominate in some way is nowhere in view. What undermines compromise and cooperation—even the integrity of the process and the possibility of success—is distrust, perhaps fear, on both sides of being dragged by conditions or circumstances into a decision neither wanted and to a purpose incommensurate with the costs.

There is one crucial way the marriage analogy breaks down, for this is a decidedly unequal relationship not based on love and often unchosen by either partner. Democratic theory and historical practice recognize that military members are professionals with distinctive expertise that gives them an indispensable voice worth respecting in discussions of strategy. But they are the agents, not the principals. Military subordination to civilian authority is a defining feature of most governments, particularly republican ones, and democracy cannot survive for long without it. Civilian authority derives not from some superior wisdom but from the fact that civilian politicians are chosen and unchosen by the ultimate principal: the electorate. Civilians oversee national security decisions not because they are right but because the Constitution and laws give them the right, the authority, and the responsibility. And it is their right, even when they are wrong in the choices they make. They have a right to be wrong.

Against this backdrop, as military and civilian learn to understand and relate to one another, they must work together to overcome numerous obstacles. We highlight three that have arisen in every post-1945 administration and a fourth that reflects the unusual tenure of President Donald Trump.
What is “Best Military Advice”? 

Recent chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, when pressed to describe their roles, have often responded that one was “to provide best military advice.” Viewed in the most positive way, the leaders are trying to indicate that their assignment is to give advice in the policy-making process that conveys their professional judgment about the military dimensions of the problem and that reflects good staff work. It is decidedly not “telling the boss what he or she wants to hear based on political calculations and irrespective of hard military realities.” But “best military advice” rarely works in an optimal way. It is misleading as a mantra and, most problematically, often poorly received by civilian superiors when framed that way.

To civilian ears, “best military advice” can sound like a threat. Civilians do not trust the benign connotation, for when do professionals ever render less than their best opinion or judgment? Instead, it comes across as a thinly veiled attempt to box in the decision makers because “best” implies a singularity. Pick it or else. Or else? Sometimes the “else” is explicit and sometimes just implicit. For instance, the consequences might be militarily dangerous or the domestic political costs significant, but the phrase can in any case feel uncomfortably like a threat. If this single recommendation is rejected and it leaks, that advice becomes the basis for criticism of the decision maker. Perhaps there are occasions when professional military opinion embraces only one alternative, but in practice senior civilian leaders quickly learn, as did Abraham Lincoln, that their challenge is not deciding whether to listen to the generals but deciding which generals to listen to. When in 2006 President George W. Bush had some distinguished military professionals advising in favor of the surge and others advising against it, which was the “best military advice?”

Civilian leaders need their military advisors to inject technical military considerations and military judgment into decision making to offer perspectives that they, as civilians, may lack. Is it a good idea to station a carrier battle group off the coast indefinitely to shape the environment for effective diplomacy as a civilian might recommend? The president should not have to rule on that question until hearing the logistical challenges and second- and third-order effects for future naval operations that such an indefinite show of force might entail. Or perhaps he or she needs to be briefed on the historical experience of similar decisions in that place or under similar circumstances.

Military expertise is indispensable. But fully considered military advice in the form of plans and options can only be developed with an awareness of the larger political context in which the president is operating. The
military has the right and the responsibility to present options, even politically unpalatable ones and even when it knows that such advice will be unwelcome in the Pentagon, Congress, or the Oval Office. Correspondingly, civilian decision makers have a right to review alternatives that better reflect their larger purposes, if only to see clearly why one or another course of action is inappropriate. This is true regardless of whether the military is sure a particular course of action is a bad idea. Inherent in the “right to be wrong” is the right to hear viable options that align with what the president thinks is preferable—if only to see how difficult and problematic that course might be.

Military advisors who try to short-circuit the process by hiding or omitting certain options or information undermine best practices in civil-military policy making. Worse yet, attempting to substitute their preferences for those of their civilian superiors—and slapping the label “best military advice” on such efforts—will not spin that inconvenient truth away. Worst of all, appearing to box in their bosses will forfeit the trust on which effective relations depends when they inevitably seek other military counsel in search of more options. Properly done, military advice entails speaking up, not speaking out. Speaking up is telling the bosses what they need to hear, not what they want to hear. If senior military leaders have a contrary opinion, it is their professional obligation to ensure civilian leaders know before a decision is cast in stone. But speaking up in private within the chain of command is very different from speaking out, which involves going to the press or to influential people with such access. The latter would surely be interpreted as pressuring a president to accede to military preferences. Seasoned military leaders learn to work with their civilian counterparts in an iterative process that is responsive, candid, and flexible, eventually yielding assessments that might differ markedly from where either side in the dialogue began.\textsuperscript{14}

At the end of the process, best practice yields a decision followed by full and faithful execution. This may be a decision not to decide, to await events, or to otherwise maintain maximum flexibility for the deciding official. Or the decision may involve a course of action riskier than the military thinks wise. Provided the military was consulted, that decision will have been made with full awareness of its perspective. Even if not, provided that the decision is legal, only one outcome is acceptable: obedience.

\textbf{Why No Norm of Resignation?}

Every American military leader we have engaged on this subject—and we have engaged thousands—understands that the military must resist,
even disobey illegal orders. Likewise, it must obey legal orders, even those it dislikes. Every military leader is trained in how to use the extensive institutional apparatus of military, DOD, and Department of Justice lawyers and other advisers to determine what to do when the legality of an order is questionable. What produces a rich and often contentious discussion is how military leaders should respond to legal orders they judge to be profoundly unethical, immoral, or unwise. In such a situation, can a military leader ask for reassignment or retirement—done either silently or with public protest—rather than obey?

The first step toward an answer requires dispelling a myth. Too many senior officers—to include several chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—have said or written that the duty to disobey illegal orders extends to immoral and unethical orders. As retired Air Force deputy judge advocate general Maj Gen Charles Dunlap carefully explained, the Uniform Code of Military Justice makes no allowance for disobeying “immoral” or “unethical” orders; the choice is legal versus illegal. Military professionalism unequivocally requires everyone in uniform to behave in both a legal and ethical fashion. Still, this dictum does not permit senior officers to resist legal orders based on their own personal standard or definition of what is moral and ethical since that is highly subjective and varies by individual. The only criterion that allows for disobedience is illegality. The matter is simply put. Military members who resist following an illegal order will be protected and exonerated. Alternatively, service members who resist following a legal order that somehow offends a subjective ethical or moral standard can be punished and-condemned. It is the job of the voters to punish and remove elected leaders for unwise behavior.

At this point, thoughtful senior military leaders usually object that they are not mere automatons who reflexively translate orders into actions. Are there not more options beyond the simple obey/disobey binary? Yes, but the details matter. For starters, it is essential that the military has first exhaustively fulfilled its obligations in advance of a decision. The advisory process is a time for raising awkward questions, offering sensible objections, and clarifying what makes a course of action unwise (or possibly unethical and immoral). The imperative of military obedience does not require the immediate execution of the slightest whim expressed by any responsible civilian.

The policy-making process is a dialogue—though an unequal one—not a monologue. Officers who think they have options to consider after an order has been given must first demonstrate that they have not shirked the responsibility to advise in full candor. It takes a certain kind of courage to
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speak up forcefully even within the confidential policy-making process when the president or secretary of defense has signaled the direction. Yet best practices in civil-military relations require that courage. Best practices also require that the military understands when it has adequately made its case and thus the point where the obligation to advise has been fulfilled—and the point beyond which further pressing of the matter impedes civil-military relations. Many subordinates expect their uniformed superiors to press military perspectives on the civilians, believing in a norm that the military should go beyond “advising” to “advocating” and even “insisting” on certain courses of action. In some cases, they misread H. R. McMaster’s influential book *Dereliction of Duty*, assuming that the Vietnam failure at its root was the unwillingness of the Joint Chiefs to stand up to the civilians and, indeed, to resign in the face of civilians who ignored military advice on strategy in the conflict.

The Joint Chiefs obviously did not resign in the Vietnam War, and such resignations at the topmost military ranks are essentially nonexistent. Many senior officers retire before reaching the topmost position for various reasons. Those in the most sensitive assignments, however, know that a sudden or unexplained departure would be interpreted as some sort of dispute with civilian policy, decisions, or leadership that likely heightened civil-military conflict. Some senior military officers submit their retirement papers when they are fed up with the direction the service or a policy appears to be heading. But this is not resignation. Some submit their retirement papers, usually misidentified as resignation papers, as a substitute for getting fired. Neither is that resignation. Submitting retirement papers gives agency to the superior, who can reject them and insist the officer continue to serve. Resignation removes that agency and thereby subverts the superior’s authority.

The closest example of a possible resignation as a protest in the last three decades is Air Force chief of staff Ron Fogleman’s departure before completing his four-year term. In reality, treating this as resignation stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of what happened and why. Fogleman requested an early retirement when he believed that the senior Pentagon civilian leadership had lost confidence in his judgment. He also went silently in the hopes of preventing his leaving being interpreted as a clash with the secretary of defense over blocking the promotion of the general in charge in Saudi Arabia during the lethal Khobar Towers terrorist attack. Nonetheless, Fogleman’s effort backfired. His silence led many to believe his was a “resignation in protest,” a misinterpretation that persists today.
In the American system, there is no norm of resignation because it undermines civilian control. For the top two dozen or so flag officers—the service chiefs, combatant commanders, and commanders of forces in active combat—resignation either in silence or with protest would be a huge news story and trigger a political crisis for the president or secretary of defense. Even the threat of resignation would constitute an attempt to impose military preferences on civilian authorities. Going beyond the role of advising and executing a decision properly ordered by civilian authority directly contradicts civilian control, and the consequences for civil–military relations would reverberate far into the future. Civilians would choose the most senior officers based on their pliability rather than on experience, expertise, ability, character, and other criteria necessary for high command and responsibility. Political leaders already have some incentive to vet appointments for compatibility with administration priorities or policies—in effect, politicizing the high command. There is some tantalizing evidence suggesting this might happen on the margins. Nevertheless, the motivations for this sort of corruption in senior officer selection would be far greater if a norm of resignation in protest took hold. Fearing the political consequences of resignation, presidents, secretaries of defense, and service secretaries would trust senior officers less, weakening the candor necessary for intense discussions of critical matters. To forestall the possibility of resignation, consultation with senior officers could become perfunctory window dressing to prevent criticism or political attacks. The threat of resignation could also cause civilian leaders to bend to the will of the military to forestall a politically costly resignation. Either way, resignation with protest as a common practice would soil the advisory process and diminish healthy civil–military relations. As long as the military retains its high standing with the public and high partisanship continues to characterize American politics, the precedent would weaken and perhaps poison civil–military relations to the detriment of effective candor, cooperation, policy, and decision-making. Indeed, there is a strong norm against resignation for good reason, but there is growing evidence that attitudes are changing about whether resignation is appropriate. Senior military leaders need to internalize the norm against resignation and reflect on how it shapes and constrains their role in the policy-making process.

Congress and the Challenge of Civil–Military Relations

Even without resignation as an option, the military is not entirely without recourse when faced with clearly dysfunctional policies or deficient orders from civilian superiors. Thanks to a key design feature of the Ameri-
can system embedded in the Constitution, Congress is also the “civilian” in civilian control. The legislative branch has constitutional powers as direct as deciding the design of military policies and forces and as indirect as having the power of the purse and the authority to approve military promotions and assignments. In practice, the president’s commander-in-chief powers and executive functions are vast, particularly during wartime. Clearly, the executive branch enjoys primacy in civilian control of the military. It has the responsibility of command and large staffs for planning and managing strategy and complicated joint and combined operations. But the military is also subordinate to the legislative branch, and woe befalls senior military leaders who fail to appreciate this fact.

To be sure, this division and power sharing often put military officers in contentious situations. In theory, the president and Congress work together to authorize, appropriate, and execute military policy. In practice, in the absence of a clearly existential war or military crisis, the president and Congress debate all sorts of military questions, sometimes making the armed services innocent victims of larger partisan struggles. Politically deft military agents have learned over several generations how to balance the president against Congress and vice versa, thus confusing and often warping healthy civil-military relations. Ultimately, these tactics produce less effective military policies and decisions.

Because of Congress’s constitutional role in making defense policy, it has a legitimate call on military advice and opinion and has levers it can pull to compel a reluctant military to provide advice. Congress must vote to confirm every military officer’s rank, and at the topmost levels that vote is on a by-name, by-assignment basis. Before confirmation, congressional committees require top officers to promise, under oath, that they will give Congress their personal, professional opinion on national security matters if asked during the legislative process. Because of the constitutional separation of powers, Congress cannot force senior military officers to reveal what they told the president during the confidential advisory process. Still, Congress can compel officers to reveal their personal, professional opinions on the matter.

This is the constitutionally mandated path of “resistance” for a military officer to register legitimate concerns about a policy or decision. However, it is a delicate situation that can ruin civil-military relations inside the executive branch if done without careful thought and wording. One caveat is that such candor is rarely applauded by the White House, DOD, or armed services, which are more likely to view it as insubordination. In fact, resistance can be tantamount to insubordination if marshalled to cham-
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pion military perspectives over decisions already made or under consideration. Achieving the right balance is a tightrope the military must walk. Staying balanced means that senior leaders honor their obligation to obey and implement legal orders from the commander in chief, even if they deem them unwise. In parallel, they must meet their constitutional duty to apprise Congress of their personal reservations if directly asked. Throughout the process, senior military leaders must do so without undermining the morale of their forces, which will bear the brunt of any policy decision. The more senior the military officer and the more significant the responsibilities, the more likely that officer will face the tightrope dilemma—perhaps multiple times in a career.

Another difficulty in dealing with Congress is parochialism. It is the belief that the military pursues the national interest and that Congress is concerned with only personal or narrowly partisan matters. A military officer looks at a member of Congress and is tempted to think, “All he or she cares about is getting reelected, keeping bases and jobs in their states or districts, and championing the military for political advantage. We are the ones thinking about national security, and they are thinking about the next election.” This is a sentiment we have heard countless times from senior military leaders. Such attitudes can be self-defeating, for the officer who displays that mindset in a congressional hearing or other interaction may experience unhappy repercussions. Those holding this view are also somewhat lacking in self-awareness. Military officers can harbor parochial views, sometimes unwittingly, that lie rooted in service culture, their current assignment, or limited career experience. Thus, national security necessitates consideration of many factors, precisely the sort that will be on the minds of the voters and of those who answer to the voters. Senior military officers do not have to answer directly to the electorate and can indulge parochial concerns, wrapping them in the patina of “the national interest,” viewing (and believing sincerely) that what is good for their service, command, or function is good for the country. That said, precisely because many members of Congress lack the experience and perhaps even the wherewithal to truly grasp national security affairs in all their variety and complexity, it is important that they be well staffed and well supported in wielding their power. A capable member of Congress can do much good, but a misinformed member can do extraordinary harm. Successful civil-military relations require the military to work closely, cooperatively, and transparently with congressional authorities every bit as carefully as they do in the executive branch.
Military officers who have spent most of their professional lives rising in their service or in joint duties naturally focus on civil-military relations in the top-down hierarchy of the executive branch. Most military facilities feature a pyramid that depicts photos of the chain of command beginning with the commander in chief. Accurate civil-military relations require one more photograph alongside the president: the US Capitol dome.

**The Distinctive Features of Trumpian Civil-Military Relations**

The foregoing discussion reflects timeless concerns that can be traced through every administration in the era of American superpower status and many to a much earlier time. Every administration experiences civil-military friction; what distinguishes success from failure is not avoiding friction but learning how to manage it. Nevertheless, President Trump’s single term in office added distinctive twists that made relations especially difficult. Two deserve special, if brief, mention.

First, Trump relied to an unusual degree on recently retired or not-yet-retired military officers to fill positions customarily reserved for civilian political appointees. Every administration has made this type of selection, and it is possible to find a precedent for every individual appointment. Nevertheless, the collective and cumulative effect was quite unusual—particularly in the combination of offices so staffed. At one point, President Trump had a recently retired four-star Marine as secretary of defense (one who required a congressional waiver to hold that post), an active-duty three-star Army general as national security advisor, and another recently retired four-star Marine as White House chief of staff—the most politically sensitive and powerful nonelected post in the White House. The secretary of defense position was especially crucial since that post is supposed to embody the key “civilian” below the president in civilian control. While the president is the commander in chief, the presidency has vast functions and responsibilities. The president is thinking about many things all the time while the secretary of defense is the chief civilian thinking about national security. All three of these top offices were also staffed by many deputies and advisors who were themselves current or recently retired military officers. Everyone’s first name was “General,” and President Trump regularly referred to each as such. As a result, it was a near certainty that the primary military advisor to the president—whom the president looked to for a trusted military opinion—was not the person legally identified as the principal military advisor, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

If the military voice was likely too prominent during early stages of the Trump presidency, there were concerns that the military voice lost too
much of its access in the later stages as Trump tired of “his generals” and they left the administration one by one. In his last weeks in office, Trump did away with regular order altogether, firing his secretary of defense and running military affairs from the White House through a chain of command and policy process populated almost entirely by “acting” and “acting in the capacity of” loyalists, some senior retired military and most unconfirmable in their positions. Trump ended with possibly the weakest civilian team ever to serve as the “civilian” in contemporary civil-military relations. After beginning his administration with boasts about how much the military loved him and he loved the military, Trump ended his term with some of the most fractious relations in recent decades.23

Second, Trump’s unusual governing style made a mockery of “best practices” in the military advisory role. Two, largely separate, policy-making processes developed during his tenure. One operated on issues that did not interest the president and on which he never engaged. That process was routine and, on occasion, produced almost textbook examples of how the policy-making process should proceed. For instance, the Trump administration produced a serious National Security Strategy (NSS) in record time. The NSS was closely integrated with the 2018 National Defense Strategy, which largely drove lower-level budgetary decisions. Yet there is little evidence that Trump himself took the NSS seriously or believed in its “allies are important” core message. The NSS proved to be a decent guide to issues the president himself did not personally engage on and to be utterly irrelevant to matters the president cared about, followed, intervened in, and rendered an opinion on.

This brings us to the other parallel policy-making process: the twitterverse where the president weighed in, often as a commentator and critic of his own administration. Repeatedly, national security policy would be developed according to a regular interagency process only to be undone by a contradictory and often shocking presidential tweet. “A tweet is not an order” never had to be said before the Trump era but had to be said repeatedly during it. While a tweet was not an order, it was an unprecedented window into the commander in chief’s “intent,” and so the policy process was repeatedly whipsawed to align with a new eruption. More likely than not, those posts could be traced to some punditry on Fox TV, a longtime Trump hobbyhorse, a comment by or recommendation of a friend, or some political maneuver versus a problem of sufficient importance to warrant an intervention from the top.

The military learned to adjust to these twists without a full-blown crisis, but civil-military relations at the policy-making level were strained close to
the breaking point on numerous occasions. President Joseph Biden's promise to return to normalcy—which in civil-military terms meant a return to a normal process with all its friction—was nowhere more welcome than in the Pentagon. Even there, Biden began with norm-breaking of his own. He chose as his secretary of defense former Army general Lloyd Austin, who required a special vote from Congress to waive the legal prohibition on appointing a recently retired professional officer sooner than seven years past retirement. This had been done only twice before in the 69 years the office existed—to confirm Gen George C. Marshall to the position in 1950 and Gen James Mattis in 2017. In both cases, the move was something of a vote of no confidence in the civilian team, to include most notably the presidents themselves. This time, it was likely that Austin's successful confirmation reflected more the crisis of concern about political divisions in the republic after the 6 January attacks on the Capitol by supporters of President Trump than any doubts about Biden’s role as civilian commander in chief. But it is undeniable that Austin went to considerable lengths to pledge his commitment to civilian control. He laid out specific steps he would take to shore up the role of civilians in the making of policy precisely to address the types of concerns we outlined above.24

Civil-Military Interaction across Society

The other category of issues in American civil-military relations that senior leaders must understand involves interactions with civilian society more broadly, from the individual to entire institutions and from the episodic to the continual. Here again there is a paradox. On the one hand, the US public expresses high levels of trust and confidence in the military. Indeed, the military is the major governmental institution enjoying the highest level of public support, and this has been true since the late 1980s. On the other hand, the public has shown historically low levels of social connection with the military, most notably a low propensity to volunteer to serve in uniform. Thus, while the public highly regards the military, it is distanced from it, as if saying “thanks for your service, but we are glad we don't have to join you.” In recent years this large set of intersections and interactions has been labeled a “civil-military gap” or in popular parlance the “1 percent and 99 percent,” referring to the tiny portion of the public that serves in uniform either in the active or reserve forces. There are three hardy perennials in this category that every recent administration has encountered at some point, but also some distinctive features peculiar to the Trump era.
Seeds of Alienation

The largest concern is a fear that civilian society and the military will become so alienated from each other the result will be a military incapable or unwilling to serve society. Though they had different diagnoses and prescriptions, this was the common concern animating the two great founders of American civil-military relations scholarship, Huntington and Morris Janowitz. Huntington saw civilian society and the military as distant from each other, especially at the level of norms and values, and urged civilian society to embrace more of the military’s thinking, norms, values, and worldview. Janowitz saw the same disconnect and advised the military to develop a new conception of its role and its professionalism to better align with civilian society. Both saw a natural gap as a problem because they doubted that two groups, so dependent on each other but so antithetical in perspectives, could maintain sufficient respect to sustain effective national security policies.

Concerns about the gap escalated with the end of the draft in the early 1970s and have remained high as the all-volunteer force reached maturity in the post–Cold War era. There were brief rally-round-the-flag moments during the invasion of Kuwait in 1991 and in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, but those quickly gave way to doubts about public connections to the military when “the 1 percent went to war and 99 percent went to the mall,” a common aphorism heard in the national security community. The extensive polling data over the past several decades support several basic conclusions. The public holds the military in high regard but seems to be happily unknowing about most military policies and activities. Military officers are not so divorced in attitudes and opinions from the general public, but there often is a wide gulf of opinion and values between the officer corps and civilian national security elites and elected officials. Both tend to caricature the other and not always in positive terms. Public ignorance about the military extends to the norms of civil-military relations, which have only the most tenuous support from the general public and, in some cases, the military as well.

At the same time, the public expresses high confidence in the military but expects it to adjust to shifting civilian values. These include such areas as the role of women in combat, the policing of sexual harassment and assault, or opening the ranks fully to gay, lesbian, and now transgender personnel. This is reminiscent of how the military adjusted to racial integration and legal rights for members more congruent with civilian judicial procedures. The military fully accepts the principle of civilian control but also worries about societal dysfunctions. It notes that only a quarter of the
civilian populace at best could even meet the minimum physical, moral, and mental qualifications for admission to the ranks. Increasingly, the military seems to be drawing its recruits from the ever-dwindling pool of families that have prior service connections. Mutual admiration could give way to mutual alienation. As one retired JCS chairman told us, what happens to a force that has been told for decades it represents the best of America? Will it not at some point reach the conclusion that it is indeed better than the rest of America? And from that point, how big of a leap is it to conclude that the inferior civilian society should conform to the superior military values? As one of us has written, “the role of the military is to defend society, not to define it.”

When fewer and fewer Americans have a personal connection to the military, the burden of representing the military to civilian society—and bridging the gap—increasingly falls upon the prominent senior general and flag officers and the men and women they lead. Society cannot rely on the media or Hollywood to portray either side accurately or explain one to the other. Senior leaders need to understand that for the rest of their professional lives, and well into retirement, they are bridging—or widening—that gap, intentionally or unintentionally.

**Politics and Politicization**

Over the past several decades, concerns about the civil-military gap have focused on one worry: a growing partisan politicization of the military. This politicization takes several forms. One is the military taking on something of a partisan identity, with disproportionate numbers openly espousing partisan views and much of the body politic viewing the military as “captured” by one of the parties. Another is dragging in, or merely welcoming in, military voices to play a partisan role during political campaigns. A third is the retired military voice growing in prominence in public policy debates, including those that range far from the traditional bailiwick of foreign and defense policy questions.

The military has always been considered a conservative institution, one that aligned more easily with traditional values than with progressive liberalism. This view shaped the Founders’ approach to building military institutions in the new republic, and it was the starting point for the major theoretical works on American civil-military relations. When the professional military was small and on the periphery of American political life—or when it was large but populated by a draft that pulled from nearly all sectors of American society—the ideological profile of the military was of secondary concern. In the era of the all-volunteer force, those concerns
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grew. Here was a large—in fungible fiscal terms, a dominating spending institution—almost entirely composed of people who chose to be in the institution, recruited others to follow them, and selected their own leadership except at the very top. In the process, the military started to shed its long-standing image as apolitical—an institution outside of party politics—and increasingly looked partisan. As political polarization intensified in the body politic, the military increasingly looked like a Republican institution. Experts debated the extent of the Republican identity, noting it was less pronounced in the enlisted ranks with more diversity in ethnicity, race, gender, and geographic location of origin—but not the direction of the skew. Perhaps inevitably, as partisan polarization has increasingly characterized political life, so too does it seem to shape public perception of the armed forces. Some experts suggest that Republicans and possibly Democrats view the military through a tribal lens—Republicans as an “us” and Democrats as a “them”—that distorted perceptions accordingly. The drift has been gradual and may be driven as much by division in the larger civilian society as by changes in the makeup or behavior of the military itself. Regardless of the cause, it poses a challenge for healthy civil-military relations during an era when the military consumes a large fraction of the discretionary federal budget and is so visible in civic life.

Notwithstanding a new partisan appearance, the military remains one of the few institutions held in high regard across the political spectrum. Consequently, politicians have increasingly used the military to further partisan political ends. Thus, every four years, we have the unseemly spectacle of political candidates—especially those seeking the presidency—recruiting endorsements from senior retired military officers to persuade Americans to vote accordingly. Regulations forbid the active duty military to express an open preference, so candidates look for the next best thing: retired senior officers whose first names remain “General” or “Admiral” after they stop wearing the uniform. The higher the rank, the more recently retired, and the more famous, the better. Every chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the past 20 years has expressed dismay in private or public about this practice because it falsely implies a preference for the active duty military, making the job of serving the commander in chief and working with Congress, regardless of party, more difficult. But the practice continues and in 2016 reached a new, tawdry level with senior retired officers going well beyond anodyne endorsements. At the national party nominating conventions, their rhetoric crossed over into the most vitriolic of ad hominem attacks of the sort considered inappropriate for the candidates themselves to level. Campaigns cannot be expected to exercise self-restraint in this area.
Hence, the military will escape the political muck only if retired officers resist the temptation to trade on their institutions’ reputation for lack of partisanship to commit a brazenly political act. If they wish to join the political fray, they should do so openly as political candidates themselves and not pretend to speak as apolitical observers.  

Senior officers on active duty also worry about another form of politicization: the prominent role given retired military veterans as pundits in ongoing policy debates, usually as talking heads on television or purveyors of “gotcha” quotes in news stories. This occurrence has a long pedigree in American civil-military relations. President Dwight Eisenhower worried aloud in his farewell address about a “military-industrial complex” that distorted policy debates by throwing the power of mutual interests behind a certain course of action. These concerns have increased in an age when the news cycle never ends and “everything became war and the military became everything.” In our view, this form of politicization is less worrisome if only because the military perspective on policy is a legitimate concern and in practice, every veteran voice on one side of a policy issue is usually counterbalanced by an equal and opposite veteran voice on the other. If anything, this dynamic only reinforces the fundamental civilian challenge in policy making: not whether to heed military advice but which military opinion to heed. Yet the public second-guessing by former senior officers who may have lost situational awareness of the full picture is especially grating to the current military advisors. Senior military leaders need to think in advance how they want to wield their remaining influence once they join the ranks of the retired.

**Budgets and the Myth of a “Civil-Military Contract”**

The gap gives rise to an enduring myth of American civil-military relations that American society has an implicit contract with the military: a promise to adequately resource and support these men and women in exchange for the risk of their lives on behalf of the nation. Generations of military leaders have mentioned such a contract in countless speeches, but the sad truth is that American society did not act as if there was one—at least not regarding the professional armed forces—for almost all of American history. There is hardly anything more “American” than underfunding the military in peacetime. The prevailing pattern in American military history up through the Korean War was to shirk readiness in peacetime, discover the full extent of this deficiency just before or during the early stages of an armed conflict, and repair the damage by ramping up the military capacity to achieve a victory only to hastily demobilize and return
to peacetime levels of readiness—then repeat the cycle. Indeed, for most of its history up until the Cold War, the United States practiced a national security policy of relatively small peacetime professional forces and mobilization/demobilization for wars.

To the extent there was any societal contract with the military, it was a narrowly drawn one with its citizen soldiers, especially its draftees, symbolized by its system of pensions after the War for Independence and the Civil War, the Veterans Administration after World War I, and the GI Bill after World War II. Over the course of the Cold War, when the military was peopled by draftees and volunteers, and since the onset of the all-volunteer force in the early 1970s, the contract became more robust as the distinction between temporary citizen soldiers and the professional military waned. Even then, some of the promises for health care and other benefits did not seem to fit the idea of “the contract” as expressed by military leaders.

Today, the notion of a societal contract with the military may face a new test. In the five decades since the introduction of the all-volunteer armed forces, thanks to a dramatic expansion in defense spending along with increased pay and benefits, two generations of officers have come of age without personal experience with the previous norm of a chronically underfunded military. Now, all the signs seem to augur a new era of major budget challenges. Intensifying great power conflict and competition imply a new, expensive arms race just as the consequences of previous budget choices create grave fiscal pressure for cutbacks. These cannot be waived away with a glib reference to a societal contract with those who promise to defend us. The current generation of service members may see a leveling or decline in defense spending—while personnel costs for both active duty and veterans strain both budgets—and an unwillingness to sustain a military establishment that competes with expanding domestic spending and continues to add to a swollen national debt.

**The Distinctive Features of Trumpian Civil-Military Relations**

None of the foregoing would surprise the generation that founded the United States. Yet the Trump tenure put its own stamp on these problems. Trump enthusiastically embraced and indeed encouraged the politicization of the military, accentuating and exaggerating it at almost every opportunity.\(^{38}\) Whereas previous presidents at least paid lip service to the idea of an apolitical military, Trump talked openly about the military as part of his political base. At the outset, he openly referred to military leaders as “my generals,” only to turn on them and publicly castigate them when their advice contradicted his desires or they left his employ.\(^{39}\)
In response to critiques from prominent retired senior military officers, Trump openly denounced the senior ranks as war-hungry careerists eager to increase weapon sales while insisting that the lower ranks remained personally loyal to him.\textsuperscript{40}

Likewise, Trump repeatedly sought to use the military in settings that crossed the boundary into the nakedly political. During his first few weeks in office, he surprised the Defense Department by turning a standard meet-and-greet visit to the Pentagon into a signing ceremony for his controversial ban on refugees from Muslim majority countries.\textsuperscript{41} He repeatedly sought to get the military to provide him a flashy parade through Washington, DC, large enough to rival the Bastille Day parade President Emanuel Macron hosted for Trump in France, despite no American precedent for such parades on American national holidays.\textsuperscript{42} In the run-up to the 2018 midterm elections when he could not get Congress to fund the building of a wall along the border with Mexico, he declared a national emergency, shifted military appropriations to the wall, and directed military personnel to patrol the border.\textsuperscript{43} In each of these instances, the military dragged its feet but, acceding to civilian control, mostly went along with the controversial actions. The breaking point came in the wake of the killing of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer in spring 2020. As localities struggled with protests, a few including violence and some even in the vicinity of the White House, President Trump ordered the National Guard to patrol the streets of Washington. He flirted with mobilizing active duty units for a more dramatic show of force, subsequently arranging for the JCS chairman and defense secretary to join him on a photo-op walk across Lafayette Park after peaceful protestors there had been forcibly dispersed. The photo op, clearly political, crossed an ethical line, causing JCS chairman Gen Mark Milley and Defense Secretary Mark Esper (a West Point graduate and retired Army Reserve officer) to apologize publicly for appearing in a political event—probably the first-ever public apology from a chairman for something so obviously partisan.\textsuperscript{44} Esper paid for his public disagreement with Trump by being summarily fired after Trump lost the presidential election.\textsuperscript{45}

After this rupture came the extraordinary events of 6 January. A mob inflamed by President Trump’s false claims that he was a victim of massive electoral fraud battled the police, broke into the Capitol building, and tried to thwart the process of confirming Biden’s electoral college victory. Some mob participants may even have sought to kill political leaders they thought stood in the way of a second Trump term. Security forces may have been slow to respond to the unfolding chaos out of fear that they
would get caught once again in a political cross fire, but after a delay they sided decisively with the constitutional order and ensured that the transfer of presidential power could occur without further interruption. Nevertheless, the prominence of some veterans among the most violent of would-be insurrectionists raised concerns about the presence of extremists in the military—and renewed calls for the military to recommit to the traditional apolitical norm.\(^46\) The Biden administration team has made it clear that it will prioritize restoring old norms and redlines on politicization, but undoing the damage to the perception of the military as an apolitical institution may take years of scrupulous behavior by civilian and military alike.

**Conclusion: What Can Be Done**

Every senior military and civilian leader will face at least a few of the challenges addressed above, and most will encounter them all at some point in a career or in retirement. Each challenge is made more manageable if civilian and military leaders develop relationships characterized by trust and candor. Trust is the universal solvent in civil-military relations. It is the benefit of the doubt earned over patterns of responsible conduct where each party speaks fully and straightforwardly with the other, genuinely seeks mutual understanding, and partners in cooperation for shared objectives.

Trust is intentionally built through deliberate action. Because of the two paradoxes of American civil-military relations, it cannot merely be assumed. Trust is developed step by step through frequent interactions and conversations, formal and informal, in the workplace and at social events. It constitutes a reservoir that must be filled in advance, only to be drawn down in a crisis and quickly replenished. When trust is most needed, it is too late to build it.

Although the military is clearly the subordinate in this relationship, it must be the initiator and not wait for superiors to take the first step. In our experience, senior military leaders spend remarkably little time—and senior civilian leaders even less—reflecting on the dynamics that shape American civil-military relations.

As with other professional occupations (e.g., lawyers, doctors, teachers, and the clergy), it is up to the experts, not their bosses or clients, to mold the relationship and influence the interactions as much as they can to provide the most functional and effective outcomes. It is up to the professionals to think through the ethical guidelines; learn, rehearse, and promote best practices; and apply them in an ongoing fashion even from a subordinate position. All military officers lead their subordinates but must also help their superiors to be successful commanders and leaders. Sometimes it
falls to the subordinate to prepare the superior to lead with maximum effectiveness. This might be thought of as “leading from the middle”—a challenging, daunting assignment but hardly impossible. Generations of senior military leaders, stretching back to George Washington, figured out how to do it well with civilians of disparate abilities. It would be productive if civilian leaders joined enthusiastically in studying civil-military relations. More importantly, however, military leaders must commit to taking on the responsibility to know and study civil-military relations. They must prepare their peers and subordinates to assume stewardship of healthy civil-military relations for the good of our future.

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Notes


4. To be sure, there are many ways in which relations between the military and civilians in the policy-making area do not resemble a newly married couple, beginning with the issue of military subordination to the civilian, as explained later in the text. In addition, there are rarely honeymoons and may be little in the way of deep admiration, let alone love, expressed across the divides. But the analogy works to convey the crucial insights regarding the potential for miscommunication and disappointment arising out of
differing perspectives that themselves derive from very different expectations of how the relations should go.


8. Rosa Brooks introduced this quip as an exchange between civilian staff, one at the White House and one in the Department of Defense, but in the years since we have heard numerous senior military officers invoke some version of this to explain why they oppose civilian meddling in the particular while also endorsing civilian control in the abstract. See Rosa Brooks, “Thought Cloud: The Real Problem with the Civilian-Military Gap,” *Foreign Policy*, 2 August 2012, https://foreignpolicy.com/.


Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn


22. Golby, Cohn, and Feaver, “Thanks for Your Service.”


24. See Lloyd Austin’s testimony at his confirmation hearings to be secretary of defense before the Senate Armed Services Committee on 19 January 2021 at https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/.


The Line Held:
Civil-Military Relations in the Trump Administration

KORI SCHAKE

Abstract

Despite legitimate concern about civil-military relations during the Trump presidency—and considerable efforts by the president to subvert US law and the norms of civil-military relations—this important guardrail in American public life has withstood the pressure. Deferral to civilian authority went unchallenged in relief of commanders and execution of policy. Where law and norms were broached, such as appointing a recently retired officer as defense secretary, Congress and the subsequent administration are equally liable. Military and veteran leaders have made mistakes, especially during the Black Lives Matter protests, but their acknowledgment and correction have strengthened the crucial prohibition on partisan political activity. President Trump did little structural damage to civil-military relations; the question remains whether his efforts have further politicized public attitudes about our military. Acceding to polarization would be terrible for our military, affecting recruiting, unit cohesion, and war-fighting competence. We will have a worse military and be less secure if that comes to pass.

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The Trump administration affected two fundamental aspects of civil-military relations (CMR) in the United States: the expanse of civilian control and the military responsibility to preserve norms. However, despite consistent pressure on these aspects, the Trump administration does not appear to have damaged the foundation of US CMR. In fact, its clumsy attempts may well have strengthened the norms. Where the Trump administration has done serious damage to civil-military relations is in the perception of the military as a political actor. The United States military did a laudable job under considerable pressure, but we will all be worse off—and our military will be weaker—if future
administrations accede to Trump’s precedent of treating the military as a political actor as a normal part of civil-military relations.

**Maintaining Civilian Control**

Civil-military relations in the United States is an unequal partnership in which the military remains firmly subordinate to elected and appointed civilians. Following the iconic example of General Washington, the American military’s subjugation has only been challenged in fiction. The norm survives, and it is widely accepted that senior military commanders serve at the pleasure of the commander in chief. Since the all-volunteer professional military, presidents have relieved military commanders frequently and with impunity. They have adopted policies against military advice, and the military has not publicly objected even when popular commanders are relieved.

For example, internal to the military services there were a number of reliefs for cause, but there was only one significant firing of a commander during the Trump administration, that of Capt Brent Crozier commanding the USS *Theodore Roosevelt*. Captain Crozier was relieved for publicizing concern about coronavirus spread on his ship and taking upon himself responsibility for determining the mission did not merit the risk to his crew. This decision properly resided at echelons above him (his superiors in the chain of command were reprimanded, but no further action was taken against them). The secretary of the Navy was also relieved after his comportment disrespected the officer and aggravated the situation. While the episode sparked considerable debate within the military community over whether the commander should have been relieved, there was no challenge to the secretary of defense’s *legal authority* to relieve the commander.

Relatedly, there was considerable friction about the Pentagon’s civilian leadership apparently stifling effective pandemic containment by military commands in 2020. US Forces Korea command established measures diametrically opposed to the president’s description of what was occurring and what actions should be taken. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper rather adroitly navigated the civil-military difficulty. While he protected the right of commanders to take actions they thought appropriate, he also tried to dampen discussion of them beyond the military community to preserve the president’s freedom of action in policy.
Shirking

Trump’s special envoy for Syria made a serious allegation that the Pentagon undercut the president’s policy decisions. Ambassador Jim Jeffrey claimed that “we were always playing shell games to not make clear to our leadership how many troops we had there.” Such an effort by the military to mislead the president to prevent policy implementation would be a serious violation of civil-military relations, something Peter Feaver describes as “shirking” responsibility. Jeffrey’s allegation implicates not just the military but also State Department officials and the Pentagon’s civilian leadership. It would also be a serious civil-military breach for military members to discount the secretary of defense and determine for themselves what the president intended. While Secretary James Mattis was a veteran, and by his own admission never stopped viewing himself as a general, he was scrupulous in establishing the president’s intent even during his interview for the position and resigned when he could not support it. That is not behavior consistent with precluding the president from knowing what the Pentagon was doing. Moreover, Jeffrey himself admits that advocates of remaining in the ISIS fight brought “five better arguments” and persuaded the president, a very different circumstance and consistent with civil-military norms.

Public support for insubordination by military officers has been steadily increasing commensurate with partisanship. While civil-military regulation is designed narrowly to restrict political acts by active duty service members, senior officers continue to be governed by the Uniform Code of Military Justice even after retirement. There was considerable pressure from outside the administration for prominent military members and veterans serving in the administration to stall or undercut the president’s clear policy preferences and the policies themselves. There were calls for Secretary Mattis, Lt Gen H. R. McMaster, and Chief of Staff John Kelly to be “the adults in the room” and discipline the president’s inclinations. Kelly and Mattis have subsequently asserted that they prevented worse outcomes by persuading the president, but not by subterfuge. Despite public pressure, the system held.

From these examples of a commander’s relief of duty, policies adopted for war, and military figures complying with regulations and norms together with an absence of counterexamples involving open insubordination, we can conclude that the fundamental element of civilian control of the military—uniformed subordination to elected leadership—remains firmly established.
Veterans’ Preference

Prior military service, especially in high-ranking roles, is often helpful in government jobs. This is especially true when running large, complex organizations with multiple stakeholders and when defense policy expertise is critical because the consequences of error are so tragic. It would be perverse if military service were allowed to exclude candidates. But the American government was designed to be run with broad public participation, which is why it permits 4,000 political appointees to come into every new presidential administration. Congress enacted law over 70 years ago prohibiting the appointment of military retirees as secretary of defense within 10 years after leaving service. The law was promulgated to ensure that, with rare exceptions, military service was not the only experience candidates had. It was also intended to increase the likelihood that linkages with the active ranks were not current for the purpose of civilian control.

The Trump administration has been criticized for appointing high-ranking veterans to civilian positions, relaxing civilian oversight of operations, and reaching into the military justice system to issue pardons. None of these areas were affected in ways that merit concern for civil-military relations. While the Trump administration selected veterans from the most senior levels for major policy positions and the president himself reveled in talking about “his generals,” he did not instate more high-ranking veterans than had, for example, the Obama administration.6

James Mattis required a congressional waiver for recent military service, which the Congress granted, confirming him by a vote of 98–1. The nomination and the ease of congressional affirmation dented the law and norm of excluding the appointment of military officers retired less than seven years (based on a change of law in 2008). With the waiver for recently retired general Lloyd Austin, the norm has been effectively transgressed and unlikely to constrain future appointments.

Trump’s generals did not prove more pliable to presidential influence than other appointees. In the case of Secretary Mattis, quite the contrary. In fact, a solid case could be made that “the generals” were less aligned with the president’s policies than appointees should be. Further, while defense experts may prefer their proclivities, presidents have a right to senior political appointees who more enthusiastically work to carry out policies on which they campaigned and were elected.

A strong case could also be made that appointees with predominantly military experience are less adroit politicians than the portfolios require. For instance, General McMaster served the president poorly in attempting to spin the president’s sharing of allied classified information with the
Russians. His narrow, legalistic defense of the president failed to protect the president politically in the way a more experienced politico might have, and it damaged his own credibility. Howard Baker or James Baker could have gotten the president out of that ditch.

**Operational Control**

Sparring over the appropriate level of civilian involvement in military operations is standard, from criticism over Lyndon Johnson picking bombing targets during the Vietnam War, to restrictive rules of engagement by the Obama administration in Afghanistan, to complaints about “lawfare” tying military leaders’ hands for drone strikes. In the Trump administration, the president granted Secretary of Defense Mattis wider latitude to make decisions about troop levels and operational plans. That constituted a transfer of authority from one civilian to another, though, not a derogation of that authority. Moreover, even during Mattis’s tenure, national security advisors General McMaster and John Bolton contested the Pentagon’s independence of operational action. It is not clear that anything substantial has changed.

**Rough Justice**

President Trump reached into military justice proceedings—during and after verdicts were decided—to issue pardons that sent worrisome signals about leniency toward war crimes. While uncommon for presidents to involve themselves in what Samuel Huntington considers the military’s “autonomy within a clearly defined military sphere,” President Trump did not exceed the standing authority of the commander in chief. Further, he did not issue more or different types of pardons to the military versus civilians. And while lacking intent to specifically damage the military does not preclude that result, the damage incurred is not in the realm of civilian control over the military. President Trump’s actions have expanded the sphere of civilian influence, not contracted it.

Where President Trump’s pardons hint at a disruption to civil-military relations is aligning himself with enlisted or noncommissioned or junior officers and denigrating the senior leadership. It is highly unusual for a president to demean active duty generals, as Trump did both publicly and privately. Nor does a president generally characterize military leaders’ policy advice as “one cold-hearted globalist betrayal after another.” Trump vehemently condemned “the generals” who had departed the administration, active duty military advocacy for continuity of policy in wars
and alliances, and civilian and military leadership of the Pentagon for their opposition to invoking the Insurrection Act during the Black Lives Matter protests. His vituperation had strong undertones suggesting that troops had a personal loyalty to him that military leaders undermined.\textsuperscript{12} There do not appear, however, to have been any instances of chain-of-command ruptures as a result of that presidential derogation.

\textit{Militarization}

Another area of concern about civilian control is the influence accorded civilians appointed to policy-making positions in the defense establishment. The bipartisan National Defense Strategy Commission criticized the Trump Pentagon in 2018 because “civilian voices have been relatively muted on issues at the center of U.S. defense and national security policy, undermining the concept of civilian control.”\textsuperscript{13}

Positioning civilian appointees in the Trump administration was a slow process. First, the president’s team was not prepared for transition to governing. Second, many establishment Republicans refused to join a Trump administration, thinning the pool of experienced potential civilian appointees. As well, the White House Personnel Office was understandably disinclined to include those who actively worked against the president’s election. The only area in which Secretary Mattis might merit criticism in delaying the appointment process is in attempting to make bipartisan appointments. Even there, he had support from the White House but was opposed by congressional Republicans.\textsuperscript{14}

It is also not clear that the career civilians and political appointees in the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) were not influential, even with an exceptionally high rate of turnover. The signature achievement of the Trump Pentagon—the National Defense Strategy (NDS)—was wholly conceived by civilians in the OSD, which would seem to refute the criticism. The NDS Commission was particularly concerned about the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff being accorded authority to apportion forces. But those force apportionments are still subject to the secretary’s and president’s approval. The real objection the commission seems to have is the atrophying of the civilian OSD staff. The commission considers civil-military issues to be on an “unhealthy trend.” But that trend did not commence in the Trump administration. Since at least the early 1990s when Goldwater-Nichols defense reforms strengthened the Joint Staff and combatant command staffs by requiring joint assignments for attaining flag rank, those military staffs have been outpacing their OSD.
counterpart. The service staffs have also declined, blurring a clear civilian-to-military comparison.

**Politicizing and Perceiving the US Military**

It was clear from the first week of Donald Trump’s presidency that he had no compunction about politicizing the military. The White House elected to sign the president’s controversial Muslim ban at the Pentagon—in the Medal of Honor recipients’ Hall of Heroes, no less—to associate the military with his policies. A retired four-star veteran who was then the civilian secretary of defense—and had publicly spoken against such a policy—stood smiling next to the president as he signed the executive order (that would be overturned by the courts as an unconstitutional religious restriction).\(^{15}\) While the military had no role in developing or executing the policy (and the president signed another order that was properly military business), the president succeeded in visually conveying military support for a deeply divisive policy.

**Politicization**

Secretary Mattis subsequently attempted to shield the military. He sustained strong relationships in Congress, discouraged presidential troop visits, and was absent at presidential troop visits that did occur. He refused some of the most virulent of the White House personnel appointments and spoke to reporters only informally and off the record rather than holding press conferences. Some of these preventative measures caused problems of their own. There was concern about Pentagon accountability without on-the-record statements and the lost opportunities to strengthen public support for the war efforts.

The Lafayette Square incident was an even more worrisome example of military participation in politics. During the widespread protests over police brutality toward Black Americans, President Trump wanted military enforcement of government decisions on handing protesters. He considered invoking the Insurrection Act of 1807 to permit him authority to deploy active duty troops as law enforcement—even over the objections of mayors and governors. While that option was under consideration, the defense secretary talked to governors about the need to “dominate the battlefield,” and both the secretary and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff paraded with the president through a public space that had been forcibly cleared of peaceful protesters.\(^{16}\)
The secretary and chairman initially defended their mistakes, expressing surprise to have been thrust into a politicized role by the White House. In neither case did, nor should, those explanations exculpate their choices. Lafayette Square occurred three and a half years into the Trump administration, with the president willfully encroaching on the apolitical reputation of the military at virtually every step along the way. These steps included signing the Muslim ban at the Pentagon, giving campaign speeches before military audiences, encouraging active duty troops to don campaign hats and fly Trump flags from military vehicles, and having pardoned service members invited to White House events and speaking at campaign events. The secretary and the chairman simply ought to have anticipated Trump’s actions and been prepared to protect the institution. Anticipation of potential problems and preparation to minimize their destruction are hallmarks of military planning.

The secretary, being a political appointee, committed no civil-military infraction by his participation in the Lafayette Square incident, although his “battlefield” comments were interpreted as supporting the president’s militarizing policy. General Milley’s appearance, especially in combat uniform, was widely condemned by former secretaries of defense, chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and civil society groups. The objections that weighed most heavily were from other military leaders and veterans’ groups; it is the military commitment to apolitical comportment that defines the profession.

To their credit, both Secretary Esper and General Milley recovered from their mistakes in ways that strengthened the norms of civil-military relations. While policy was still being decided, Secretary Esper held a press conference apologizing for his “dominate the battlefield” language and giving his assessment that the protests did not rise to the standard of concern that would merit invoking the Insurrection Act.17 That act by the secretary significantly increased the political cost to the president of invoking the Insurrection Act, and it positioned General Milley’s subsequent abject apology as supporting his immediate civilian superior. Substantively, General Milley’s argument that the military’s primary obligation is to uphold the Constitution drew a bright, clear line about where responsibility to the commander in chief ends.18 But those corrections were visible mostly to the expert community. The public, particularly the inattentive public, may well remember the march through Lafayette Square but not the apologies.

The Lafayette Square incident so alarmed members of the military establishment that it got the Pentagon thinking and planning for how the
Quiet planning for how to prevent those outcomes and consultations with the other civilian control, namely the Congress, served to foreclose the military’s involvement in the even more dangerous and potentially damaging circumstances of President Trump refusing to concede the election. Civil-military relations were strengthened because the military was nowhere to be seen during President Trump’s fulminations of election fraud. This low profile also actively distanced the force from suggestions by Trump supporters that the military should oversee a rerun of the election—even though retired general Michael Flynn was among those stridently advocating for military election supervision. Active duty military leaders were clear and consistent in repeating that the American military has no role in elections.

In fact, so concerned were the military and elected local officials in the District of Columbia about military involvement in the summer’s protests that support was impeded during the 6 January 2021 insurgency at the Capitol. The Pentagon offered assistance in advance. However, that assistance was declined by DC mayor Muriel Browser, and the military didn’t press the case. There were unreasonable expectations of how quickly National Guard forces could be mobilized and assist (itself an interesting civil-military issue) and also the special circumstances of command authority for the District of Columbia not being a state-created concern. Nevertheless, the presence of the Guard reinforced civic peace in the aftermath.

On balance, the DOD’s civilian and military leadership did an admirable job against a four-year maelstrom of attempts at norm-corroding politicization by the Trump administration. As a result, President Trump did little structural damage to civil-military relations. Where he may have done greater harm is in public perceptions of the military.

**Denigration**

President Trump insulted Gold Star families and Senator John McCain during and after the 2016 campaign, shocking the sensibilities of a military community accustomed to respect from our broader society. As president, he denigrated leaders and experts and also promoted himself as the tribune of the downtrodden—a particularly dangerous game where the purveyors of state-sanctioned violence are concerned. President Trump repeatedly suggested that he had a direct connection with troops that the military’s senior officers did not. During the Afghanistan policy process, he countered the Pentagon’s positions by saying the Soldiers didn’t sup-
port them. After Secretary Mattis’s resignation, the president unleashed a vitriolic tirade against him and again during the Lafayette Park incident when Mattis made public statements critical of the administration and encouraging the military leadership not to damage its relationship with the American public. When news broke that the president had called fallen Soldiers “losers” and “suckers,” President Trump tried to deflect by stating, “I’m not saying the military’s in love with me. The soldiers are. The top people in the Pentagon probably aren’t because they want to do nothing but fight wars so all of those wonderful companies that make the bombs and make the planes and make everything else stay happy.”

The president’s tirades appeared to affect public attitudes about the president rather than the military. But as the work of Peter Feaver and Jim Golby has shown, American public attitudes have for some time been trending toward seeing the military as just another faction in our politics. The public is beginning to perceive the military the way it perceives the Supreme Court, as something to favor when it supports your political beliefs and to oppose on the same basis.

That is, attitudes about the military are polarizing just as our politics are polarizing. The president’s denigration may well have had political salience with his partisans as did his views on other policy issues. But even that influence was not particularly enduring. Survey data from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs indicates that the president’s signature opposition to immigration, trade, and alliances initially garnered support. Nevertheless, his policies in office alienated many of those initially supportive of his rhetoric, and public attitudes have since rebounded to be even more favorable toward international engagement than the pre-Trump status quo.

**Conclusion**

Although President Trump did not weaken the underlying structures of civilian control, he politicized the military by attempting to draw it into the fold as a loyal political actor. While Trump’s actions in this sphere were appalling, they were not entirely new. Service members have been caricatured as everything from heroes who leap tall buildings in a single bound, to moral exemplars, to objects of pity lacking employment opportunities or having the potential for violence due to post-traumatic stress. Political polarization may leaven those views and help Americans to consider their military as a reflection of society as a whole—no better, maybe, but also no worse. In a twisted way, it may be good for civil-military relations since it
would level the military’s long-standing advantage over other institutions in American government and civic life.

The precedent Trump set in so overtly treating the military as a political ally was harmful, but it is not irreversible and need not be lasting. Acceding to polarization would be terrible for our military, affecting recruiting, unit cohesion, and war-fighting competence. Selecting senior military officers based on their politics rather than their military experience would diminish trust with elected officials. It would also weaken our international standing and ability to attract allies. We will have a worse military and be less secure if that comes to pass.

Kori Schake

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Notes

6. The Trump administration appointed retired lieutenant general Michael Flynn and subsequently active duty lieutenant general H. R. McMaster as national security advisor, retired general James Mattis as secretary of defense, and retired general John Kelly as White House chief of staff. The Obama administration appointed retired general Jim Jones as national security advisor, retired general Eric Shinseki as secretary for veterans affairs, retired lieutenant general James Clapper and then retired admiral Dennis Blair as director of national intelligence, and retired general David Petraeus as the CIA director.


An “Unprincipled Principal”: Implications for Civil-Military Relations
Pauline Shanks Kaurin

Abstract

This article examines five ways in which a principal in civil-military relations (CMR) might be “unprincipled” and the implications of these different modes. First, it presents a general sense of the broader view of CMR into which categories are being positioned. Next, it defines the role of norms, morals, and ethics before outlining the five types of unprincipled players in civil-military relations. It concludes with the implications each has for CMR, ultimately exposing where civil-military relations will become either ineffective or untenably problematic. Alternate strategies for CMR will be necessary depending upon the kind of “unprincipled principal” with whom the agent is dealing.

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The question of an unprincipled principal arises when the moral or other normative qualities—such as integrity, humility, and trust—are absent or when moral or normative perspectives differ between the principal and the agent. In the case of CMR, the principals are the president (and the secretary of defense who acts for that individual) and Congress. The agents are the military and the members of the military who act in their professional capacities. The idea of trustworthiness underlies a good working relationship between principal and agent; shared morals, norms, and other values are often taken to contribute to this relationship of trust. One might wonder why ethics and the moral and normative perspectives of the two groups in this relationship even matter. Surely CMR is a function of the interactions and transactions by those in their roles, and what moral values or normative commitments they hold are ancillary to their behavior and action. While this view has some commonsense appeal, we should recall that moral values and normative commitments (defined below) clearly influence the actions and behavior of individuals and organizations. Other actors attach meaning to the actions and
behaviors that ultimately stem from values and commitments. Therefore, values and norms are worthy objects of analysis in CMR. Discussions of morality and values tend to focus on the agents and consonance with the views of the principals and less on the morality and values of the principals themselves. This argument seeks to redress that analytical imbalance by focusing more on the principals and their moral world.

These are the core questions: How durable must the notion of norms, morality, and ethics be, and how much agreement is necessary for healthy CMR? In a political environment where one cannot rely on a shared moral worldview or even consensus on the shared norms for governance, the question takes on serious practical and theoretical importance. This article categorizes five ways in which a principal might be “unprincipled.” It first presents a general sense of the broader environment of civilian-military relations and defines the role of norms, morals, and ethics. It then proposes and describes five types of unprincipled principals. The article concludes with the implications of these various “unprincipled” actors in CMR, ultimately exposing where civil-military relations will become either ineffective or untenably problematic. Strategies for CMR will need to be adapted to the kind of “unprincipled principal” with whom the agent is dealing.

The Broad View of Civil-Military Relations

As with most discussions on CMR in the United States, we start with Samuel Huntington and his seminal book *The Soldier and the State*. He makes the case for the functional imperative and objective control over and against the societal imperative and subjective control of the military by the civilian principals.1 Under objective control, the military is tasked with national security and military effectiveness, that is, the management of violence to win the nation’s wars. Congress and the POTUS (the principals) decide on end state and policy while the military (the agent) advises on the best strategy. Once agreed, the matter of violence and war becomes the responsibility of the military (as a profession and as experts acting on behalf of society for the common good). After military victory, responsibility reverts to civilian leaders for the political aspects of maintaining the peace. There is a strict political/military division of labor here. For Huntington, keeping the military apolitical is essential to preserving its effectiveness. The civilians do politics; the military does war.
Separate Spheres, Shared Responsibilities

According to Suzanne Nielsen and Don Snider, Huntington is concerned with giving an account of CMR that preserves military effectiveness and keeps the military out of politics. To this end, he appeals to a notion of the military profession, including a professional officer corps rooted in objective control and the functional imperative. The military serves society in a particular function (defense and national security) and must maintain the norms and moral commitments essential to that function and that are instantiated in the apolitical military profession.

Huntington advocates that the military mind is rooted in a realist, conservative worldview. While his ideas are central and influential in the military officer corps, they are by no means universally accepted in CMR discussions. Numerous scholars have critiqued Huntington’s view on several grounds. Matthew Moten and Risa Brooks reflect a common concern in noting that strategy and policy are not entirely separate domains, while retired Army lieutenant general James M. Dubik indicates that war management, like strategy and policy, is a shared responsibility between the two parties. This notion of shared or overlapping responsibilities seems to create problems under the separate domains in objective control. Brooks states that

Huntington’s model influences civil-military relations in ways inimical to the country’s strategic effectiveness, especially in conflicts where the political, strategic, and tactical levels of military activity cannot be easily divided into the separate spheres on which objective control is premised. Ensuring strategic effectiveness in the United States’ armed conflicts requires a better appreciation among scholars, analysts, and military leaders of the weaknesses of contemporary norms of military professionalism.

Dubik considers the different domains of objective control in terms of just-war thinking, the obligations of senior military officials, and their responsibility to advise on the resort to force and war management. His argument builds on the work of Eliot Cohen, who advocates the idea of “unequal dialogue” where civilians are preeminent but where there are coinciding areas of concern and responsibility. Dubik highlights the implications of these shared obligations and the issue of what military leaders should do when the principal and agent disagree. In contrast with Cohen, Dubik contends that resignation can override the civilian “right to be wrong” when senior military leaders believe that the decisions of civilian leaders will waste lives. According to Dubik’s line of reasoning, a civilian leader’s right to make unwise or immoral decisions must not remain
inviolate. Consequently, military leaders must be prepared for situations where civilian leaders fall short of meeting their moral obligations.

**Principles and Principal-Agent Theory**

Against the backdrop of Huntington’s view, Peter Feaver and others instead have proposed thinking about CMR through the principal-agent lens from the discipline of economics. In this view, principals empower agents to do a job or work on their behalf and according to their wishes. The basic feature of this framework for CMR is the strategic interactions within a hierarchical system wherein civilians and the military hold divergent preferences and each has information that the other does not have access to. Moreover, the military (as agent) may not act as the civilians intend and so must be controlled through monitoring and punishment mechanisms. The civilians contract with the military to protect society, but they must have the means to ensure that their agents act according to their direction. The principal-agent theory offers analysis of how the principal can tolerate what Feaver calls adverse selection and moral hazard. In this case, the delegation of tasks and actions to the agent does not necessarily mean the principal’s abdication of responsibility or control. The question is how the principal maintains control.

A critical question for this discussion is the place of moral values and normative commitments in this relationship. Feaver indicates that the military comes with strong moral commitments relative to the profession of arms, a strong reverence for honor, and a desire for respect. In addition, a common feature of CMR in the United States is that the civilian principal has a right to be wrong, that is, to decide on policies that actually harm national security. One might wonder if this right to be wrong also includes a right to be wrong on moral issues. While some aspects of national security might have moral aspects or implications, others may be more pragmatic or instrumental issues—especially those related to effectiveness. Further, does the civilian principal have a right to be morally corrupt? If so, what responsibilities fall to agents dealing with a “lousy” political principal? Feaver states, “Lousy political agents can commit many sins of omission and commission, but they are hard-pressed to bring down the republic.” However, he seems to imply that bad military agents do have that power.

Too, there is the problem of moral competence. Feaver argues that since the military operates under an unlimited liability contract, a willingness to die for the nation, the public sees it as bringing a certain kind of moral competence to the relationship in opposition to the political competence
of the civilian principals. Yet we might wonder if there is any special moral competence expected of the civilians by virtue of their ability to demand obedience and this sacrifice of life. If the principal sets the boundaries of appropriate behavior for the agent, does that also include morally appropriate boundaries?

To see how Feaver’s premise might work in practice, it is helpful to compare it to another principal–agent relationship—that of a chief executive officer (CEO). The CEO runs the business as a fiduciary for the shareholders who relinquish control of daily operation. The CEO makes decisions to maximize shareholder value. If the decisions support that goal and do not violate the law or some moral norms that the two parties agree to, agents are free to use judgment and discretion rooted in their expertise and experience. If the agent fails to preserve or further the goal that incentivized and bound the relationship, the principal has reason to intervene and perhaps sanction or replace the agent. So what happens if the shareholders expect a certain set of moral commitments that the agent finds problematic to the agreed aim of maximizing value, such as abiding by environmental rules or social justice positions? How does the relationship function if shareholders object to what the CEO sees as well-proven and effective best practices—either from a desire to innovate or because they reject the moral or normative basis of those best practices? How much agreement on normative and moral issues is necessary for this principal–agent relationship to work?

The role of trust becomes foundational in this relationship. We can ask what the role of trust is in CMR and what that trust is based on. Is it the personal relationship between the principals and the agents, adherence to procedural norms, allegiance to deeper norms and shared moral values of political nature and democracy, or a shared moral universe—a shared view of the good life? If the principal cedes power and agency but is still held responsible for the actions of the agent, some measure of trust seems necessary. At the same time, if agents are going to act with the authority of the principal and have confidence that their actions will not be constantly countermanded or interfered with (micromanaged), they must trust the principal. Answering the above questions requires us to address the role of norms, morality, and ethics in CMR.

**Ethics, Morals, and Norms**

While many may use the terms *ethics*, *morals*, and *norms* interchangeably, it is necessary to bring some definitional rigor to these concepts since they function differently in CMR. First, what is ethics? Ethics is the discourse
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about, reflection upon, or analysis about moral claims, regardless of who
makes those claims—an individual, a community, an institution, or society.
Moral claims refer to what is right or wrong, often articulated in terms of
concepts like duty, greatest good, virtue, or care. Moral values (like the pri-
macy of a nonpartisan professional military) are a specific kind of moral
claim that surfaces in CMR discussions. The assertion that a business ought
to maximize profit for the shareholders is an example of a moral claim;
ethics would be the discussion, justification, articulation of reasons, critical
questioning, or defense of the claim. CMR discussions often feature ethical
considerations about the moral values and moral claims central to the
military profession (that one ought to fight only just wars) and the rela-
tionship between the principle and agent and to CMR more generally.
They may also analyze the moral obligations rooted in the relationship
between the two parties as understood within the constitutional framework
and the function of national security in the common good.

Similarly, the role of norms is a part of the CMR conversation. Norms
can refer to certain sets of practices or attitudes that are agreed upon (how
strongly is a subject of debate) between individuals or members of a soci-
ety or institution to facilitate social interactions. Sometimes there is dis-
cussion of normative values, which are values that are agreed upon but
may or may not be moral in nature. Norms, in this kind of context, are
seen to be regulative but in a different way from laws since the sanctions
or punishments for violation, if present, are largely social in nature. Norms
tend to be weaker than moral values and claims. However, the two catego-
ries overlap somewhat, making it difficult to sort out whether various au-
thors are discussing nonmoral norms or moral norms, values, or claims.
The discussion here keeps the categories separate for the sake of analysis,
but in practice doing so is more convoluted.

**Moral Values and Norms and the Profession of Arms**

The clearest, most comprehensive discussion of moral values and norms
occurs in accounts of the military profession and, more narrowly, the pro-
fession of arms. For this discussion, I use the following concept of profes-
sion: “(1) a body of expert knowledge on which basis (2) the public accords
certain privileges in exchange for (3) an understanding that the members
of the profession will self-regulate and (4) operate for the public or com-
mon good.” A profession is a community of practice that comes with
traditions, history, and certain moral and normative commitments that
identify the members of that community as different from those in other
communities of practice. Don Snider, who has written extensively on the
military profession and the Army in particular, views the moral values and norms in the military profession through the lens of expert knowledge displayed through various roles. These roles are warrior (military/technical), leader of character (moral/ethical), servant of the nation (political/cultural), and member of the profession (human development).  

Anthony Hartle, another Army-centric writer, focuses his discussion of the norms and moral values that are part of the American professional military ethic on what he calls constitutional values. Hartle roots these in the oath of office, including the commitment to the Constitution and the duties within the military’s professional role. He sees the moral values (not just political norms) of the Constitution as liberty, justice, and equality, where these moral and political values are understood in terms of individual rights secured by the judiciary (Supreme Court) through the norm of rule of law. In keeping with the natural law tradition, these moral values are viewed as natural moral rights secured or reflected in legal norms—especially the idea of maximum equal liberty for all citizens. Moreover, he cites the three core values of duty, honor, and country as constitutive elements. The norm of civilian control of the military, and the moral claim that lives of the military ought not to be wasted or risked without compelling cause, seems to imply some adherence to the principles of just war. Under the usual view of CMR, it is the civilians (including the people they represent) who make this determination, although civilian leaders should—and usually do—consider military judgments on these matters in light of the military’s expertise.

In a slightly narrower vein, James Burk focuses on the role of moral judgment and discretion (as part of both expertise and autonomy) in the military profession, particularly because military members are still viewed as moral agents responsible for their own actions, even ones taken under civilian or higher orders. If we expect military members to exercise judgment and discretion as experts, one might ask whether they can also do so with respect to making moral judgments about the principals. This question is especially pertinent when a decision may conflict with the moral commitments and norms of the military profession. “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” was a flashpoint on this concern, with political norms and values as well as moral commitments around sexuality and masculinity and the military’s identity and effectiveness. As we will see later, such dilemmas can raise key issues about how we decide what moral values and norms will be regulative, particularly where there are conflicts or incommensurable claims between the civilian principals and the military agents.
Turning more specifically to CMR, we can see some moral values but many more norms in force. Depending on the view, there are various lists of integral norms and moral values for CMR. They can include procedural and process norms (like giving the best advice), moral values or commitments (be a team player, give candid and well-supported assessments, i.e., honesty), and a combination of moral and nonmoral values. For example, the ideas of developing expert knowledge and using the news media only for the national interest have aspects of moral values and obligations embedded in the notion of the military professional. But these concepts are also procedural and process norms that, even if one rejects them as moral obligations, are necessary for effective CMR as a normative matter.

**Political or Partisan**

A primary moral value for military professionalism that is also a moral value on the other side of the civilian-military relationship is that of a nonpartisan (some say apolitical) military. However, authors like David R. Segal and Karin De Angelis indicate that Janowitz (contra Huntington) advocates that beyond military expertise, an officer must have a political ethos and political sensitivity. The exercise of these characteristics would produce a different moral claim as well as norm. Risa Brooks observes that civilians may lose trust in the military and the finality of their decisions if the military or its members engage in any range of political activity and are viewed as having veto power over the principal’s decisions. Brooks states,

> Those norms involve both proscriptions and prescriptions, especially for the officer corps: officers should refrain from anything remotely political in their activities and thought processes; they should focus on cultivating military expertise and protect their autonomy to do so; they do (and should) retain a singular worldview and values system as military professionals, which necessarily separates them from their civilian counterparts in other state institutions and in society; and, especially as they assume senior leadership roles, they should readily offer politics-free assessments of military options after civilians provide them with definitive guidance.

Another issue is whether military members can have political influence or input without partisan input (as it is really the partisanship that undermines trust) or whether all political influence is necessarily partisan. Making this distinction is challenging during periods of significant partisan polarization, and some civil-military scholars in the United States have been attempting to draw clearer normative lines.
Finally, it is necessary to consider the political norms and moral commitments around democracy. Huntington’s objective control requires neutrality on politics, but does it also require neutrality on the underlying moral questions about value and the good life? If Huntington is right that the military mind is ideologically conservative, there are moral implications in tension with classical liberalism. Liberalism requires state neutrality about moral visions of value and the good life (these are to be left to the individual), provided they are compatible with procedural justice and basic democratic political values and norms. Darrell Driver asks about the connection between military professionalism and normative beliefs in pluralistic American democracy. He brings up Ronald Dahl’s argument that the modern liberal state does not require a shared normative core about public life but rather an acceptance of democratic norms and processes that will govern that public life. That said, we might wonder if the notion of the common good and the specific content that comprises that conception is a shared normative (and often moral) commitment.

Moving away from the descriptive toward a more proscriptive view, Charles Gibson argues for what he calls a Madisonian approach to civilian-military values and norms. Fundamental elements of this approach are that elected leaders have the final say and no decisions about war are beyond their purview, that there is a nonpartisan military, and that POTUS and Congress share civilian control. Gibson finds the historical relationship of Secretary of War Henry Stimson and Gen George Marshall to be instructive. Thus, he proposes a process where the political and military constituents develop competing plans and then critique one another’s plans to ensure that the best ideas and thinking prevail.

What do these discussions tell us about norms and moral values in examining the unprincipled principal? They do offer some idea of the standard moral commitments, values, and norms that have been operant in CMR discussions; which moral values and norms apply to the agent and which to the principal; and areas where scholars are proposing new directions. It is noteworthy here that most of the discussions seem to apply to the agent and how the principal will regulate the agent’s behavior and much less about the principal’s behavior. One might wonder at this point, Do the moral and normative commitments of the principal even matter beyond a basic commitment to the purely procedural and process pieces that define the principal-agent relationship in CMR? To answer this question, we consider five options for what an unprincipled principal might look like in CMR and assess their implications.
An Unprincipled Principal: Consider the Options

A principal (Congress, POTUS, or the secretary of defense) might be unprincipled in several ways. Aside from their roles as secretaries of defense for the United States, Donald Rumsfeld and Robert McNamara are two examples of the unprincipled principal in the principal-agent view of civilian-military relations championed by Feaver and others. Rumsfeld rejected military expertise, autonomy, and profession of arms norms. Richard Kohn suggests that McNamara, Rumsfeld, and others were primarily motivated by political and personal ambition rather than some commitment either to moral or normative values related to civilian-military relations. More recent concerns about the use of the military by unprincipled principals were highlighted by the incident at Lafayette Square in May 2020 involving Gen Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in what many viewed as a political photo opportunity (for which he later apologized). Another such occurrence was when the National Guard and potentially regular military forces were called on to disperse peaceful protestors during domestic unrest in an election year. The point here is to explore which kinds of unprincipled principals are most problematic for civilian-military relations and which could still be compatible with an effective relationship. In each of these five options, the core question is whether and to what extent the moral values and normative commitments of the principal matter for maintaining the trust essential for successful CMR.

Case 1: Shared Values, Conflicting Interpretations

In the first case, the principal shares the moral commitments around CMR with military members (especially in terms of the moral values and norms of the military profession). They could share many values or have complete consensus and overlap of these moral values and norms. The POTUS or secretary of defense may have served in the military, and Congress may have numerous veterans. This combination would create a great deal of consensus on the moral values and norms that are a part of the military profession, including the constitutional values discussed by Hartle. It may also enforce a commitment to the procedural and process norms of CMR. Also, there is likely to be a strong commitment to shared moral values and norms as a matter of both personal and professional conviction and experiences that support and reinforce interactions. Secretary of Defense James Mattis, to whom the press often referred by his
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military title, is an example of a principal whose moral values and norms aligned with those of the agents.

This scenario would represent the least “unprincipled” principal if it can even be called that. Nevertheless, there are still two concerns here. First, unless the shared consensus is only around Hartle’s constitutional or political principles and values, this conception might be too congenial to be sustained over time. Considerable agreement on moral values, norms, and other commitments would be required to make this relationship work, something only likely given a fairly high level of veteran experience for the principals. If that were the circumstance, we might wonder if these principals become an extension of the military and the profession of arms since they just happen to be holding positions that are civilian in some sense.

Further, shared moral commitments and norms do not equate to agreement on these. The POTUS, Congress, and the military could all be committed to the moral value of equality or the norm of civilian control of the military. However, they may disagree about what that looks like in a particular case. These kinds of disagreements would seem easier to resolve by appealing to shared moral values and norms, but the parties may still not reach a consensus. In the instance of capital punishment, there is agreement on the value of life and the need to punish crimes. Still, these commonalities do not provide grounds for arguments and appeals that could resolve the issue. The problem lies in the disagreement within a set of shared moral values or norms and how to resolve what are basically internal disagreements. Accordingly, “unprincipled” here really means that the principal interprets the relevant moral value or norm differently than the agent. To return to our corporate example, the principal and agent may disagree about what constitutes profit or what means are permitted to achieve that goal. The principal may be more interested in tangible monetary gain that can be paid in dividends. The agent may be interested in the company’s reputation and other less concrete forms of profit that would benefit the company’s long-term sustainability.

Case 2: Shared Values, Different Priorities

In the second case, the parties may have a shared normative commitment about the nature of CMR and the values (nonmoral, political) that frame it. These commitments could include civilian control of the military, objective control as the mode of civilian-military relations, and respect for military expertise in certain areas (and the monopoly on that expertise others do not possess). Such values would indicate adherence to the nonpartisan role of the military—not as a moral value but as a normative
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commitment necessary for effective CMR and a well-functioning democratic system. Of note here is that most of these normative commitments do not rise to the level of generally accepted claims about what is right or wrong. Instead, they are based on what is necessary for effective CMR in a particular political system and context.

There may be other ideas shared and/or agreed to that do rise to the level of moral claims. These include commitment to advice and dialogue processes as partners for the common good of the nation and commitment to the good of the nation (a moral and normative claim). They can also include moral commitments of the profession of arms (either as concepts in themselves or more thinly as recognition of their regulative normative role in CMR). As with the first category, where there is stronger, more congenial agreement or commitment, these moral values will be constrained by the community of practice norms of both the civilian community of practice, including citizens, and the military/national security communities of practice, which include overlapping norms.

The problem with the moral values and norms relative to the principal in this case is that some moral values and norms may be more critical than others. Civilian control is one of these values—along with the constitutional values implicit in the oaths that military members take—that is less negotiable than military nonpartisan or political activity. Our frameworks for civil-military interactions might need to shift if we come to think that objective control can no longer balance political needs with national security. Here, “unprincipled” revolves around ranking and prioritizing one value or norm over another; if one must give way, which one? The principal may think that a nonpartisan military is sacrosanct. The agent may think that some political acumen on the part of military members is essential and advisable, perhaps even obligatory, as they act as agents of the state and as citizens. Partisan behavior and political acumen are not the same thing. Nevertheless, it may well be that acquiring political acumen requires some engagement with issues and perspectives that may be viewed as (or are in fact) partisan. Within CMR discussions, how do we decide which values or norms get priority without some partisan implications?

**Case 3: Shared Process Absent Shared Values**

In the third case, there may be a norm but not one of moral value. The commitment to procedure/process is purely formal (these are the rules of the game), with no agreement on priorities as in option two above. This category reflects the thinnest form of agreement that will still deliver functional objective control. Without concurrence on the ground rules, it
will be difficult for both parties to accept decisions on any matter. Moreover, processes and their resulting choices will be ad hoc and thus entirely situational—providing no precedent about how to approach future disputes. Therefore, “unprincipled” here means there are no shared ideas aside from a purely formal process. There is no agreement, consensus, or commitment to moral or normative values. Risa Brooks notes that under the Huntington view, CMR is purely transactional rather than collaborative, which seems to support this kind of view. While this thin commitment to procedure and process can support the transactional relationship, it is hard-pressed to be collaborative without a congenial account such as in the first and second options above.

One might object at this juncture that commitment to the process is enough without the accounts of the first two cases. The procedural commitment would seem to assume at least some agreement on the more substantive issues from cases 1 and 2. Otherwise, why would one agree to these rules except as a provisional matter (i.e., these are the rules right now, but without a deeper grounding, why can’t they change)? This question exemplifies the classic pragmatist concern with what works as the court of ultimate appeal on matters of truth. If nonpartisan military or objective control, for example, turns out at some point not to work, what then? What replaces it? This apprehension is analogous to concerns about how one decides when and how law changes in jurisprudence, namely the rule of recognition (how one knows \( x \) is law) and the rule of change (how to change law).

Any of the above options would be compatible, perhaps to different degrees, with effective CMR. This is true largely because of overlapping consensus and agreement on some moral and/or normative elements around which to negotiate and work together. That is not to say there will always be agreement but that there is a shared reality in which to operate. The next two options, however, present heightened threats and challenges to civil–military relations. They may well be insurmountable precisely because of this lack of shared vocabulary and reality.

**Case 4: No Shared Substantive or Procedural Values**

In the fourth case, there are no shared moral commitments or norms. The parties hold incommensurable views or commitments, and there is no basic agreement on the procedural/process approaches that govern civilian–military relations. This combination of ideology might take the shape of disagreement about what principles ought to govern CMR, including any or all of the following: (1) rejection of the norms and moral commitments of the military profession and/or profession of arms, spe-
specifically; (2) rejection of objective control or other salient CMR norms; and (3) rejection or renegotiation of constitutional values with other principles or values. We can see the behaviors of Rumsfeld and McNamara mentioned earlier as examples of this circumstance, especially regarding the military profession and military expertise.

In this case, “unprincipled” means a lack of both agreed upon substantive and procedural values or principles. In the case of disagreement over values and norms in option 2, there is agreement that the values and norms under dispute are all important, but it is a question of how to rank and prioritize them. Presumably, there is still some disagreement over procedural/process norms and values, especially relative to the values and commitments that arguably undergird those procedures and processes. This conflict may also be a case of rejection of relevant moral values and norms without any notion of what might be substituted, or it might be a rejection in favor of other values and norms. The claims by some that President Trump was right to pardon Chief Eddie Gallagher of war crimes were based on a rejection of the moral values of the profession of arms in favor of a view that military members are “killers” and such accountability undermines military effectiveness.36

**Case 5: An Amoral Principal**

In the last case, the principal has no normative or moral commitments. This version is the only one where the principal is truly unprincipled in a strict sense. The behavior of the principals may be rooted in whim, public opinion, or political expediency relative to that person as an individual, not as a member of a community of practice. Secretary of War Harry Woodring and Secretary of Defense Louis Jefferson are cited as examples because their personal ambitions or other nonmoral and normative considerations drove decisions.37 The problem here is a lack of consistency, guidance, and process for the civilian-military dialogue to occur or to agree on limits and rules. Further, there are no guardrails against abuse and no agreement that actions are undertaken for the common good of the nation. In this case, the civilian principal would have the right to be wrong on policy and moral questions and even to be morally corrupt or agonistic.

**Implications of Unprincipled Principals**

Given this range of possibilities for an unprincipled principal, one can evaluate the implications for the current discourse on CMR. As stated, there is a significant difference between the unprincipled in cases 1, 2,
and 3 and in cases 4 and 5. The first grouping can be engaged and appealed to within the shared or overlapping moral and/or normative reality and perhaps within the context of subjective control of the military. The second category cannot.

In addition to that claim, a truly unprincipled principal (case 5) is rare and would be an outlier. This does not mean we do not need to address the issue. However, it will have to be considered in a separate category, and these arguments do not apply to the other kinds of cases. If the principal really has no moral values or normative commitments, the civil-military relationship will be unpredictable and more likely be subject to the specific contexts, personalities, and relationships involved to bring some structure to the engagement. Thus, sustained trust between these communities of practice and individuals will be more difficult. To deal with this challenge, the agent will need to use pragmatic appeals oriented to the context, individual, or power of personal relationships to try and navigate the boundaries for each instance. This tactic will produce no broader CMR norms for the next instance or precedent for the future and seems a wholly unsatisfactory way to pursue civilian-military relations. It is an emergency measure where no other viable options exist to get at least agreement to the third option (shared process) for pragmatic reasons.

What is much more likely is a principal with normative and/or moral commitments incommensurable with the norms and moral commitments that govern CMR, as seen in case 4. For example, a leader may have a radical or authoritarian ideology and reject all or part of cases 1–3 in pursuit of new political and other commitments that presumably have the endorsement of the American people through the electoral process. The question then becomes whether and how to navigate this scenario to move toward basic procedural commensurability. Some negotiation or other engagement toward acceptance of certain procedural and process norms, albeit on different grounds than presented in my discussion of case 3, could provide small steps toward effective CMR that could be subsequently built upon. However, even if successful, accepted norms in this context seem to put CMR on shaky, provisional grounds subject to constant attempts to undermine agreement on procedure and process. Further, procedural/process norms could even be used as a functional mechanism to keep the military from engaging in political resistance and/or dissent.

Current theories of civil-military relations provide inadequate guidance about how military leaders should respond to the question of an unprincipled principal. Due to the problems raised by all five scenarios, it may be time to reconsider whether and to what extent subjective control is prob-
lematic for military effectiveness—especially in the strategic sense—as Huntington suggests. Political acumen and the ability to appeal to the shared political values of the military community of practice seem to be critical to going beyond winning the nation's battles to winning the nation's wars. A version of subjective control may present us with a model of negotiation of authority, like arguments about negotiation and command authority in the military. We might still agree that the civilians have preeminence and a right to be wrong without arguing that this is a one-directional mode of principal dictating to agent.

What are the benefits of a reconsideration of subjective control? First, it acknowledges Brooks and others’ critiques suggesting that objective control is problematic. It does not accurately map onto our current national security structures and processes or fit with more contemporary interpretations of military professionalism. Second, the societal imperative provides some mechanisms to negotiate and navigate moral and normative disagreement and change over time without sacrificing a meaningful, consistent civilian–military relationship over the long term. If this is an unequal dialogue as Eliot Cohen suggests, then that model and the power relations implicit in it may yield at least some insights into the relationship and this negotiation process.

The CMR tensions and crises of 2020 might illuminate the need to think more about cases 4 and 5. However, they do not mitigate the need to address possible problems with cases 1, 2, and 3 involving different conceptions and expectations about what moral and normative commitments are anticipated from the principal. There is much discussion about these ethical matters for the military agents, such as Dubik’s assertion that “moral agency is expected of the general just as it is for any other soldier or leader.” But what does this look like for the civilian principals? What if there are no moral requirements for the principals (they decide the terms), and the only normative commitments are those they set out for some version of case 3? Does the civilian right to be wrong mean that moral and normative commitments are only binding on the agents and not the principals? Why would agents consent to be used in ways that potentially go against their own moral worldview, and even if they consented, would that be moral?

The provisional questions and conclusions discussed here are worthwhile for future areas of inquiry or discussion, especially the possibility of pursuing accounts or theories of CMR that engage cases 1, 2, and 3. One recommended focus area is whether subjective control or some other framework can alleviate or provide mechanisms for addressing tensions
and conflicts. With cases 4 and 5, the core concerns are more about what kinds of moral and normative commitments and values one can and ought to expect from civilian principals. Accordingly, good CMR requires an account of moral and normative commitments, including explaining why a particular configuration of them is necessary and how agents should behave when principals arise who do not fit this model. The potential harm to CMR by issues raised in cases 4 and 5 seems so serious that agents must be prepared for them even if these cases are somewhat unlikely. Principals may have the “right to be wrong,” but agents deserve more guidance about how they should act when the moral and normative values of their principal are called into question.

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Notes

1. Subjective control sees the military as one of many social groups vying for resources and control, and these decisions about which group prevails will vary by context. Objective control is rooted in the functional imperative, that is, the function of the military to manage violence and win wars. The military (based upon expertise and other professional norms) is responsible for deciding how best to achieve this end. Civilian leaders task the military to fulfill that function based upon expertise and professional norms and practices. Within its domain, the military decides how to proceed with minimal interventions.


5. In “Paradoxes of Professionalism,” Risa Brooks notes that this is less true in the Trump administration than in prior administrations.


9. Feaver, 70.

11. Feaver, 89.
18. Hartle, 41, 43.
30. Feaver, Armed Servants.
32. For the National Guard issue, see Lindsay P. Cohn and Steve Vladeck, “The Election and the Military,” Lawfare (blog), published by the Lawfare Institute in co-


38. For Huntingdon, subjective control was different from objective control in that different factions within the society sought to bring the military under their control and in line with their values and priorities. As a result, the military has very little autonomy, and there is little space for military professionalism since the military is part of the social and political processes.

39. In general, I think that all members of the military profession are members of that community of practice.


Through the Looking Glass: 
Trump-Era Civil-Military Relations 
in Comparative Perspective

RISA BROOKS

Abstract

While often studied in isolation and treated as exceptional, civil-military relations in the United States under President Donald Trump exhibit many patterns and problems found globally. This article explores these similarities, drawing from four sets of scholarship in comparative politics: societal-military pacts, militarization of politics and society, regime security, and coups d’états. Applying these concepts to the Trump era, the article contends that some of his actions were fueled by trends and patterns in society and the military that predated his presidency. Other actions significantly departed from modern conventions of US civil-military relations. Neither the trends nor Trump’s specific actions, however, are especially novel when viewed through the lens of comparative politics.

In January 2021, after mobs stormed the US Capitol, Americans were prompted to ask an extraordinary question: Had they just witnessed an attempted coup d’état inspired by the president of the United States? Weeks of misinformation and false statements by politicians about fraud in the election had encouraged thousands to travel to a protest in Washington, D.C. In a speech at the rally, Donald Trump urged participants to march to the Capitol, which many heeded. Swarms of the president’s supporters subsequently breached the Capitol’s defenses and overwhelmed police, some with the intent of harming legislators to prevent Congress from certifying Joe Biden’s victory and ensure Donald Trump would remain in office. In the debate that followed about whether these events constituted a coup, much turned on the role of the security forces, with analysts actively weighing whether Trump had attempted a takeover and whether the US military would ever abet him in such an effort.

Perhaps Americans should not be surprised that the most turbulent period in the country’s modern civil-military relations would culminate in a
discussion about whether a coup had been attempted against the US government. Throughout his presidency, Trump had trampled on civil–military conventions, overtly treating the military as his political ally and threatening to use its coercive power against peaceful protesters in June 2020.4 Still, that Americans were even considering a potential role for the US military in a coup was jarring. It was a remarkable moment in US history.

It was also a notable moment for academic specialists of civil–military relations. Normally, the field remains separated between academics who study civil–military relations comparatively, especially in non-democracies, and those who focus on the US case. The former study military coups and authoritarian political control of and by the military, while the latter concentrate on norms, civilian control, and political activism in democratic politics. Yet in January 2021, the fields had seemingly converged on the question of what had occurred on the sixth.

What else do we have to learn about US civil–military relations by looking to comparative politics? Can phenomena developed in a comparative context help illuminate the US case, especially during the Trump era?

In this article, I begin to address these questions, arguing that there is indeed much to learn from comparative politics about US civil–military relations in the Trump era and beyond. While often studied in isolation and treated as exceptional, civil–military relations in the United States today exhibit many patterns and problems found elsewhere.

Specifically, I make two related arguments about the nature of US civil–military relations under Trump. First, I argue that some of what occurred was fueled by trends and patterns in society and the military that predated his presidency. These trends are especially important in understanding his efforts to forge a societal–military coalition to support his position in office—that is, to convert elements within the military to partisan allies tied to his political base. They also help explain why Trump so often referenced military symbols and echoed themes that reflected and then reinforced the centrality of the military in politics and society. While Trump was more aggressive in his tactics, in some cases carrying them to their logical extremes, both set of actions were nonetheless enabled by long-standing trends in civil–military relations. In these areas, Trump was exploiting existing deficiencies in civil–military relations.

Second, I argue that other aspects of Trump’s approach did significantly depart from modern conventions of US civil–military relations—his approach was distinctive and unprecedented compared with other contemporary presidents. This is especially notable with respect to Trump’s efforts to use security forces for the purposes of regime security and possibly to
help overturn the 2020 election. Hence, while long-term trends enabled his actions, Trump nonetheless pushed US civil-military relations in alarming new directions. Encompassing both arguments is the claim that neither those trends nor Trump’s specific actions are especially novel when viewed through the lens of comparative politics.

In drawing from comparative politics, I focus on arguments and concepts from four domains of scholarship: societal-military pacts, militarization of politics and society, regime security, and coups d’états. The concepts and arguments in each of these sets of scholarly literature were developed in particular contexts, often in nondemocratic settings, to explain specific political outcomes, many of which are not directly relevant to the US. Nevertheless, the ideas in this scholarly tradition provide heuristics or lenses through which to conceptualize features of US civil-military relations.

I use these concepts to explain four aspects of civil-military relations under Trump. The first is his effort to elicit factions of partisan supporters in the military and tie them to his larger political coalition. The second is his readiness to exploit military resources and symbols. The third is his efforts to orient state security forces and non-state militant groups toward safeguarding his position in office. The fourth aspect is whether on 6 January he attempted a coup d’état to overturn the election and maintain power unconstitutionally. In each instance, the analysis shows that what seem like exceptional developments in the US case—and in some respects are exceptional—in fact resonate with aspects of civil-military relations around the globe.

**Civil-Military Relations under Trump**

Below I discuss four dimensions of civil-military relations under Trump and how lessons from comparative politics helps explain them.

**Forging a Societal-Military Coalition**

Scholarship from comparative politics about the military’s role in politics first helps illuminate what might be seen as Trump’s efforts to forge a societal-military coalition in support of his position in office.

In the 1980s important scholarship on societal-military pacts emerged to describe a political process in which factions of the military coalesce with particular societal groups, enabling democratization. Pacts formed when some faction of the military perceived that either its members’ interests or those of the military institution would be served through some change in the political system; that segment then coalesced with a section of society to
effect that change. Groupings or factions within the military allied with ideological or political groupings in society to both sides’ advantage.

More broadly, scholars have also sought to understand what role the military might play in a leader’s ruling coalition and how that shapes civil-military relations. Especially in places where the military is a powerful and popular constituency, leaders have considerable incentives to try and cultivate allies within it. In authoritarian contexts, doing so is often essential to prevent the military’s coercive power from being turned against the leader’s regime.

These concepts provide useful tools through which to analyze Trump’s efforts to construct a political alliance between parts of the military and society. Understanding his strategy, however, requires looking at the longer-term degradation in the nonpartisan status of the military in the United States. These underlying deficiencies in civil-military relations provided openings for Trump to try and elicit a partisan constituency from within the military and for members of his political base to welcome that segment into their ranks. The empirical expression of that coalition could have taken different forms. One way would have involved prominent active duty and retired senior leaders and cohorts in the military publicly speaking about their support for Trump and publishing articles expressing their endorsement of his policy agenda. Those in the “Make America Great Again” base would then coalesce around these individuals and movements and endorse and publicize their images and statements.

The intersection of two trends helps explain why Trump might have believed such a coalition was possible and sought to pursue it. The first relates to partisan divides in how Americans view the military. While the US military enjoys enormous popularity overall, that support is greater among those Americans who identify with one political party, the Republican Party. Over two prior decades, the partisan split in confidence in the military has intensified, such that today, as David Burbach has put it, “Party ID is now the best predictor of one’s confidence in the military.” In other words, before Trump took office, there was already a robust societal constituency from his political party that identified especially strongly with the military. The partisan imbalance, in turn, meant that there was a ready opening for Trump to try and divide support for the military along partisan lines and tie at least part of the military to his political base.

That some in his base might be receptive to such a message is the result of other trends, including evidence that Americans are not especially beholden to the ethic of nonpartisanship within the military or to upholding civil-military relations norms. A June 2020 Economist/You Gov poll
found that, despite endorsing the abstract idea that the military should remain apolitical, in separate questions more than a quarter of respondents nonetheless supported active duty military personnel campaigning in elections. Nearly as many felt that it was fine if those personnel participated in a political photo op. In addition, many would prefer that the military behave like a partisan ally, or at least that it not identify with their partisan opponents, consistent with the phenomenon of negative partisanship. Research has shown that retired generals are rewarded for their partisan behaviors with such things as increased visibility and followers on social media. In addition, Americans filter civil-military relations conventions through their partisan lenses, selectively expressing support for civilian control of the military depending on which party holds the presidency. Taken to a logical extreme, these trends suggest that many Americans might not oppose the military as a whole or factions thereof overtly siding with them in partisan politics.

There is also evidence that some in the military might not fully resist being drawn into such a coalition. In part, this results from growing weaknesses in the military’s nonpartisan ethic, a trend that has rendered military personnel vulnerable to incorporation in societal–military coalitions. Since the 1970s, military officers have developed a more actualized partisan identity, evident in a greater willingness to associate themselves with a political party versus expressing independence from the political system. In addition, there are indications that some in the military are becoming more open to involvement in domestic politics. Incidents of political activism in recent years suggest a fundamental fraying of the normative firewall against such engagement. Here comparative politics scholarship provides context for this activism. In 1962, Samuel Finer developed a typology of military intervention in politics in which he distinguished between “military influence” and “military pressure or blackmail.” In a situation of influence, the military seeks “to convince the civil authorities by appealing to their reason or emotions . . . [in a manner] entirely consistent with the supremacy of the civil power . . . and in precisely the same way and with the same authority as any elements in the bureaucracy.” In the case of a pressure or blackmail scenario, the “military seek to convince the civil power by the threat of some sanction,” or consequence, which is often legal and constitutional yet serves to subvert the authority of civilians. Since the 1990s there has been growing concern about instances of activism in the US military evocative of Finer’s “pressure” or “blackmail.” This debate was sparked by the op-eds and other actions taken by then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell in 1992 to protest
intervention in the Bosnian civil war.\textsuperscript{18} There have since been periodic episodes of political activism, including many involving retired officers.\textsuperscript{19} There have also been instances of retired officer commentary about domestic political themes unrelated to national security.\textsuperscript{20} Also, since the 1990s, retirees have been endorsing candidates during elections.\textsuperscript{21} While scholars of comparative civil-military relations would not find these developments especially surprising, they are nonetheless suggestive of the growing pressures from within the military that encourage involvement in domestic politics and potentially partisan politics.

In sum, when Trump became president, he inherited a situation in which there were already factors paving the way for the military to become a more expressly partisan actor. He then took several actions that sought to accelerate these trends and provide the basis for a coalition between his political supporters and segments of the military. Two sets of actions are especially important in this respect.

First, while other presidents have exploited the military symbolically to promote their popularity with the electorate (see below), Trump overtly fostered the idea that the military, or at least segments within it, was his partisan ally within society. His actions served a dual purpose of signaling both to his supporters within the electorate and potential co-partisans in the military that alliances are possible and appropriate. Especially distinctive here is how Trump politicized the military and military resources in a manner that incited partisan tensions and intersected partisan divides both inside and outside the military. Such tactics potentially divided the military internally between supporters and opponents, while also polarizing the public’s views about the military along partisan lines. These are crucial steps on the paths to forging a societal-military coalition.

Specifically, one tactic involved attempting to tie the military to his express domestic political agenda and campaign priorities. There are numerous examples of these dynamics. Early in his presidency, he signed a controversial executive order on immigration—a centerpiece of his campaign—in the Pentagon’s Hall of Heroes.\textsuperscript{22} Trump later pardoned or overruled the demotion of service members accused or convicted of war crimes.\textsuperscript{23} He then invited them to campaign events.\textsuperscript{24} Trump also took money from the defense budget appropriated for other purposes to fund a highly controversial border wall to fulfill a campaign promise.\textsuperscript{25}

In so doing, he was not only using the military to leverage support from his base but also attempting to court military supporters and normalize the position of the military as a partisan institution. Trump was signaling to supporters within the military and society that violating the military’s
organizational integrity to advance his partisan agenda was appropriate—
namely, that the military was ultimately to be subordinated to his partisan
interests. As one critic put it, “Trump viewed the military ‘as his personal
force, not the country’s’” and repeatedly conveyed that impression among
his political base and to audiences within the military.26

Second, Trump sought to cultivate political supporters inside the mili-
tary, signaling to service members that acting like his co-partisan was ap-
propriate. Early in his tenure on a visit to MacDill Air Force base, he
made overt references to assembled military personnel about their voting
for him.27 Trump similarly used Thanksgiving Day calls to troops to talk
about the importance of his border wall and his stance on trade.28 He of-
ten referred to the military’s political support for him, as in a 2016 speech
when he said in response to applause from military personnel in the audi-
ence, “Well, at least I definitely know the military likes Trump, right?”29 In
another speech, he recruited military audience members to lobby on behalf
of his policy priorities, telling them to “call that congressman and call that
senator” regarding his budget and legislative priorities.30 Trump also
sought to divide officers from the enlisted ranks, praising his supporters
among the latter while disparaging their senior leaders and accusing them
of being agents of the military–industrial complex.31

How are we to assess the success of Trump’s efforts to build a societal–
military coalition to bolster his position in office? There were instances in
which military personnel overtly signaled their partisan allegiances to him
while at the workplace,32 and a handful of retired senior officers also overtly
allied with him.33 Yet there were otherwise few examples of active duty
military personnel publicly speaking out in favor of Trump or otherwise
signaling support for him—and none among currently serving senior of-
ficers. This is notable because while regulations prohibit military person-
nel from undertaking some partisan activities to support campaigns, and
the UCMJ precludes contemptuous speech about political leaders and
Cabinet officials, military personnel are not legally restricted from speak-
ing favorably about a candidate or politician or advocating issues they
support. In this sense, the normative proscription against partisan behav-
ior within the military seems to have held, and Trump’s efforts to elicit an
overt, openly operating faction of supporters within it did not materialize.
In fact, his efforts to build a societal–military coalition may have been
counterproductive, alienating some military officers. Although unscien-
tific, surveys by the Military Times34 suggest a decline in support among
military personnel for Trump prior to the 2020 presidential election, sug-
gestive that at least some were put off by his actions.34 Anecdotal observa-
tions by prominent former military leaders suggest that Trump’s efforts to politicize the military deeply unsettled many senior military leaders.\textsuperscript{35} Compared with other recent US presidents, Trump was the subject of an unprecedented amount of dissent by retired officers, with concerns about his efforts to do so being a prominent theme in their public commentary.\textsuperscript{36} In short, Trump’s efforts to openly draw parts of the military into his coalition seems to have been a step too far for many within its ranks.

Trump, however, may have been more demonstrably successful with pushing Republicans (and Democrats) toward viewing the military as his co-partisan. A YouGov/Economist poll in June 2019 found the largest partisan gap in views toward the military in years, with a 31 percentage-point gap in Democrat and Republican respondents who expressed quite a lot or a great deal of confidence in the military.\textsuperscript{37} In sum, while Trump did not fully succeed in efforts to forge a societal-military coalition, by amplifying partisan divides on public views toward the military, he moved the country closer to that outcome.

**Trump’s Militarization of Politics and Society**

Insights from comparative politics also help explain Trump’s reliance on military symbols and iconography in public appearances and in partisan contexts. Once again, these can be seen in the context of trends that predate his presidency related to the growing presence of the military—or militarization—in American culture, politics, and society. There are numerous examples of how Trump both reflected and promoted this militarization. Early in his presidency, Trump sought to organize a military parade comprised of troops that would march through the streets of Washington, D.C., with tanks and heavy equipment.\textsuperscript{38} Trump also appointed an unprecedented number of generals to his Cabinet, referring to them as “My Generals” even when they played civilian policy roles, such as secretary of defense or chief of staff. Throughout his presidency he embraced military symbols, “regularly speak[ing] in front of military equipment, using fighter planes, ships and ground vehicles as backdrops,” including in his “[political] rally speeches.”\textsuperscript{39} His 2020 presidential campaign included an initiative aimed at fashioning an “Army for Trump” in which it sought to “enlist” supporters to work on the “frontlines” as part of a “field staff” alongside “battle tested Team Trump operatives.”\textsuperscript{40}

While more egregious under Trump, however, such symbolic exploitations of the military are far from new. For example, presidents today regularly use military audiences, rather than civilian universities, as backdrops to outline their foreign policy doctrines in speeches at service academies.\textsuperscript{41}
They sometimes don bomber jackets and flight suits when speaking to the public in front of military audiences. They solicit and publicize lists of retired senior officers’ endorsements during campaigns. They also vaunt their military service in campaign advertisements, and they occasionally use the images of military personnel in campaign materials.  

Manifestations of militarization also pervade American society and culture. They are seen in the way Americans fetishize military service during patriotic displays commemorating military service at sporting events or wear clothing evocative of military dress. They manifest in waging “wars” against an abstract concept of terrorism, drugs, and COVID-19. They include Americans’ readiness to put the Department of Defense in charge of all manner of national security issues, underscoring how, as Rosa Brooks puts it, “war became everything” in the United States.

Comparative and historical studies of civil–military relations provide context for these trends, showing how they are a byproduct of enduring cultural fixations with war–related and military ephemera and iconography. As Richard Kohn has observed, since the 1930s, the US public has become increasingly militarized in that “the American people’s identification with and use of war images and thinking, and a belief in the primacy of standing military forces for American safety, have become normalized.” Similarly, as Andrew Bacevich describes it, “Americans in our time have fallen prey to militarism, manifesting itself in a romanticized view of soldiers, a tendency to see military power as the truest measure of national greatness, and outsized expectations regarding the utility of military force. To a degree without precedent in US history, Americans have come to define the nation’s strength and well-being in terms of military preparedness, military action, and the fostering of (or nostalgia for) military ideals.” From this perspective, the fixation with military instruments and solutions is a byproduct of a culture—a militarist ethos or “the vast array of customs, interests, prestige, actions, and thought associated with armies yet transcending true military purposes.”

Other dynamics in the US also promote (and reflect) the militarization of society and politics. Among them is the significant structural power the US military enjoys in the United States. One commonly expressed manifestation of that power is the polling by Gallup and other organizations that show the US military is the most socially esteemed of all the country’s institutions. Yet it is not just that the military is popular but that it has an important presence in the economy and society, including in local communities. This is especially the case around military installations and bases, many of which are located in the southern United States.
the country’s approximately 18 million veterans participate in veterans’ organizations, some of which remain powerful political actors in their own right. The US military also has enormous power because of the magnitude of resources it enjoys and how its activities fuel jobs and the economy. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that military symbols resonate so strongly in American culture and politics.

Comparative scholarship also suggests that militarization might in part be symptomatic of a larger decline in the legitimacy of democratic institutions in the United States. In the 1960s the concept of praetorianism was developed to explain recurrent armed intervention in politics and the military running institutions in the state. Central to that scholarly literature is the notion that military influence in society and politics is a byproduct of political stasis, illegitimacy, and incapacity in other institutions. The military institution, its authority, and its members begin to supplant political institutions in part because those institutions do not function in a way that meets the citizenry’s needs. As Raphael Cohen states, “The gap between Americans’ confidence in the military versus its civilian counterparts has widened over the past several decades, leading former military officers to play an increasingly prominent role in politics and changing the civil–military balance in potentially unhealthy ways.”

Comparativists might also situate the US case in the context of larger global trends, where there has been a resurgence of military influence in politics and governance. Trump’s aforementioned appointment of several retired generals as cabinet members and as White House chief of staff and national security advisor early in his tenure is suggestive of society’s comfort with those with military experience playing a greater role in politics. In Brazil, similarly, under President Jair Bolsonaro, individuals who have served in the military have held almost half of all cabinet portfolios. Support for the military has remained high across Western Europe, while trust in other private and public institutions remains considerably less, as in the United States. Surveys in many countries in Latin America also reveal that the military remains extremely popular, even while confidence in other political institutions and elections has steadily declined. As some analysts note, in Latin America, “an inverse correlation has developed between the capacity and legitimacy of democratic institutions to meet society’s socio-political expectations and the use of the military to serve as a stopgap in support of ineffective civilian institutions.” Consequently, as Adam Scharpf indicates, “Soldiers are considered to have integrity, be incorruptible, and to be equipped with the skills and determination to get the job done. . . . Politicians, in turn, hope to utilize the positive perception of
the armed forces for their own political gain." The perceived dysfunction of civilian institutions combined with the military’s popularity create incentives to rely on the armed forces. Scharpf adds that “recruiting officers as ministers, staff members, or political advisers is seen to demonstrate the political willingness and capability to address a country’s intractable problems head on.” Gustavo Flores-Macías details the different means through which the military is entering politics in Latin America, including having greater roles in domestic law enforcement, adjudicating the outcomes of mass protest, and deciding the fates of incumbent governments. In the Middle East, Holger Albrecht and Kevin Koehler note the growing demand for the Tunisian military to participate in domestic policing and government beyond its security roles. They tie such sentiments to disillusionment with the government’s democracy and institutions.

In parts of Europe the military is also occupying a more central place in politics and society, reflected in the military’s role expansion in internal security beyond external defense. In France, for example, the political leadership has increased the military’s role in domestic counterterrorism, including having troops regularly patrol the streets. Doing so has enhanced the military’s domestic popularity such that in 2018, 84 percent of French citizens expressed trust in the military. Vincenzo Bove, Mauricio Rivera, and Chiara Ruffa document how this recasting has led to a militarization of politics, with the usually politically passive military beginning to engage in increased public commentary and activism. The COVID-19 pandemic has also helped promote a shift in power and authority toward the military in many countries. The British military, for example, played an unusually prominent and visible role in the pandemic with the chief of the Defense Staff, Nick Carter, participating in high-profile briefings and giving wide-ranging interviews on topics well beyond the military’s logistical support for the effort. French president Emmanuel Macron declared in March 2020 that “we are at war” against the virus, while then deploying active duty troops around France and helicopter carriers to assist its overseas territories with public services as part of “Operation Resilience.”

Even more striking is evidence that Americans, like their counterparts, would welcome a dominant role by the military in governing the country. Surveys have shown support for military rule even in countries with recent dictatorships; more than 30 percent in Brazil and 50 percent in Indonesia support it. In the United States, survey data from 2010 and 2017 by Vanderbilt’s Latin American Public Opinion Project found that between 25 and 30 percent of Americans support the military seizing power of the government “during difficult times,” such as when corruption is high.
These numbers are similar to those of Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile, which have a history of military intervention in politics. The authors of the survey also observe a corresponding decline in Americans’ satisfaction with democratic institutions. That is, the militarization of politics and society evident in the United States might be seen as part of a global phenomenon, or at least one afflicting many countries around the world.

**Regime Security**

Scholarship from comparative politics related to regime security also helps illuminate aspects of Trump’s approach to civil–military relations. Regime security is a concept commonly used to explain how autocrats secure themselves and their ruling group in office and insulate themselves from violent challengers. The concept counterposes “regime” security to that of “state” security: policies and personnel decisions are made to narrowly advance the private interests of leaders and maintain them in power versus to enhance the well-being of the country at large. Specifically, the concept of regime security resonates with three sets of actions Donald Trump took with respect to the security sector.

The first involved Trump’s apparent attempts to appoint those perceived as personally loyal to him to key positions within the national security establishment. The elevation of loyalty (often over competence) in appointments among key security force leaders is a common, if not ubiquitous tactic of regime security. Appointing people who rely on leaders for their positions renders them more likely to defend the regime and even to take unethical, if not illegal, actions to maintain them (and by extension themselves) in office. The corollary also holds that leaders sometimes fire (or, in the parlance of the regime security scholarship, “purge”) those suspected of disloyalty or who might privilege institutional commitments over personal allegiance to the leader.

While the stakes are obviously much different in an autocratic regime than in a democracy like the United States, the broader logic of using personal loyalty to protect one’s position in office is reflected in some of Trump’s personnel choices with respect to the Department of Defense. According to those in his administration, Trump regularly prioritized such factors in appointments. For example, after the departure of top civilian officials at the Pentagon in February and June 2020, individuals were appointed who were known for their close personal connections to the White House and “undisputed allegiance to President Trump.” Such shifts occurred after a new director of the White House’s personnel office took over, whose mandate, according to a senior administration
official, was to “examine the Pentagon for ‘non-loyalists.’” \(^8^1\) When the Pentagon’s top foreign relations and policy chief was deemed insufficiently compliant, \(^8^2\) for example, the administration tried to replace him with retired Army brigadier general Anthony Tata. Tata’s extreme statements on social media sunk his Senate confirmation, but in November 2020 the administration circumvented that process and appointed him in an acting capacity instead to the post of deputy undersecretary for policy. \(^8^3\) Also notable was the dismissal in November of Secretary of Defense Mark Esper and several top officials and the appointment of several close allies without substantial prior experience in defense matters to the department. \(^8^4\) Trump also later abruptly replaced the members of the Pentagon’s Defense Business Board with former campaign operatives and other known political allies. \(^8^5\) These personnel changes were seen by some as motivated by mere pettiness on Trump’s part and by others as signs that he planned to rely on the Pentagon’s civilian leadership to use the military in some nefarious fashion. \(^8^6\) For example, after he was forced out, Secretary Esper expressed the fear that Trump would misuse the military, saying that if his successor was “a real yes man,” then “God help us.” \(^8^7\)

Distinctive in Trump’s case is that while presidents commonly select leaders for national security roles that share their partisan affiliation or worldview, they do not commonly prioritize personal loyalty over experience and capability in those decisions. Trump’s actions pushed well beyond the personnel practices of recent presidents. Perhaps for that reason, it is unclear how successful Trump was in these efforts—that is, whether and how much those civilian policy makers appointed as ostensible loyalists acted consistently with that role once in the Pentagon. Some were tied to subsequent efforts to obstruct the presidential transition process after Trump lost the 2020 election, but there are few outward indications of efforts to assist Trump’s efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 election. \(^8^8\) Perhaps other efforts to use the military or its resources to support Trump were never intended or attempted, were bungled, or were rebuffed by other civilian and military leaders in the Pentagon. In any case, this tactic of regime security seems to have borne limited fruit, at least based on what is publicly known.

A second tactic that Trump attempted was to use the country’s security forces’ coercive power as a political symbol and, in some instances, potentially as a means to coerce or harm societal opponents. Cultivating state security forces outside the regular military is a common tactic of leaders in non-democracies. They rely on these actors in the coercive sector to carry
out repressive acts against those in society opposed to their rule, sometimes because the regular military resists such internal policing missions. Some analysts detected this kind of dynamic at play in late June 2020 when Trump’s acting secretary of homeland security, Chad Wolf, supported efforts to employ security forces against protesters in Portland and other cities, including members of the US Customs and Border Patrol and other federal forces. Trump had signed an executive order that provided (vague) authority for Wolf to employ federal forces to defend US monuments and federal property against “anarchists and left-wing extremists.” He also threatened to send upward of 50,000 to 75,000 officers to cities around the country, whether wanted or not. In the case of Portland, help was not solicited; there had been property damage in protests in the city, but local authorities had not requested assistance from federal authorities to manage the disturbances.

When agents arrived, they were wearing camouflage, rendering them difficult to distinguish from military personnel. Although ostensibly there to protect the courthouse and federal property, some agents carried out law enforcement actions beyond that mandate. As law professor Stephen Vladeck put it, compared with historical incidences of relying on federal forces in civil disturbances, “what’s new and troubling here is we have a very, very contested factual predicate.” This context suggested to some that federal forces were employed for partisan advantage in support of Trump’s “law and order” political messaging and effort to portray the coercive sector as his ally. Indeed, at the time, it was reported that “Trump’s campaign officials say that the president wants to amplify his law-and-order message to show he is a last bastion of safety for a reeling American public, and that U.S. cities ravaged by crime and unrest—which also happen to be heavily Democratic—are the right venue.” Trump also threatened to deploy the National Guard for similar purposes, including to Portland in late July 2020. As he stated during a White House press conference, “These protesters, many should be arrested because these are professional agitators, these are professional anarchists.” He added, “These are people that hate our country. We are telling them right now that we are coming in very soon. The National Guard. A lot of very tough people. These are not people that just have to guard the courthouse and save it. These are people who are allowed to go forward and do what they have to do.”

Notably, Trump did not initiate the growth in the federal forces. There has been a notable increase in expenditure on federal policing entities since the 1980s, including the US Marshals Service and US Customs and Border Protection (agents of both were sent to Portland). Rather, what
analysts viewed as distinctive was the effort to politicize federal agents’ involvement in countering public protests. As three experts on US civil-military relations characterized it, Trump’s tactics resembled a plan to “create an internal federal security force with little accountability beyond the executive branch.” Combined with the absence of deployments of similar forces against protests by Trump’s allies, his administration’s actions looked like efforts to use the state’s coercive power to intimidate opponents and demonstrate Trump’s influence. Also provocative was that some of the federal forces were sent to protests without identifying information so that citizens would be unable to track their personal identities or organizational affiliations.

Moreover, these actions followed a prior episode in June 2020 that occurred amid large protests in Washington, D.C., following the killing of George Floyd by police officers. At that time, Trump involved Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Mark Milley in a photo-op in front of a historical church—after peaceful protesters had been forcefully cleared by the United States Park Police—with the National Guard in attendance. Milley subsequently apologized for his role in the episode.

On June 1st Trump then supported sending 10,000 regular (active duty) military troops to the streets—forces usually used in external conflict. Troops were brought to the Washington, D.C., area, including some from the immediate response force brigade of the Army’s 82nd Airborne Division. Trump also threatened to invoke the Insurrection Act, allowing him to deploy troops legally to states without the governor’s approval. There was, however, appreciable pushback from retired officers and behind the scenes from the military leadership. Secretary of Defense Esper then stated that he believed the use of active duty forces was unwarranted at that time. Ultimately, the president did not invoke the Insurrection Act, and the troops were sent home. Hence, Trump’s threats to harness the military’s coercive capacity to his partisan self-interests met with resistance.

Trump had more success with respect to a third tactic of regime security. It involved fostering groups in society that might be inclined to support his electoral prospects or even, in some cases, to use force on his behalf to help secure his position in office. There is scholarly literature on the role of autonomous, allied pro-regime militias in civilian society, often termed “pro-government militias,” which exist as adjuncts to other formal state security units. In some cases, these groups emerge and operate without funding or organization by the state, although they may experience impunity from the law; in other cases, they operate outside the formal security structure and institutions yet are supported by the state. Regardless,
these entities serve several functions. One is providing a leader a political base within the security sector, especially when the personal loyalty of the regular military is in question. They also offer a means for intimidating and repressing opponents and ultimately, in extreme circumstances, actors who might use violence to defend a leader and prevent their removal from office. Further, a major advantage of encouraging or sponsoring pro-government militias is to allow a regime some plausible deniability when private groups use illegal or violent means to intimidate opponents.

Unlike many other countries around the globe that comparativists study, the US does not have a history of pro-state societal paramilitaries or “non-state armed groups using violence to support the state (or a particular regime that holds the power)” (emphasis in the original). Hence, Trump did not have a preexisting paramilitary constituency with which he could readily coalesce. Traditional militia or those in the Patriot movement in the US dating from the 1980s espouse anti-state views and oppose the centralization of power in the federal government. A separate class of militant White Nationalist and neo-Nazi groups, however, is less opposed to government authority and seeks to establish a White ethnostate.

Nonetheless, despite the anti-government views of the traditional militia and the rivalries and differences among far-right groups, elements of these disparate groups came to support Trump. In the case of anti-government militias, this was despite the fact that Trump sought to expand his own executive power as president. His argument that doing so was necessary to fight “the deep state” helped mitigate this contradiction. Too, while anti-government groups initially rejected politicians of both parties in the 1980s, by the 1990s they came to concentrate their opposition on Democrats; hence, there was a basis for partisan alignment with Donald Trump.

Trump, in turn, often invited and encouraged the alignment of these groups with him. He employed conciliatory language and signaled support for far-right groups and armed militias that identified as sympathizers and encouraged their mobilization. This was evident, for example, in his comments in the aftermath of violence by far-right participants in the 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. It was also notable in his comments in a presidential debate where he called for far-right extremists the Proud Boys to “stand back and stand by.” He asserted that “somebody has got to do something about antifa and the left” that Trump counted as opponents. Similarly, after stating that he opposed violence after the Capitol attack in January 2021 in a public statement that day, Trump closed his remarks by telling the riot’s participants,
“We love you.”¹²⁰ Some members of these groups, in turn, responded favorably to Trump’s overtures. Members of the “boogaloo” movement, who embrace the prospect of a second civil war in the United States, were arrested for sparking violence at protests by the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020—a movement Trump frequently criticized.¹²¹ In addition, organized elements of the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys were among those who attacked the Capitol on 6 January 2021 to prevent the certification of the 2020 presidential election.

Comparativists also highlight cases globally in which politicians rely on support from armed groups during elections. In some instances, they use the group to ramp up electoral participation. In the United States, for example, during the 1920s the Ku Klux Klan endorsed political candidates and encouraged members to vote for them.¹²² Alternatively, Aila Matanock and Paul Staniland detail the cases of Sri Lanka and Colombia in which politicians relied on allied paramilitaries to target their political opponents in elections.¹²³ Armed groups provide such support in exchange for favorable policies and latitude to grow their organizations or to undertake illegal activities, sometimes with the complicity of authorities or of the politicians with whom they are allied.

Matanock, moreover, suggests this might provide a lens for understanding the political activism of some militant groups in the Trump era.¹²⁴ In the Idaho State Capitol, for example, a group of militants were allowed in the gallery in August 2020 after confronting state police and breaking a glass door to enter.¹²⁵ In other cases, local officials have endorsed militants’ violent threats against politicians they opposed.¹²⁶ In one notable incident, Donald Trump encouraged armed militia members then protesting inside the State Capitol to “liberate Michigan.”¹²⁷ In their analysis of content found on the Oath Keepers’ website, Carolyn Gallaher and Jaclyn Fox found multiple instances of group members soliciting help from organized Patriot groups to provide security in the form of “protecting Trump supporters from ‘radical leftist assault’” at the president’s rallies in nine states.¹²⁸

In sum, while the tactics that Trump attempted to employ to encourage the mobilization of armed militant factions and tie his political fortunes to these movements look exceptional in the US context, there is a long history of such dynamics worldwide and at times in US history. In this case, Trump seemed to have had some success in encouraging affinities with sympathetic paramilitaries, at least relative to other tactics of regime security.
Trump’s Actions in the Capitol Insurrection

Finally, returning to the events that opened the article, the coup literature from comparative politics provides tools for assessing Trump’s actions surrounding the attack on the Capitol on 6 January 2021. It helps answer a key question: Was the Capitol attack Trump’s attempt to implement a coup and, in particular, a self-coup or “autogolpe” whereby an executive suspends democratic processes to maintain office unconstitutionally?

Aspects of the events resemble an attempted coup, according to the scholarly literature on the topic. First is the motive of the people involved in the attack. That the attack was intended to disrupt, if not derail, the certification of an election is significant. It occurred as part of an effort to obstruct the transition of power to a new president and therefore to enable the current president (Trump) to remain in office unconstitutionally. Also, according to federal law enforcement, at least some of the event was orchestrated by coordinated elements of organized paramilitary or militia groups as part of a premeditated plan.129 This element transforms the incident from a violent, spontaneous outburst to one with insurrectionist qualities in which a societal group uses violence to overthrow the government.

Many scholars contend, nevertheless, that the events do not qualify as a coup attempt because coups involve takeovers of government instigated by or involving actors within the state (or regime). As Naunihal Singh notes, a coup involves direction and use of state resources.130 Based on facts known as of this writing, the attack does not appear to have been expressly directed by Trump or members of his administration in an operational sense in that there was coordinated and premeditated planning between the White House and participants in the attacks. Yet in part, Trump’s role in orchestrating the attack depends on how one evaluates the meaning of “directed.” Dan Nexon remarks, contrary to Singh, that “the president is not a private citizen; his call for his supporters to march on the Capitol and help keep him in power is obviously inflected by his authority and his prerogatives.”131 To the extent one agrees that Trump’s statements and encouragement to militia groups to defend his presidency constitute “state direction,” Trump’s actions might be classified as a self-coup or autogolpe, as described above.132

The finding that it was a coup attempt, however, also depends on whether one defines a coup attempt as involving the state security forces. Many definitions—especially those developed in the 1960s and 1970s when coup research was at its academic heyday—emphasize the role of the state armed forces in perpetrating coups, often the military but sometimes presidential guards or militarized police.133 According to Singh, “It
is the involvement of state security forces that critically separates a coup attempt from an assassination, an invasion, an insurrection or a civil war.” While individual active duty, reserve, retired, and former military personnel were involved in the attack, there is no evidence of any premeditated conspiracy within the country’s security organizations to abet the attack, especially within the military. Also, while the military may have been slow to respond to the breach, with approval of the National Guard response on 6 January coming three hours after it was requested, any delay was not due to military complicity in the attack. In a letter to the joint force, the Joint Chiefs subsequently reinforced their support for the country’s Constitution and institutions. In sum, by this metric, the Capitol attack does not qualify as a coup attempt and is better understood as a different category of political violence.

One final qualification is in order. Just because there was no manifest coup attempt involving the state’s armed forces does not mean that Trump would have been opposed to carrying one out had circumstances allowed. He was apparently receptive to other misuses of the military to maintain himself in office, including invoking martial law. Two allies, retired lieutenant general Michael Flynn and retired lieutenant general Thomas McInerney, publicly discussed the possibility in December 2020. It was also reportedly raised in White House deliberations, among other potential initiatives aimed at overturning the election results. That Trump was willing to take power unconstitutionally is underscored by his personal involvement in efforts to pressure Georgia officials into committing fraud and overturning the election results in that state. In a television interview, Flynn raised the possibility of using the military for such purposes, suggesting it be sent to swing states to “re-run the election.” Referring to Trump’s options, he further stated, “Within the swing states, if he wanted to, he could take the military capabilities and he could place them in those states and basically rerun an election in each of those states.” Some of Trump’s allies even went so far as to take out a full-page ad of the Washington Times endorsing the idea. Indeed, the military historically often initiates coups, but they also can result from civilian politicians’ efforts to court military supporters to carry out coups on their behalf. That there are no known overtures to that effect may reflect the military’s signals that it was unwilling to be a party to any extraconstitutional act. In fact, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, chief of staff, secretary of the Army, and 10 former secretaries of defense had publicly stated that the military has no role in the election process. Hence, the reason there was no coup attempt may have been the result of the mili-
tary’s unwillingness to go along rather than an unwillingness on Trump’s part to attempt one.

Finally, scholars of comparative politics help illuminate why distinguishing the events of 6 January as an attempted coup or something else matters. As Erica De Bruin highlights, the nature of the political violence helps prescribe the actions required to address it. The action has different implications and entails different remedies if it is understood to be a failed attempt by a societal group to stop the certification of an election or a failed attempt to orchestrate a coup against a president-elect by a sitting president. Indubitably, it will take months—if not years—to know all the details, and assessments may change about how best to classify the 6 January attack. Regardless, in that endeavor comparativists and Americans will in this find their scholarship (uncomfortably) intertwined.

Conclusion

This article has sought to show how concepts from comparative politics illuminate aspects of civil-military relations under Trump. It argues that insights developed by scholars working on non-US cases, including non-democracies, help explain the long-term trends that Trump exploited and the new directions he took US civil-military relations.

Two important lessons follow from the analysis. First, civil-military relations in the United States are far less healthy than many of the country’s citizens may realize. Absent the erosion of support for the military’s nonpartisan stance within both the military and society, it would have been far more difficult for Trump to try and push things to the next level and build a societal-military coalition. It would also have been difficult to exploit military symbols and resources if the militarization of society and politics was not present in the US long before he arrived in office.

Second, the analysis suggests that even though Trump was less successful in his efforts to push civil-military relations in dangerous new directions, the US public should not be complacent about the significance of his actions. That a democratically elected US president might even consider, let alone attempt, reconfiguring the security sector to safeguard his regime versus the country’s national security is stunning. It suggests that the US is not immune to the same pathological civil-military relations phenomena that afflict other countries, including many nondemocratic states or backsliding democracies.

Perhaps most discomfiting is the possibility that the US could have experienced a coup attempt—even if the event on 6 January does not fully qualify according to many experts. Still, perhaps Americans can take some
comfort that such a coup attempt involving the military did not occur. This suggests that despite the turbulence of civil-military relations in Trump’s four years as president, that one—perhaps the most fundamental—dimension of civil-military relations withstood the test.

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Notes
4. See the discussion of June 2020 below for details.
13. Urben, Like, Comment, Retweet.
16. Finer, 86.
31. Philip Bump, “Why Trump Wants to Blame the Military-Industrial Complex for Allegations That He Disparaged Troops,” Washington Post, 8 September 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/. Although we do not know the reasons for these actions, they presumably could have reflected calculations that the officer corps was more resistant to converting into a partisan ally than perhaps were some among the enlisted.

43. Brooks, Golby, and Urben, “Crisis of Command.”

44. The website Pinterest maintains a “military fashion” page showcasing celebrities and models wearing clothes inspired by military uniforms and camouflage patterns. It has 54,000 followers as of March 2021. See https://www.pinterest.com/. As the fashion website “Just the Design” advises, “If it’s the military look that you’re aiming for, stand to attention in a double-breasted midi coat with gilt buttons, and look to marching orders on the runways.” See “Just the Design,” accessed March 2021, https://www.justthedesign.com/.


54. Seven percent of the population is comprised of veterans, equal to nearly 19 million people, half of which were over 65 in 2017. Jennifer Shultz, “Veterans by the Numbers,” National Conference of State Legislators Blog, November 2017, https://www.ncsl.org/.


63. Scharpf, 7.


72. According to the 2017 Pew survey, support for military rule in Brazil was 38 percent; South Africa, 52 percent; Nigeria, 48 percent; Tunisia, 42 percent; the US, 17 percent; Indonesia, 68 percent; Jordan, 21 percent; and Argentina, 24 percent. Richard


74. Feierherd, Lupu, and Stokes.


76. A security sector describes the regular military; other security entities, such as police or forces located in a Ministry of Interior; intelligence agencies; non-state paramilitaries; or citizen militia that act as adjuncts to official state forces.


81. Ryan, Sonne, and Dawsey, “White House Intensifies Effort.”


100. Lupton, Burbach, and Cohn.
105. Brooks and Robinson, “Let the Generals Speak?”


114. Gallaher and Fox, “Could Anti-State Militias Become Pro-state Paramilitaries?”

115. There were many fewer Patriot groups active under Trump (576) compared with Obama (1,360). Gallaher and Fox.


123. Matanock and Staniland, 714.


128. Gallaher and Fox, “Could Anti-Government Militias Become Pro-State Paramilitaries?”


136. According to several participants in a call with the Pentagon, some military leaders expressed reservations about avoiding the “optics” of putting military forces in the Capitol, and military officials asked questions reflecting skepticism about the appropriateness of a military role in the event. The Pentagon has disputed that interpretation. It attributes any delay in bureaucratic processes to city and security officials in charge of the Capitol not requesting Guard deployments prior to 6 January. Timelines suggest that on the day of the attack, approval was given for sending a small emergency force of Guard members who had already been organized and approved prior to 6 January to go to the Capitol. An additional 1,100 Guard troops were deployed following a request by the D.C. National Guard. It took several hours for either force to arrive, however, and questions remain about whether this timeline was affected by some initial wariness to approve sending the forces. Lisa Mascaro, Ben Fox, and Lolita C. Baldor, “‘Clear the Capitol,’ Pence Plead, Timeline of Riot Shows,” Associated Press, 10 April 2021, https://apnews.com/. Indeed, it is possible that there was some reticence to become involved, affecting the alacrity of the response. Deputy Assistant Defense Secretary Robert G. Salesses acknowledged in congressional testimony that there was hesitance within the military to become involved in January, in part because it had been criticized for its aggressive response to the June 2020 social justice protests. The chief of the National Guard, Maj Gen William Walker, also reported that he was subject to “unusual” restrictions on his authority to make decisions to control the movements of the Guard. Eric Tucker and Mary Clare Jalonick, “General: Pentagon Hesitated on Sending Guard to Capitol Riot,” Associated Press, 2 March 2021, https://apnews.com/; Joaquin Sapien and Joshua Kaplan, “6 Questions Officials Still Have Not Answered after Weeks of Hearings on Capitol Hill,” ProPublica, 11 March 2021; Luke Broadwater and Michael S. Schmidt, “Ex-Security Officials Spread


143. Reimann, “Trump Reportedly Asked Advisors.”


148. For a similar conclusion, see Brooks, Golby, and Urben, “Crisis of Command.”
Maximum Toxicity: Civil-Military Relations in the Trump Era

MACKUBIN THOMAS OWENS

Abstract

Civil-military tensions are a perennial feature of American history. Although fraught during the Trump administration, civil-military relations became especially toxic during its final months. Commentators have so far tended to place most of the blame on Trump, but military leaders—both active and retired—share the blame for the degradation of the relationship. Healthy civil-military relations depend upon mutual trust, respect, and understanding between civilian and military leaders. These elements were not in evidence during the Trump administration, but they began to falter even before he took office. It will take a concerted effort to place US civil-military relations back on a sound footing.

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Civil-military tensions are nothing new in American history. Indeed, they date from the very founding of the republic. Although there are many examples of unhealthy civil-military relations during the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations, civil-military relations were particularly fraught during the Trump presidency. Indeed, by the end of his time in the White House, they were at such a toxic level that they were in danger of triggering a constitutional crisis unlike any since the presidency of Andrew Johnson.

The reason for this toxicity is that healthy civil-military relations depend upon mutual trust, respect, and understanding between civilian and military leaders. Unfortunately, mutual trust was not often evident during much of the Trump presidency, especially toward the end of his term in office. Although most commentators place the blame on Trump, he shares responsibility with the military for this state of affairs.

Renegotiating the US Civil-Military Bargain: Changing Norms

Donald Trump entered the White House as an outsider who did not hesitate to express skepticism about the direction of the foreign and de-
fense policies of his predecessors, arguing against the alleged verities of
the post-9/11 consensus as articulated by the “security community.” In
particular, Trump criticized many of America’s overseas commitments,
including the ongoing efforts in Afghanistan; called into question the
value of NATO; and argued that the United States was being undone by
its adherence to free trade.

Trump’s very presidency was an affront to this foreign policy/national
security consensus and to the people who articulated it. According to his
critics, Trump upended the “norms” of civil-military relations. But civil-
military norms are neither eternal nor sacred. They have changed over
time in response to the periodic renegotiation of a US “civil-military bar-
gain.” Of course, not all norms are equal. Those that reinforce democratic
values should be strengthened or maintained. Nevertheless, many of these
norms were already being undermined before Trump, reflecting the in-
creased hyperpartisanship afflicting US politics. Understanding the state
of civil-military relations during the Trump presidency requires apprecia-
tion of the nature of this civil-military bargain, the parties to this bargain,
and how the bargain has been renegotiated lately.

The US civil-military bargain must be periodically renegotiated in re-
sponse to geopolitical, social, and political change. This process has oc-
curred many times since the beginning of the republic. There are three
parties to this bargain: civilian policy makers, the uniformed military, and
the American people. All too often, civil-military relations are viewed in
terms of only the first two. But in the long run, no policy established by
civilian and military leaders alone is sustainable without the concurrence
of the American people. This has been true from the founding.

For instance, the leading lights of the American War of Independence—
Washington, Hamilton, and Knox—believed that US security required
the establishment of a regular army, but anti-army ideology dominated
public opinion. Even the idea of a more uniform militia failed to pass
muster among the people at large. It took the failure of the militia during
the War of 1812 to change public opinion, and even then, standing armies
remained unpopular. Subsequently, the militia gave way to short-term
volunteers raised at the state level.

More recently, in 1993, a Democratic House and Senate passed a law
prohibiting military service by open homosexuals (not to be confused with
“don’t ask, don’t tell,” a Pentagon policy that allowed the law to be skirted).
But in 2012, Congress repealed that law, illustrating that Congress and
the president are ultimately constrained by public opinion. The same
principle has applied to US wars. Public support for Vietnam and the
post-9/11 wars eventually evaporated, leading to a change in policy in each case. Although political leaders try to shape public opinion, history shows that those attempts are often limited.

There are five questions that define the aforementioned civil-military bargain. First, who controls the military instrument and how? Second, what level of influence should the military have in a liberal society such as the United States? Third, what is the appropriate role of the military? Fourth, what pattern of civil-military relations best insures military success? And fifth, who serves?

During the Trump presidency and the early transition to the Biden administration, three of the five issues came to the fore. One was the control of the military in the relationship between Trump and his generals, including the meaning of professionalism and the possibility of “praetoriansm.” Another was the influence of the military, in particular the role of the retired officer corps. The last one was the role of the military, especially regarding domestic disorder.

As the civil-military bargain is renegotiated, it is to be expected that the norms of US civil-military relations will change as well. The legal basis for US civil-military relations is the US Constitution and the laws and statutes that arise from it. Norms do not necessarily have any statutory basis. They are not to be found in regulations or statutes. For instance, there is no statutory basis for the Huntingtonian norm calling for a nonpartisan professional officer corps. Indeed, through most of American history, officers were partisan. The earliest generation of officers were Federalists, and their actions shaped the early republic. One of the reasons that Thomas Jefferson established the Military Academy at West Point was to end Federalist influence in the Army. As the old Republican Party of Jefferson became the Democratic Party of Andrew Jackson, the officer corps reflected that Democratic partisanship, with certain exceptions such as Winfield Scott and Zachary Taylor. The significance of party affiliation became apparent during the Civil War when generals such as George McClellan often opposed Lincoln’s policies regarding prosecution of the war.

Similarly, the idea that active duty officers should not publicly criticize the country’s political leadership is of modern vintage. Both Taylor and Scott criticized the leadership of President James Polk during the Mexican War. Union generals took issue with Lincoln’s conduct of the Civil War.

The reality is that the dominant norms of today’s civil-military relations arose in conjunction with the rise of the modern conception of professionalism, which was a product of the Progressivism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These norms have dominated US civil-
military relations since World War II. Until the rise of Progressivism, the
American conception of military professionalism differed from that of
most European countries.6

But with the rise of Progressivism, US military officers began to view
themselves as part of a distinct profession with a separate ethos and body
of expertise and specialized knowledge. As Samuel Huntington argued, a
central tenet of this military professionalism was the idea that the Army
and the Navy were apolitical servants of the state, owing allegiance to a
legitimate government irrespective of political party.7

Although his opponents criticize Trump for violating civil-military
norms, which he often did, these norms have been eroding for some time
as the United States moved from the Cold War world to the post-9/11
environment. The most conspicuous characteristic of this era has been
continuous conflict in the Middle East and Central Asia. The military—
the Army, Marine Corps, and special operations forces in particular—has
been stressed in ways that exceed previous periods.

Referencing the “Team America” episode during the Obama adminis-
tration, historian Andrew Bacevich described how protracted wars can
erode civil-military norms:

Long wars are antithetical to democracy. Protracted conflict introduces
toxins that inexorably corrode the values of popular government. Not
least among those values is a code of military conduct that honors the
principle of civilian control while keeping the officer corps free from the
taint of politics. . . .

. . . Circumstances such as these have bred praetorianism, warriors be-
coming enamored with their moral superiority and impatient with the
failings of those they are charged to defend. The smug disdain for high-
ranking civilians casually expressed by McChrystal and his chief lieuten-
ants—along with the conviction that “Team America,” as these officers
style themselves, was bravely holding out against a sea of stupidity and
corruption—suggests that the officer corps of the United States is not
immune to this affliction.8

This reality in no way absolves Trump of his contributions to the degr-
adation of civil-military norms. Among other things, he publicly criti-
cized unnamed active duty officers who opposed his decision to pull US
forces from Syria as “failed generals.” He also excoriated both active and
retired military leaders who had criticized him, impugning their character
and competence purely for political reasons. Further, he lavished praise on
the active duty military voters whom he believed supported him.9
Trump and the Generals

During his campaign for president, Donald Trump routinely slammed the leadership of the US military, claiming that “the generals under Barack Obama” had not been successful. During the 2016 campaign, Trump asserted, “Under the leadership of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, the generals have been reduced to rubble, reduced to a point where it is embarrassing for our country.” He implied that, as president, he would replace Obama’s military leadership with generals and admirals who would not subordinate military effectiveness to “political correctness.”

Obviously, as president, Trump did not replace the military’s leadership. Indeed, he elevated four Obama-era generals to important administration positions. He appointed retired Marine general James Mattis as secretary of defense and retired Marine general John Kelly first as secretary of Homeland Security and then as White House chief of staff. Further, he selected retired Army lieutenant general Michael Flynn as national security adviser and active duty Army lieutenant general H. R. McMaster also as national security adviser.

The proliferation of generals in high administration posts led critics to express two contradictory concerns: on the one hand, they argued, these appointments undermined civilian control of the military under Trump. In addition, Trump’s delegation of authority to employ military force to military commanders would lead to the “militarization” of foreign policy and the marginalization of diplomacy and the State Department. On the other hand, some contended that these military men would provide a stabilizing influence on a mercurial president. This was part of a broader argument that the permanent bureaucracy was working to ensure that the president was kept on a leash. This perspective smacked of praetorianism, a topic for later consideration.

During most of his presidency, Trump’s relationship with the generals was uneven. At times, he heaped praise on them. At other times, he publicly questioned their intelligence, courage, and commitment to their Soldiers. And he certainly rejected their advice on many occasions. Clearly, the president is not obligated to accept military advice. The military has no right to “insist” that its advice be heeded. According to his critics, Trump’s problems with his generals could be traced to his disdain for expertise, trust in his own instincts, and his reflexive contrariness. Accordingly, he resisted any sort of coherent strategy. Finally, his notions of soldiering were simplistic and antiquated.
Trump and the Public

However, President Trump—perhaps more than any recent president—ensured that the public played a central role in the renegotiation of the civil-military bargain that occurred during his administration. President Trump seemed to have his finger on the pulse of the American people more firmly than his generals did, and his national security policies were quite popular with a large swath of the American citizenry.

Trump’s positions on national security affairs were often those of a significant portion of mainstream Americans—the third party to the US civil-military bargain that had elected him—who long ago had soured on the seemingly endless conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Trump seemed intuitively to grasp that changes in geopolitical circumstances required commensurate changes in US strategy, primarily from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific. Thus, a feature of civil-military relations during the Trump presidency was the tension between the professional military and others in the national security community on one side and the American electorate on the other.

Trump’s supporters observed that he, unlike his predecessors, had a plan to counter China’s clear intent to supplant the United States as a hegemonic power. That is, by exploiting innovations in domestic oil and gas production, the United States could shift the geopolitical focus of US strategy to the Indo-Pacific region. His proponents also pointed out that despite his alleged resistance to any coherent strategy, his administration produced an excellent National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy designed to implement an effective response to the changing geopolitical reality. Even his Middle East policy advisors—despite some criticisms—have argued that Trump’s strategy in that region was more coherent than his critics suggested.

All too often, civilian leaders and the uniformed military have tended to forget the role the public plays in renegotiating the civil-military bargain. Trump did not, but senior military leaders and others in the national security establishment often did. They underestimated Trump’s appeal to the public on national security affairs and failed to recognize the ways the civil-military bargain was changing as a result.

Military Professionalism and Praetorianism

Despite their self-identification as members of a profession, service members—active and retired—are not immune to self-interested behavior. The individual services can act on behalf of their budgetary and op-
erational interests, and the military often does act as any other self-interested bureaucracy. This behavior became even more egregious during the Trump era.

During the Trump presidency, some members of the national security “community” took it upon themselves to actively thwart the president’s policies. This activity was most prevalent among intelligence professionals, though it sometimes involved active and retired military officers. Over the course of the Trump presidency, it was common for the president’s critics to claim that he was a threat to national security—whether because of “collusion” with Russia or controversy over the Ukraine affair, which led to his impeachment. But the same people who had once dismissed the idea of a “deep state” blocking the president’s policies as a dangerous conspiracy theory later came to support public opposition by unelected bureaucrats as a way to curb Trump’s actions.¹⁸

In September 2018, the *New York Times* published an op-ed by an anonymous writer claiming to be a high-level member of the Trump administration. The thrust of the article was “that many of the senior officials in his own administration are working diligently from within to frustrate parts of his agenda and his worst inclinations.” The writer later followed up with a book. Observers speculated on the identity of the author, suggesting Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis or Chief of Staff John Kelley. As it happened, the author was a relatively low-level staffer from the Department of Homeland Security.¹⁹

Regardless of the writer’s rank, there is a name for this sort of activity: praetorianism. From the time of Augustus Caesar until Constantine, a corps of soldiers known as the Praetorian Guard protected the Roman emperor. Over time, the Praetorians became the real power in Rome, appointing and deposing emperors at will. In our time, praetorianism has come to mean despotic military rule, something associated with countries where the army is the real power behind the government. Praetorianism would seem to be incompatible with republican government. However, the attempted coup against President Charles de Gaulle in 1961 arose from a praetorian bent by French officers who sought to depose him over his intention to grant independence to Algeria.

Unfortunately, the idea that it was necessary to protect the country from a duly elected president has had its advocates from the beginning of Trump’s presidency. For example, right after his inauguration, Georgetown law professor Rosa Brooks, the author of *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything*, expressed an extreme version of this view. Writing in *Foreign Policy*, she remarked that Trump’s “first week
as president has made it all too clear [that] he is as crazy as everyone feared. [One] possibility is one that until recently I would have said was unthinkable in the United States of America: a military coup, or at least a refusal by military leaders to obey certain orders.” A senior Pentagon appointee from 2009 to 2011, she further stated that, for the first time, she could “imagine plausible scenarios in which senior military officials might simply tell the president: ‘No, sir. We’re not doing that.’”

The most dangerous version of praetorianism is a coup d’état. The United States has been blessed by the absence of a coup throughout our history. We may have come close at the end of the Revolution when George Washington defused a possible mutiny by his officers at Newburgh. George McClellan blustered about putting “his sword across the government’s policy.” So open was McClellan about opposing Lincoln’s war policy that his quartermaster general, Montgomery Meigs, expressed concern about “officers of rank” in the Army of the Potomac who spoke openly of “a march on Washington to ‘clear out those fellows.’”

Arguably, the closest the country has come to a coup was during the presidency of Andrew Johnson. Succeeding to the presidency following the assassination of Lincoln, Johnson was at odds with Republicans in Congress over Reconstruction legislation and the enforcement of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments. The Army was placed in the untenable position of having to choose between Congress and the president. It chose to execute the law as passed by Congress.

At one point, Johnson proposed the organization of a military unit of 5,000–7,000 men to be stationed in the capital under the command of Maj Gen William Tecumseh Sherman, whose position on race issues was similar to Johnson’s. Sherman extricated himself from the predicament by going west to fight the Indians. Would Johnson have used the Army to suppress Congress? No one knows for certain, but the consequences for the future of the American republic would have been devastating.

Was Trump ever the target of a coup? Not in the sense of the military ousting elected leaders and taking control of the government. But certain elements within his administration—especially within the intelligence community—took steps against him that had the makings of a bloodless coup. In any event, the machinations of some within the administration constituted an affront to Republican government. Active and retired military officers often played a central role in these disputes.
Trump and Military Advice

Many of the methods generals and other national security officials used to constrain Trump’s policy were not new, but they were egregious. Although the US Constitution provides the foundation for civilian control of the military, what this means in practice is far more complicated. As Samuel Huntington noted, the Constitution itself makes the practice of civilian control difficult. It divides control vertically between state and federal levels and horizontally between the executive and legislative branches. Long precedent has cemented the idea that in practice, the professional officer corps is to advise civilian decision makers and then execute the policy. However, these policy makers are not required to accept the military’s recommendations. Likewise, the military is not obligated to follow an illegal order.

Exactly where to draw the lines that guide the behavior of the professional officer corps is difficult in practice. One of the many claims that Trump’s critics raised was that he would involve us in endless military conflicts. What would the military do if the president ordered a nuclear strike against Iran or North Korea? Would the military act?

This scenario raises a perennial question at the heart of civil–military relations: What do military leaders do if their advice is rejected? During Trump’s tenure, he and his military advisers clashed over such issues as our relationship with NATO, US military actions in Afghanistan, intervention in Syria, and the appropriate response to domestic disorder. One way the military could respond to policies it opposes involves subterfuge to weaken the president’s ability to implement his agenda. This tactic could involve “slow rolling” execution, leaking to the press in an effort to diminish public confidence in the decision, and simply ignoring the policy. Bureaucracies have perfected these kinds of responses to policies with which they disagree, and those in the senior ranks of the military are often no different.

Slow-rolling is a time-tested method. The classic study of bureaucratic behavior is Graham Allison’s *Essence of Decision*, his postmortem of the Cuban missile crisis and its subsequent refinements. President Clinton had to deal with slow-rolling during the campaign in the Balkans. President Bush and especially his secretary of defense, Donald Rumsfeld, did as well during the Second Gulf War. Trump also experienced slow-rolling related to his policy decisions on troop withdrawals in Syria and Afghanistan.

Every president has had to contend with leaks to the press, but no one has been victimized in this manner more than Donald Trump. For example, after the 2020 election, the president asked for options—including an attack on Iran’s main nuclear site—following a report by the International Atomic
Energy Agency that Iran’s uranium stockpile had reached a level 12 times higher than allowed under the nuclear accords. His advisers—including the secretary of defense, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), and national security adviser—recommended against military action. Both the president’s question and the advisers’ responses were reasonable. But the fact that this affair was leaked was not. It permitted the president’s detractors to portray him as seeking to provoke a conflict in his waning days in office. It also potentially signaled to our enemies that Trump, as a lame duck, would be unable to respond to aggressive provocations.

The final form of bureaucratic resistance to presidential policy is simply to ignore an order. Trump was a victim of this response more than once. The clearest case of this kind regarded his order to reduce US military manpower in Syria. Ambassador Jim Jeffrey, who served as the special envoy in the fight against ISIS, acknowledged that his team routinely misled senior leaders about troop levels in Syria. “We were always playing shell games to not make clear to our leadership how many troops we had there,” Jeffrey said in an interview.

All these actions by those trying to limit the president’s authority harmed civil-military relations by undermining trust. Trump’s critics emphasize his demand for loyalty, arguing that it was personal and political. But these critics misconstrue the nature of the loyalty Trump demanded. Presidents have a right to expect that subordinates will execute their policy decisions once they are made. Certainly, they should expect that subordinates will not actively subvert those decisions. Presumably, those who disagree with policy have the option of resigning. According to reports, at least some retired officers called on Gen Mark Milley to resign in the wake of Trump’s actions in the nation’s capital following domestic disorder there. His resignation, they argued, would help maintain the integrity of the military as an apolitical institution.

The idea that officers should resign when they disagree with the president or other civilian policy makers is based on a misreading of H. R. McMaster’s Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam. It is a misreading common in the military, reinforcing the belief that officers should be advocates of particular policies rather than simply serving in their traditional advisory roles. Duke University political science professor Peter Feaver has called this false belief “McMasterism.” According to this misreading, the JCS should have more openly voiced their opposition to the Johnson administration’s strategy of gradualism in Vietnam and then resigned rather than carry out the policy. However, McMaster, a retired Army lieu-
tenant general and former national security advisor, argues no such thing in his book. Instead, the book contends that the Joint Chiefs should have spoken up forcefully in private to their superiors and candidly in testimony to Congress when asked specifically for their personal views. Further, they should have corrected misrepresentations of those views in private meetings with members of Congress. McMaster does not say or imply that the chiefs should have obstructed President Lyndon Johnson’s orders and policies by leaks, public statements, or resignation.

For those concerned about the potential “politicization” of the military, it is necessary to clarify that high-ranking military positions are inherently “political.” Thus, the very act of resignation by a senior military officer is itself a political statement. There is no tradition of public resignation in American history. Indeed, resignation under such circumstances constitutes at worst a form of mutiny. At best, such a step belies the mutual trust at the heart of healthy civil-military relations.

Healthy civil–military relations—and by extension, effective policy, good decisions, and positive outcomes—require mutual respect, candor, collaboration, cooperation, and ultimately subordination. Nothing would destabilize that relationship more than a resignation by a senior military officer. The role of the military is to advise and then carry out lawful policies and orders, not to make them. In the end, the threat to resign, thereby taking disagreement public, directly erodes civilian control of the military.

The Influence of the Military: The Retired Officer’s Voice

From the outset of his presidency, Trump faced external and internal resistance to his national security policies. Opposition to this outsider was immediate and bipartisan. Originally, his vocal opponents were diplomats, members of the intelligence community, and academics. Largely missing were retired military officers.

What changed toward the end of his presidency was that Trump came under attack by retired military officers. It has become routine, unfortunately, for retired officers to line up to endorse candidates. But it is unprecedented—and dangerous—for so many retired officers to publicly attack a sitting president using contemptuous language that, were they still on active duty, would put them in violation of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. As one military lawyer has observed, “There is an entrenched norm in American civil–military relations, one that is not imposed by the Constitution, or any statute, or any field manual, or any regulation.” Former military leaders are expected to have a “stoic regard for lawful civilian orders into retirement years, finding greater virtue in silence,
even when [they] might consider the civilian direction to be ‘lawful but awful.’” This was the norm for many decades.

Maj Gen John J. Pershing told 1st Lt George Patton in 1916, “You must remember that when we enter the Army we do so with the full knowledge that our first duty is toward the government, entirely regardless of our own use under any given circumstances. We are at liberty to express our personal views only when called upon to do so or else confidentially to our friends, but always confidentially and with complete understanding that they are in no sense to govern our actions.” Omar Bradley, the first JCS chairman, stated that “thirty-two years in the peacetime army had taught me to do my job, hold my tongue, and keep my name out of the papers.”

Officers swear an oath to the Constitution, not to an individual. But a president should be able to expect the loyalty of the officer corps and its support of an administration’s policy once a decision is made. And it is the president in consultation with Congress, not an imaginary “security community,” that has the constitutional authority to make national policy.

Trump’s opponents engaged in a concerted effort to drive a wedge between the president and the military. The Atlantic story alleging—anonymously, of course—that he disparaged fallen Americans during a visit to France in 2018 was only a particularly egregious example. To their discredit, too many retired officers contributed to this effort.

Trump’s supporters in the retired officer community also violated the norms to which retired officers had previously adhered. During the chaotic time following the disputed 2020 election, rocked by claims of extensive voter fraud and court challenges by the Trump administration, some prominent retired generals invoked such words as “treason,” “sedition,” and “insurrection” and called for the imposition of martial law.

As citizens, retired officers are entitled to voice their opinions. However, they should be circumspect in how they go about it. Even though retired officers claim to speak only for themselves and not for the military, they are, as Richard Kohn once observed, akin to the cardinals of the Catholic Church. Thus, their statements carry weight and often reflect on those still in uniform even if that is not their intent.

Accordingly, retired military leaders should consider the public impact of their statements. They need to realize how what they say can damage trust between military and civilian authorities. In the case of Trump, the consequence of public attacks by retired officers was to undermine not only his own trust in the military but also public trust in the military as an institution. Is the military truly a nonpartisan profession in service to the US Constitution or just another interest group in service to a political
party? The idea that the military should be nonpartisan and professional is clearly a norm worth preserving even as other aspects of the civil-military bargain change.

The Role of the Military: Domestic Disorder

During the summer and fall of 2020, many large cities were shaken by large-scale looting, arson, and rioting following the unfortunate death of George Floyd at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer. Despite the loss of life and devastating damage to property, many mayors took a hands-off approach. Police forces stood down, and in some cities, the rioters were even permitted to set up “autonomous areas.”

Some called for Trump to invoke the Insurrection Act. Arkansas senator Tom Cotton made the case in an op-ed for the New York Times. Trump threatened to do so, stating, “I will deploy the U.S. military and quickly solve the problem for them. . . . I am your president of law and order.” However, he never followed through. His opponents criticized him for issuing his threat and using federal law enforcement to clear rioters from Lafayette Square after a famous church near there was torched. His position on domestic disorders elicited condemnation from several prominent retired military officers.

Those who criticized Trump—especially retired officers—for even considering the use of the military to deal with the domestic disorder that swept the country in the summer and fall of 2020 should know better. Although there are many reasons to limit the use of federal troops in domestic law enforcement, the fact is that they have been so used in many instances since the American founding. Indeed, the US Army Historical Center has published three 400-page volumes on the use of the federal military forces in domestic affairs.

The authority of the president to use force in response to domestic disorder arises from the Constitution itself. Section 4 of Article IV reads, “The United States shall guarantee to every state in this union a republican form of government, and shall protect each of them against invasion; and on application of the legislature, or of the executive (when the legislature cannot be convened) against domestic violence.” Although the First Amendment to the Constitution guarantees “the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances,” it does not protect riot, arson, and looting.

Under Article II of the Constitution, the president, as commander in chief of the armed forces—and of the militia (National Guard) when under federal control—has the authority to act against enemies, both foreign
and domestic. As a federal republic, the first line of defense against domestic disorder is local law enforcement, supplemented as necessary by the resources of the states, including the National Guard. But if mayors and governors are unable or unwilling to quell disorder, the federal government has the responsibility to act.

The president’s authority is supplemented by the Insurrection Act of 1807 by which Congress explicitly authorized the US Army to enforce domestic law under certain conditions. Although intended as a tool for suppressing rebellion when circumstances “make it impracticable to enforce the laws of the United States in any State or Territory by the ordinary course of judicial proceedings,” presidents used this power on five occasions during the 1950s and ’60s to counter resistance to desegregation decrees in the South. It was also the basis for federal support to California during the Los Angeles riots of 1992, when elements of a US Army division and a Marine division augmented the California National Guard. More recently, active duty forces have deployed in response to Hurricane Katrina.

Those who have criticized President Trump for threatening to use the National Guard “against the will of state governors” might want to consider this example. After the Supreme Court mandated school integration in 1954, some Southern governors refused to execute the law. In 1957, Arkansas governor Orval Faubus deployed the National Guard to defy federal authority by preventing the integration of a high school in Little Rock. President Eisenhower responded by placing the Arkansas National Guard under federal control and deploying Soldiers of the 101st Airborne Division to enforce the law. In view of the invective directed against President Trump for his threat to use federal troops to quell domestic disorder, it is interesting to note that, in a letter to Eisenhower, Democratic senator Richard Russell of Georgia explicitly compared Soldiers of the 101st Airborne Division to Hitler’s “storm troopers.”

Many who denounced Trump for his threat to deploy federal troops to restore order did not question his legal authority but the normative implications of doing so, including public trust in the military and the right of citizens to assemble peacefully. Although many of the demonstrations following the incident in Milwaukee were peaceful, many were not. As citizens not only of individual states but of the United States, people have an expectation that the authorities will protect them from mayhem. If local authorities fail to do so, that protection becomes an obligation of the national government.
Militarizing Politics: The 2020 Election and Its Aftermath

The lead-up to the 2020 election was an especially troubling time for US civil-military relations. The subsequent period was even more so. There were calls from Trump opponents and supporters to involve the US military in determining the outcome of the election and its aftermath.

As the election approached, some expressed fear that Trump would not abide by an electoral result that did not return him to office. These individuals wanted the military deployed to forcibly remove him from office should he fail to accept electoral defeat. For example, in August 2020, two retired Army officers wrote an open letter to Gen Mark Milley, JCS chairman, arguing that he should be prepared to deploy active duty troops to remove Trump if he refused to concede.43

The letter was factually inaccurate and politically dangerous. As the senior military advisor to the president, the chairman has no command authority: he does not possess the power to command or issue orders to any members of the armed forces. That is the duty solely of the service chiefs and combatant commanders. More generally, this is not the military’s role. No military officer is empowered to exercise such unconstitutional discretion. Fortunately, the letter was roundly denounced for suggesting that the military should anoint itself the final arbiter of a political question by calling for the chairman to exercise unconstitutional discretion. Such a step would remove the military from civilian oversight by granting it alone the authority to resolve a political dispute.44

This incident was just another public manifestation of the idea that the US military has such power. When questioned about the possibility of Trump refusing to leave office after electoral defeat, then-Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden responded, “You have so many rank-and-file military personnel saying, ‘Whoa, we’re not a military state. That is not who we are.’ I promise you, I am absolutely convinced they will escort him from the White House with great dispatch.”45

However, the behavior of some of Trump’s supporters was even more dangerous. The election of 2020 led to a chaotic outcome with charges and countercharges of voter fraud. As Trump pursued legal remedies, some of his supporters called for measures to overturn the election, which would have created a constitutional crisis. For instance, in the aftermath of the election, retired US Army lieutenant general Michael Flynn—the former director of the Defense Intelligence Agency and Trump’s first national security adviser—circulated an online petition calling for Trump to suspend the Constitution, declare martial law, and have the Pentagon oversee a “revote” of the presidential election. Retired Air Force lieutenant general
Thomas McInerney called for martial law and investigations of Trump’s opponents for “treason.”

To his credit, General Milley pushed back strongly against any use of the military in the event of a dispute over the outcome of the election. “I believe deeply in the principle of an apolitical U.S. military,” Milley said. “In the event of a dispute over some aspect of the elections, by law U.S. courts and the U.S. Congress are required to resolve any disputes, not the U.S. military. I foresee no role for the U.S. armed forces in this process.”

This is the proper response: helping to determine the outcome of an election would be the most open political interference possible from a military that takes pride in its presumably apolitical character.

So toxic had civil–military relations become by the end of Trump’s presidency that speculation about possible actions by the president took on a decidedly conspiratorial flavor. When Trump fired Secretary Mark Esper and some of his subordinates at the Pentagon and replaced them with “loyalists,” critics were apprehensive that he was preparing for a military strike against Iran, a precipitous withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, or, as mentioned before, use of the military to keep him in office despite a loss in the Electoral College.

Inspired by Trump’s rhetoric claiming that the election had been stolen, a large pro-Trump crowd assembled in Washington, DC, on 6 January 2021 in support of his allegation. Many had been convinced that the Congress, led by the vice president, could refuse to certify the results of the Electoral College. While Trump was still addressing his supporters, part of the group made its way to the Capitol and breeched its security.

That event led to charges that Trump had “incited” an “insurrection” and provided justification for a second impeachment. The 6 January incident certainly amounted to criminal trespass. Some of those involved assaulted police officers and committed vandalism as well as other transgressions.

The incident was a disgrace and helped discredit Trump and taint his legacy. However, to call it an “insurrection” seems a stretch. Disruption, not seizure of the government, was the objective. Unfortunately, by characterizing the incident as an insurrection, the table was set for what was essentially a military occupation of the capital. President Biden’s inauguration was scaled back, and some 25,000 National Guard troops were deployed to DC, marking the first inauguration since 1865 featuring a large number of armed Soldiers. No violence occurred, but a substantial force has, as of this writing, remained in the city.

The period from the 2020 election until Biden’s inauguration and beyond marked a low point in US civil–military relations. Among other
things, Trump’s opponents suggested that the slow response of the National Guard to the violence at the Capitol on 6 January was due to the purposeful inaction of President Trump and his Pentagon appointees. In reality, the slow response was the result of normal bureaucratic factors and concerns that a forceful response would be criticized as overreaction, as was the case with the earlier riots the previous summer.\textsuperscript{52} Some critics point to the testimony of Maj Gen William Walker, DC National Guard chief, that political constraints made it more difficult for him to stage his personnel to support the response in January. However, these constraints likely were imposed by Army secretary Ryan McCarthy because of criticism leveled against McCarthy and the National Guard over their roles in responding to events in June.\textsuperscript{53}

**Conclusion**

Americans don’t often think about civil–military relations, and that’s a good thing. It means that paratroopers are not seizing communications centers and tanks aren’t rolling down Pennsylvania Avenue toward the Capitol. Since US civil–military relations are generally healthy, when Americans do talk about them, they often do so in apocalyptic terms. Each example of civil–military tensions, it seems, portends a crisis.

In the past, these tensions were in reality the result of the periodic renegotiation of the US civil–military bargain. That was certainly the case during the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations and, indeed, through most of Trump’s presidency. But by the end of his term, civil–military relationship had become dangerously toxic.

Trump bears a great deal of responsibility for this state of affairs, but as I have tried to show in this article, he is far from alone. The officer corps, both active and retired—aided and abetted by a press eager to paint Trump in the most negative light—shares much of the blame. It is also the case that during the Trump administration, too many in the military seemed to have forgotten that the president is charged with establishing US policy. The military provides advice but cannot presume that the president will accept it. US history also illustrates that the military is not always right, even when it comes to military affairs, as Vietnam makes clear.

Meanwhile, the denizens of the administrative state, particularly those members of the so-called national security community, have worked to undermine Trump from the beginning of his administration. These denizens have routinely been lionized as heroes, saving the republic from Trump. As argued above, this smacks of praetorianism.
Retired officers were particularly irresponsible, failing to consider the public consequences of their statements. They consistently failed to realize how their public statements damaged trust between the military and the president. In short, they failed to exercise prudence.

There is another issue that has influenced civil–military relations during the Trump years. As noted at the outset, US civil–military relations can best be understood as a bargain that is constantly being renegotiated as circumstances change. All too often, the first two parties to the bargain—the civilian leadership and the uniformed military—have tended to forget the last party to the bargain. The people may be wrong, but anyone who tries to conduct security policy without taking into account the citizens of the United States will fail.

President Trump may have been more attuned to the American people than the national security community was. The public shows little support for continuing the stalemate in Afghanistan. It is leery of continued adventures in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East. This skepticism is something that military commanders and others within the national security community did not seem to understand. They therefore underestimated Trump’s appeal to the public on national security affairs.

The reality is that both the military—active and retired—and the former president bear responsibility for the toxic state of civil–military relations during the previous administration. The missing element has been trust—the mutual respect and understanding between civilian and military leaders that enables the exchange of candid views and perspectives as part of the decision-making process. If we are to reestablish healthy civil–military relations in the country, civilians and the military must reexamine their mutual relationship. Mutual trust ultimately lies at the heart of healthy civil–military relations.

Mackubin Thomas Owens

Notes


11. Of course, all had been critical of aspects of Obama’s security policies.


25. Huntington, Soldier and the State, chap. 7.


31. Art. 2(a)(4), UCMJ, states, “Retired members of a regular component of the Armed Forces who are entitled to pay are subject to the UCMJ. They may be tried by courts-martial for offenses committed while in a retired status.”


41. Chapter 15, Title 10, U.S.C.


46. Altman et al., “Calls for Martial Law.”


Trump’s Generals: 
A Natural Experiment in Civil-Military Relations

JAMES JOYNER

Abstract

President Donald Trump’s filling of numerous top policy positions with active and retired officers he called “my generals” generated fears of militarization of foreign policy, loss of civilian control of the military, and politicization of the military—yet also hope that they might restrain his worst impulses. Because the generals were all gone by the halfway mark of his administration, we have a natural experiment that allows us to compare a Trump presidency with and without retired generals serving as “adults in the room.” None of the dire predictions turned out to be quite true. While Trump repeatedly flirted with civil-military crises, they were not significantly amplified or deterred by the presence of retired generals in key roles. Further, the pattern continued in the second half of the administration when “true” civilians filled these billets. Whether longer-term damage was done, however, remains unresolved.

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The presidency of Donald Trump served as a natural experiment, testing many of the long-debated precepts of the civil-military relations (CMR) literature. His postelection interviewing of more than a half dozen recently retired four-star officers for senior posts in his administration unleashed a torrent of columns pointing to the dangers of further militarization of US foreign policy and damage to the military as a nonpartisan institution. At the same time, many argued that these men were uniquely qualified to rein in Trump’s worst proclivities. With Trump’s tenure over, we can begin to evaluate these claims. Additionally, the period of “Trump’s generals” ended almost precisely halfway through his administration, with the resignations of James Mattis as secretary of defense (SecDef) and John Kelly as White House chief of staff (WHCOS)—effective 1 and 2 January 2019, respectively.
Therefore, we can compare a Trump presidency with and without retired generals serving as “adults in the room.”

This article compares predictions of a CMR crisis at the outset of the administration with the results. Specifically, it compares the following: concerns for militarization of foreign policy, loss of civilian control, politicization of the military, and hopes for restraining Trump’s worst instincts. We see that, while Trump repeatedly flirted with them, civil-military problems were not significantly amplified or deterred by the presence of retired generals in key roles. Further, a similar pattern continued in the second half of the administration when “true” civilians filled these billets. Whether longer-term damage was done, however, remains unresolved.

Predicting a Civil-Military Relations Crisis

The CMR debate started almost immediately after Trump’s 2016 election, when it became clear that an unusually large number of senior officers were candidates to join the administration. While the views on Mattis were mixed, the reaction against the prospect of so many retired senior officers set off alarm bells. By late November, Lt Gen Michael Flynn, USA, retired, was already announced as the national security advisor (NSA) designate. ¹ Mattis was favored for defense secretary, though Gen Jack Keane, USA, retired, was reportedly being strongly considered. General Kelly, USMC, retired, was the frontrunner for secretary of homeland security; Gen David Petraeus, USA, retired, was being considered for both secretary of state and director of national intelligence (DNI); and active duty admiral Mike Rogers was also under consideration for DNI. US Army retired general Stanley McChrystal’s name was also being floated, despite his announcing over the summer that he “would decline consideration for any role” in a Trump administration. ² The possibility of so many senior military leaders serving in key political roles caused civil-military scholars to suggest potential problems.

Concerns of Militarization of Foreign Policy

Many CMR scholars feared that placing retired officers in key national security roles would further shift the policy-making balance of power to the Pentagon, either because they shared the same worldview as serving officers or because they lacked a sufficient breadth of experience to appreciate nonmilitary instruments.

Gen Anthony Zinni, USMC, retired, was concerned that “we could end up being long on military strategy, much needed after the last two Admin-
istrations, but short of foreign policy expertise.” I argued, “Recently separated officers are likely to reinforce the advice given the president by the Joint Chiefs rather than offer a political perspective.” Phillip Carter and Loren DeJonge Schulman warned, “This risk is particularly acute now, after 15 years of war, when the military has achieved such policy and budget primacy, and military tools are often looked to as options of first, rather than last, resort.” Thomas Pickering echoed this sentiment, adding, “If they have all the money and resources and tools, that does reduce the influence and capacity of the civilian-dominated agency.”

Carol Giacomo took a slightly different tack and argued that “the concern is not so much that military leaders might drag the country into more wars. It is that the Pentagon, with its nearly $600 billion budget, already exercises vast sway in national security policymaking and dwarfs the State Department in resources.”

But, as with the other CMR concerns, many were skeptical. Richard Fontaine pushed back at the notion that retired officers were especially likely to urge the use of force, observing, “In my experience, veterans have been less likely than the civilians to advocate for military intervention abroad.” He suggested that it was the latter who “pushed hardest to launch the 2003 Iraq invasion.” Maj Gen Charles Dunlap, USAF, retired, went further, contending that because they know the costs, “retired generals don’t clamor for war; they are typically the voices urging that all other avenues be exhausted before turning to force.”

Additionally, many disagreed that modern four-stars fail to understand the complexities of the larger policy picture. For example, Caroline Bechtel observed, “Combatant commanders oversee all assets in their respective areas of operation, coordinating all military, diplomatic, intelligence, and even development assets in their commands. Thus, they must have an intimate understanding of the command’s political context, often playing a regional political or diplomatic role themselves.”

**Concerns over Civilian Control**

The most debated CMR issue was whether these retired generals would further shift the balance of power toward the military brass and away from civilian policy makers, exacerbating a growing public sense that military affairs are best left to the military. Even many who supported a waiver for Mattis believed it would be dangerous for the exception to become the norm. A related concern was whether a lifetime in uniform left retired officers unprepared for the challenges of navigating an inherently political process. Robert Burns noted, “Trump has turned to retired officers so pub-
licely and in such large numbers that it raises questions about the proper balance of military and civilian advice in a White House led by a commander in chief with no defense or foreign policy experience.\textsuperscript{10}

By far the most controversy over civilian control was engendered by the potential and then actual nomination of Mattis, only three years retired from the Marine Corps, as SecDef. When Congress created that position in 1947, it specified that its occupant must be “appointed from civilian life by the President” with the proviso that “a person who has within ten years been on active duty as a commissioned officer in a Regular component of the armed services shall not be eligible for appointment.”\textsuperscript{11} In addition to concerns that the senior generals and admirals of World War II enjoyed more political prestige than virtually any civilian, Congress believed that this cooling-off period would “help ensure that no one military service dominated the newly established Defense Department; ensure that the new Secretary of Defense was truly the President’s (rather than a service’s) representative; and, again, preserve the principle of civilian control of the military at a time when the United States was departing from its century-and-a-half long tradition of a small standing military.”\textsuperscript{12}

Just over three years later, owing to the twin crises of the “revolt of the admirals” against the second SecDef, Louis Johnson, and the debacle at the outset of America’s entry into the Korean War, President Harry Truman requested a waiver. Writing Congress, he urged, “I am a firm believer in the general principle that our national defense establishment should be headed by a civilian. However, in view of the present critical circumstances and General [George] Marshall’s unusual qualifications, I believe that the national interest will be served best by making an exception in this case.”\textsuperscript{13} While controversial, the request was honored but accompanied by a statement expressing “the sense of the Congress that after General Marshall leaves the office of Secretary of Defense, no additional appointments of military men to that office shall be approved.”\textsuperscript{14}

That intention was honored for 67 years until Trump’s nomination of Mattis. Given the lack of a crisis comparable to 1950 and that Mattis was a battlefield commander rather than a staff officer who had served two years as secretary of state after retirement, the choice generated considerable controversy. Numerous Democrats on the Senate and House Armed Services Committees came out early against a waiver. Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) issued the obligatory caveat “General Mattis deserves deep gratitude and respect for his commendable military service” before declaring, “Our American democracy was built around the concept of civilian control of the military.” She urged her colleagues to resist granting a waiver.
to “protect this core foundation on which our country was built, and which has served us well.” Her colleague Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) concurred, declaring, “Civilian control over the Department of Defense is a bedrock principle. The standard is a high one.” He added, “General Mattis has the burden of meeting it, which he has not yet done. I would vote to waive it only under the most unique and exigent circumstances.” Sen. Chris Murphy (D-CT) was “deeply fearful” that the precedent of civilian control of the military could wither by granting the waiver, and Rep. Adam Smith (D-WA 9th District), the top Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee, proclaimed, “Civil control of the military is not something to be casually cast aside.”

In testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Kathleen Hicks noted that the prohibition applied to this particular office and no other is because it is “the one nonelected civilian position in the operational chain of command.” While supporting an exception for Mattis, she cautioned against routinely appointing retired generals to SecDef or other senior posts in the defense bureaucracy. Doing so would undermine the nation’s “interest in developing knowledge and expertise about the armed forces among those who have not served” because “motivating civilians to invest in careers in the defense sector requires having positions of meaning to which they can aspire.”

Peter Feaver and Lawrence Korb shared Hicks’s position. Feaver argued that those who retire as a four-star officer “never become fully civilian” because they retain “some of the influence of serving military officers” and “represent the military profession in the eyes of the public in a way that much more junior veterans do not.” Korb said that having Mattis, a man who had spent four decades in uniform, as SecDef would rob the Pentagon of needed perspective and that major social changes in the military, from ending segregation to allowing women in combat, had always been pushed by civilians.

Still, some noted CMR scholars defended the selection. Despite his reservations, Feaver argued that it was reasonable to make an exception in Mattis’s case for many reasons but especially “because so many other logical candidates signed letters opposing [Trump] during the campaign, effectively taking themselves out of the running for consideration for a post like this.” Similarly, Hicks supported a waiver not only because of Mattis’s superb command of the issues and avowed support for the tenets of civilian control but because she assessed “the state of U.S. civil-military relations to be strong enough to withstand any risk such a once-in-two-generations exception, on its own, could pose.”
Some dismissed the need for the rule altogether. Mackubin Owens contended that “Mattis as secretary of defense is no more a threat to civilian control than Dwight Eisenhower as president.” He noted that during Mattis’s tenure as commander of CENTCOM, “none of the symptoms of unhealthy civil–military relations, such as those that characterized the tenure of Donald Rumsfeld as secretary of defense, manifested themselves.” For instance, “there were no leaks to the press over policy disagreements and no reports of ‘slow rolling’ or ‘foot dragging’ in Mattis’s implementation of the president’s policy,” despite tensions that would ultimately result in Mattis’s premature relief.24

Kori Schake argued that Mattis would be “a superb Secretary of Defense” and pointed to survey research finding that “the public does not share experts’ concerns about retired military officers endorsing political candidates or speaking at political conventions, because the public has outsourced its expertise to the military itself.”25 Similarly, Rosa Brooks contended that “in America today, the notion of civilian control of the military has become unmoored from its original purpose.” Instead, it has “become a rule of aesthetics, not ethics, and its invocation is a soothing ritual that makes us feel better, without accomplishing anything of value.”26

Within the larger debate, there was also one over sheer professional competence. Some argued that a lifetime in uniform does little to prepare people for the inherently political tasks of running massive organizations, while others argued that retired generals are in fact uniquely suited for those tasks.

Joan Johnson-Freese wondered “whether [retired generals] are bringing the right job skills and cultural dispositions to their positions.” She added, “Nobody argues that retired ambassadors, because they have demonstrated career achievement should, on retirement, be hired by the military, given a few stars and perhaps act as a Service Chief or the Joint Chief of Staff [sic].”27 Charlie Stevenson observed, “There is a concern that someone who has been a general all their adult [life] doesn’t really understand civilian life.” Specifically, “the secretary of defense has to deal with domestic businesses, has to recruit people from the civilian job sector. If he is just used to commanding[,] he might not be used to commanding civilian society.”28

Erin Simpson expressed personal admiration for Mattis but opposed his nomination on the grounds that “warfighters rarely make good bureaucrats. The Pentagon is one of the world’s largest bureaucracies, and Mattis has shown little patience for management and administration.” Moreover, “Budgets, white papers, and service rivalries, not to mention the
interagency meetings and White House meddling—these tasks are not what you go to Jim Mattis for.”

Gen John Allen, USMC, retired, offered a mixed view of a potential Petraeus selection. Echoing Harry Truman’s assessment of a possible Dwight Eisenhower presidency, Allen observed, “The State Department bureaucracy is not really efficient—it doesn’t snap and pop the way bureaucracies do in the military.” Further, “It doesn’t work in a hierarchical way. . . . He’s going to recognize that he’s never going to get a diplomat to tell him something in 10 words that can be said in 14 minutes.” Despite his worries about the difficulty of transitioning from the military hierarchy to a civilian agency, Allen was intrigued by the idea. “We’re in a damn dangerous world now,” he stated. “For Trump to reach out to some of the finest military minds we’ve ever had—who have led very large, globally-oriented organizations—I don’t think that’s a bad thing.”

There were plenty of other defenders of placing retired four-stars in these roles. Bing West argued, “Our country is fighting a long war. It’s common sense to seek the experience of those who have proven they know how to fight.” Peter Roberts was even more enthusiastic, gushing, “Mattis, Petraeus, Keane, Kelly and McChrystal radically altered the way that the US dealt with challenges in Iraq and Afghanistan, turning failing campaigns into a semblance of victory.” He added, “It is this type of leader, capable of making decisions and implementing unpleasant policies in high-pressure environments, that marks out generals and admirals as extremely useful government partners.”

Dunlap, the author of a seminal 1992 article on the dangers of militarizing domestic politics, also expressed support. He viewed Mattis as “gifted with the kind of authentic charisma that few people of any generation enjoy . . . [,
] engender[ing] a confidence in his leadership that I’ve never seen equaled.” Further, Dunlap challenged the very premise of the critiques, contending that “it would have never occurred to the Founding Fathers to oppose a retired officer holding a political office of any sort. Quite the opposite, as most had such service themselves and those who did not regretted their failure to serve.” He endorsed the public perception that “retired generals, by and large, have a considerable set of leadership and organizational skills, not to mention a work ethic, which would be valued by any large organization, including the government.”

**Concerns of Politicization of the Military**

A related fear was that placing retired generals in these roles would encourage active duty officers to shade their military advice to policy mak-
ers, whether to curry favor to remain viable for postretirement appointments or because policy makers would more thoroughly vet the brass for political alignment.

While allowing that Mattis was her preferred option among the names being floated and was “not especially worried about how Mattis the man will handle the job,” Alice Hunt Friend was nonetheless “worried about how the military as an institution will respond and what comes after Mattis.” She was concerned not only about service parochialism that led to the cooling off period being included in the law but also about the military becoming “associated with one party over the other, robbing the profession of its historic political impartiality.” Relatedly, “active-duty officers may begin to view political appointments as natural addenda to their careers—rather than the rarity it is now—encouraging partisan ambitions prior to retirement.”

Hicks was in agreement. Just as routinely appointing senior retired officers would discourage civilians from pursuing careers in defense, “it would risk furthering incentives for active-duty officers to politicize their speech and/or actions and for civilians to seek to ascertain the political viewpoints of officers as part of the recruitment and hiring process for political positions.”

Still, others were skeptical. Brooks noted that “today’s US military has elaborate internal checks and balances and a deeply ingrained respect for democracy and the rule of law. It’s difficult to imagine any active-duty general or group of officers, no matter how popular, persuading the troops to ignore or overturn the results of an election or a properly passed law.” She added, “That’s even truer for retired military officers. Technically, they are civilians. They can still give orders if they want to, but even the lowliest private is free to tell a retired general to take a hike, subject only to the constraints of courtesy.”

**Hope of Restraining Trump**

Regardless of their views of the wisdom of having a recently retired general run the Pentagon or a plethora of former senior generals in high posts, many were optimistic that these individuals would be able to rein in an improbable president who had demonstrated during the campaign a lack of discipline and impatience with the norms of foreign policy making. Opinions ranged from relief that Trump would pick from this group rather than make more extreme choices to a belief that it was about time to turn policy making over to the most trusted leaders in the land.

Brooks declared that “a cabinet stocked with retired military officers is the least of my worries” compared to the alternatives, observing, “anyone
who thinks Rudy Giuliani would make a better secretary of state than David Petraeus needs to have their head examined.” While I was among those concerned about putting a general in charge of the Pentagon, at the same time, “I breathed a sigh of relief when General James Mattis was announced as Donald Trump’s choice for defense secretary” given the likely alternatives, noting that Flynn was “already in place as national security adviser” and that “names like Rudy Giuliani, John Bolton and Newt Gingrich” were “being floated for key foreign policy posts.”

Lt Gen David Barno, USA, retired, and Sen. John McCain were similarly inclined. Barno observed that “most of these officers are relatively non-partisan, publicly endorsed no candidate during the campaign, and have lifelong records of public service leading large, complex organizations.” He predicted that “they could bring a wealth of sober judgment and experience to a Trump foreign policy team in need of both.” A month into the administration, McCain, a frequent Trump critic, declared, “I could not imagine a better, more capable national security team than the one we have right now” when McMaster replaced Flynn. However, Simpson was unpersuaded, observing, “His Mattis-inspired about-face on waterboarding notwithstanding, I’m not convinced the president-elect will be able to manage a coterie of competing advisors, much less listen to them.”

Assessing the CMR Concerns

The next sections attempt to assess the above predictions in light of what actually transpired in the four years of Trump. Doing so is difficult, partly because the concerns and hopes are intertwined. Most notably, the very notion of retired generals restraining the elected commander in chief may well undermine the norms of civilian control and risk damaging the military’s reputation for nonpartisan service. Still, while the separation is artificial, the predictions provide an organizing principle for the discussion.

Was US Foreign Policy Further Militarized?

A quick survey shows that Trump did have an unusual number of general officers, retired and otherwise, in key policy-making positions. The table below provides a snapshot of general and flag officers, retired or active, broken down by administration and post, in the period since the passage of the National Security Act of 1947, which began the modern era.
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<tr>
<th>President</th>
<th>Secretary of State</th>
<th>Secretary of Defense</th>
<th>NSC</th>
<th>WHCOS</th>
<th>DCl/DNI</th>
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<td>Harry Truman</td>
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<td>Dwight Eisenhower</td>
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<td>Walter Smith</td>
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<td>John Kennedy</td>
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<td>Lyndon Johnson</td>
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<td>Ronald Reagan</td>
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<td>Colin Powell</td>
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<td>(23 Nov 1987–20 Jan 1989)</td>
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<td>George H. W. Bush</td>
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<td>(20 Jan 1989–20 Jan 1993)</td>
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<td>Bill Clinton</td>
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<td>George W. Bush</td>
<td>Colin Powell</td>
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<td>Mike McConnell</td>
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<td>Barack Obama</td>
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<td>James Jones</td>
<td>Dennis Blair</td>
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<tr>
<td>Donald Trump</td>
<td>James Mattis</td>
<td>Michael Flynn</td>
<td>John Kelly</td>
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<td>John Kelly</td>
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The table includes only the most prominent roles: secretary of state, secretary of defense, national security advisor, White House chief of staff, director of central intelligence (DCI)/DNI, and secretary of homeland security. It excludes those who served only in an acting capacity. These criteria ignore retired officers like Gen Barry McCaffrey, USA, who served as President Bill Clinton’s “drug czar”; Gen Eric Shinseki, USA, who served as veterans affairs secretary under President Barack Obama; and Anthony Zinni, who served as a special envoy on the Qatar crisis for Trump. Doing so keeps the focus on those in the most powerful posts. It also allows a reasonable consistency in comparison since most have existed since either the very beginning (state secretary, defense secretary, chief of staff, DCI) or very early (national security advisor) in the period in question. The sole exception is the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), created in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. I have taken the liberty of consolidating the DCI and DNI positions, given that they perform the same ostensible function notwithstanding some key organizational differences.

Simply looking at the information in the table shows several things. First, senior officers have frequently served as DCI/DNI. For nearly three decades, ending with Stansfield Turner’s tenure under the Carter administration, active duty three- and four-star officers were common in that billet. Moreover, three retired officers have served as DNI in its short history. Excluding the DCI/DNI slot, five administrations (Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Carter, and Clinton) had no general or flag officers (GOFO) in key posts, and three (Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Clinton) had none at all.45 We went more than two decades with no GOFOs in a key billet between Marshall’s tenure as SecDef and Haig’s turn as White House chief of staff. Marshall (State and Defense), Haig (WHCOS and State), Powell (NSA and State), and Kelly (DHS and WHCOS) are the only GOFOs to fill multiple billets. Additionally, Scowcroft was NSA for two different presidents nonconsecutively.

So Trump was indeed unusual in beginning his term with three retired four-star generals in key national security posts; no other president had more than two. More unusually, none of them served as intelligence director. Did this lead to a militarization of policy?46

It certainly seemed so at the outset. Seven months into Trump’s tenure, a Washington Post report began, “High-ranking military officials have become an increasingly ubiquitous presence in American political life during Donald Trump’s presidency, repeatedly winning arguments inside the West Wing, publicly contradicting the president and even balking at implementing one of his most controversial policies.”47 It assessed that “gen-
eraly manage Trump’s hour-by-hour interactions and whisper in his ear—and those whispers, as with the decision this week to expand U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, often become policy.”

Friend and Hicks argued that “if Trump gives merely episodic presidential attention to defense matters, the military receives little strategic direction from the commander in chief.” They added, “By largely delegating national security decisions to the Pentagon, while allowing the diplomacy, development, and trade elements of our toolkit to atrophy, the United States severely underplays its hand as a global power.”

Anne Applebaum observed,

A U.S. foreign policy run by military technocrats will have the same deep flaws as the governments run by economic technocrats that are sometimes installed in countries engulfed by economic crisis. A foreign policy, like an economic policy, can succeed only if it has political backing. Difficult decisions will be accepted by the public only if they have political legitimacy. Military decisions in particular should be part of a carefully thought-out strategy, one that has been cleared by Congress, debated in public and discussed not only in the Pentagon but also in the State Department and the other institutions, staffed by experts, that we have created for this purpose.

While there were some early indications—such as the dropping of the so-called Mother of All Bombs on ISIS targets in Afghanistan weeks into his administration—that Trump’s deference to theater commanders would lead to no-holds-barred military action at the expense of diplomacy, it is difficult to construct an argument that foreign policy became more militarized during his tenure. Indeed, depending on one’s definition, Trump is the first US president in quite some time not to send troops into a significant new conflict and withdrew forces from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Somalia at a faster rate than his uniformed military advisors and civilian cabinet alike had counseled. Indeed, the Syria decision was ostensibly the final straw for Mattis, prompting his resignation.

At the same time, the State Department’s influence and capacity declined under Trump, with its senior workforce intentionally gutted, a hiring freeze, and the serious curtailment of hiring top-drawer entry-level talent through the Presidential Management Fellows program and similar avenues. Furthermore, despite high hopes from some that he would curtail Trump’s excesses, Rex Tillerson proved to be an abject disaster in his short tenure as secretary, alienating the president and his staff.

Still, even though Pompeo’s tenure was arguably even worse in terms of policy outcomes, he was ultimately the most powerful foreign policy ap-
pointee in the administration. After serving as Trump’s first CIA director, he spent nearly three years at Foggy Bottom, steering an aggressive foreign policy at odds with the elite consensus pushed by his predecessor and Mattis. Meanwhile, Mattis, Kelly, and McMaster were advocates for a much more traditional foreign policy. So too was Tillerson, even if he undermined it drastically by his misguided attempts at streamlining his department. They were, as will be discussed later, simply incapable of reining in a president with decidedly different instincts.

The evidence for generals in key posts leading to a militarized foreign policy in the administration is thin. Arguably, though, the fact that Pompeo—a West Point graduate who left the military after his first tour—succeeded at getting his preferred policy options enacted while they were not is evidence for the claim that former generals lack the necessary political skills. Then again, it may simply be that his preferences were either more aligned with Trump’s or were more malleable than those of the generals.

Was Civilian Control Diminished?

The ongoing trend of power shifting from the civilians in the Office of the Secretary of Defense to the brass accelerated during the Trump administration. It is, however, difficult to pin this on the choice of Mattis to lead the Pentagon.

Reacting to several instances in the first six months of the administration where Trump seemed to leave the decisions on significant military matters to Mattis and commanders in the field, Friend and Hicks declared it “an abrogation of our tradition of civilian control over the military.” They argued that doing so endangered the “military’s political neutrality and commitment to technical expertise free of partisan interests.” Months later, Andrew J. Bacevich claimed that Trump had “largely ceded decision-making on the conduct of America’s wars to the very generals he derided while running for office.”

Further, there were an unusual number of incidences where uniformed leaders actively resisted tweeted “orders” from or issued statements directly contravening the commander in chief. In the early months, these included resistance from Mattis and the Joint Chiefs over Trump’s directive to ban transgender individuals from military service and pushback against his statements seemingly siding with white supremacists in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Here, having a recently retired Marine general clearly clouded the issue. It would be perfectly normal for a “regular” civilian SecDef to resist the president who appointed him on matters of policy pursuant to the best
military advice of the brass. But because Trump continued to call him “General Mattis” and continued to cultivate his “Mad Dog” persona, the distinction was blurred. Carter noted that it “is significant and telling that the highest-ranking military officers—such as Gen Joseph Dunford, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the four chiefs of the armed services—did not file affidavits in support of the government in the transgender cases.” He defended these actions, contending that “military leaders have struck a posture that’s not disloyal but still allows the ship of state to correct its course when steered in the wrong direction by an errant president.” He added, “Call it respectful disobedience or selective engagement or lawful resistance or some other euphemism—but it’s clear that military leaders have found a formula for saluting their commander in chief while keeping his worst excesses at bay.”

Here, having retired generals in prominent civilian roles arguably played a factor. As Carter put it, the uniformed leaders were “probably aided by a secretary of defense and White House chief of staff who have literally worn their shoes. Jim Mattis and John Kelly may not be able to moderate the president’s worst statements or most egregious tweets, but they almost certainly provide cover for senior military leaders behind closed doors, where they can explain to the president why the generals are behaving a certain way.” Beyond that, while impossible to assess at this juncture, it’s more than reasonable to assume that Mattis’s relationship with Dunford, who had been his subordinate in the Marines, contributed to this impulse.

Lara Seligman reported in late 2018 that “frustrated by lack of influence and disheartened by U.S. President Donald Trump’s rhetoric, Department of Defense civilians are heading for the door, leaving key positions unfilled in a Pentagon increasingly run by active-duty or retired military officers.” Moreover, “interviews with a dozen current and former Department of Defense civilians reveal an increasingly hollow and demoralized workforce, with staffers feeling they no longer have a seat at the table.” According to one anonymous former official, civilian oversight of the military “was already weakening in the last administration, and I think it basically fell off a cliff.”

Writing the day after Mattis resigned in protest over his inability to restrain Trump’s decision to withdraw US forces from Syria, Schake praised the “quiet integrity” with which Mattis had done his job in the face of “gale-force political winds.” She stated, “The president of the United States has transgressed civil-military norms frequently—treating speeches to troops as campaign rallies, using military titles for civilian appointees to
give the appearance of military support for him personally and for his policies.” In particular, she found it “shocking” when Trump signed his travel ban in the Hall of Heroes at the Pentagon early in the administration, which she saw as a “trap” he had sprung on Mattis and other senior leaders. Tom Nichols likewise blamed Trump for the state of affairs, declaring that “the president has taken a dangerous path, excoriating retired military leaders who criticize him and lavishing praise and make-believe pay raises on the active-duty military voters who he believes support him.”

Jim Golby was less forgiving. He cut to the chase by observing, correctly in my view, “Jim Mattis may have become a civilian political appointee, but he never stopped being a marine.” Acknowledging that Trump often placed him in impossible situations, he gave the former secretary credit for having “avoided a true civil-military catastrophe” and going “two years without a major national security crisis.” In the end, though, he assessed that Mattis’s tenure “further: (1) blurred the lines of authority between civilian and military, as well as between active-duty and retired military; (2) enabled the rapid erosion of civil-military norms; and (3) widened gaps between the military and American society as well as between the military brass and elected political leaders.” While seemingly damning, none of these trends was reversed in the second half of the Trump administration when civilians were at the helm of the Pentagon.

Writing in September 2019, nine months after Mattis vacated the post but just two months into Mark Esper’s formal tenure as secretary, Schulman, Friend, and Mara Karlin welcomed the return of a Senate-confirmed civilian to the role after months of acting officials and lauded statements by Esper that he would seek to fill civilian posts that had been long vacant. Indeed, this was a clear failing under Mattis, although not one entirely of his making. His staffing was dominated by the likes of Craig Faller, an active duty rear admiral who was his senior military advisor, and Kevin Sweeney, a retired two-star admiral who was his chief of staff, both of whom had worked for him at CENTCOM. But while this staffing issue was partly a function of leaders naturally wanting to surround themselves with trusted advisors, it was mostly a function of one of the problems that led Trump to select so many generals for his cabinet. Many Republican foreign policy professionals had disqualified themselves from serving by signing Never Trump letters or otherwise declaring the now-president unfit for office. Additionally, Mattis was reportedly rebuffed when he tried to make Michèle Flournoy, who had served as under secretary of defense for policy under the Obama administration, his deputy secretary.
Regardless, Schulman, Friend, and Karlin asserted, “Civilian control is a process, not simply a person. And out of sight of most Americans, civilians are losing control over key processes that manage war plans, deployment decisions, and the programs that determine what kind of military the U.S. builds for the future.” Further, “over the last several years, formal engagements for civilian review of war plans have been cut back, with significantly less secretary-level oversight.” They especially lamented the chairman having assumed the roles as the “global integrator” of war plans, which they argued “can impute to the military the kind of strategic, diplomatic, and political context that civilians traditionally provide.” While they are by no means alone in this concern (indeed, I share it), this development didn’t happen on Mattis’s relatively brief watch and predates Trump’s tenure. It was what was left from the failed Goldwater-Nichols 2.0 initiative that survived into the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act signed into law in the last days of the Obama administration.

Still, Dunford, who had pushed for this new role, was the first to exercise this power. Again, while it is impossible to know for sure, it is perfectly reasonable to wonder whether he would have received more pushback from a secretary who had come up as a Pentagon civilian and with whom he did not have a long-standing personal friendship. In any case, Dunford is now the template for the global integrator role, and it will be more difficult for new defense secretary Lloyd Austin to claw back the power if he is so inclined.

Regardless, the tensions over civilian control continued once Mattis departed. Indeed, they arguably intensified. In the wake of a series of standoffs in spring 2020, including the firing of tear gas to disperse peaceful protestors, Esper and Army general Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs—in his combat fatigues—marched by Trump’s side so that Trump could stage a photo opportunity at a church. Adding to this turmoil were a series of statements and policy letters from Esper, each of the Joint Chiefs, Mattis, and several retired four-stars critical of militarized responses to demonstrations and the handling of other crises. Karlin summed up the situation: “If this isn’t a civil-military relations crisis, I don’t know what is.” But, as I argued at the time, these statements were consistent with their roles. Specifically, “to the extent any of these statements are seen as political, let alone partisan, it says a lot about our state of affairs and should cause us great shame as a nation. But they’re not only consistent with the values of the Constitution, federal law, and the Uniformed Code of Military Justice but it would be unconscionable for men who lead so many African-American service members to not get out in front of this issue.”
In terms of the balance of power between the uniformed military and civilian policy makers shifting in favor of the former during the Trump administration, it was both a continuation of preexisting trends and a clash between the values of the military profession and the actions of a highly unusual president. While Mattis’s relationship with Dunford and being steeped in those same values might reasonably have been expected to reinforce that tension, we see that it continued, even escalated, under Esper’s tenure. The key variable, then, was Trump, not whether the SecDef was a “true” civilian.

It is too soon to fully assess other predictions in this ambit, but we have some early clues. The long-standing norm, enshrined in law since 1947, of the SecDef being a “true” civilian seems to have been discarded. Logically, Mattis’s confirmation as SecDef made it easier for Austin to be nominated and confirmed, although the direct evidence is mixed. Mattis’s waiver was approved 268–151 by the House and 81–17 by the Senate in 2017. Four years later, the House voted 326–78 and the Senate 69–27 for Austin’s appointment. Granting that two elections had altered the membership of both bodies, that is an increase of 58 votes in the House but a decrease of 12 in the Senate. There are a variety of possible explanations for that, including the fact that so many Democrats, particularly in the Senate, had been so adamantly opposed to the Mattis waiver and insisted that it be a one-time measure. Still, the margins in both cases were overwhelming, lending credence to those who argued that the norm no longer reflected a consensus.

Whether the de facto eligibility of retired generals and admirals to serve as SecDef will lead to them being routinely appointed remains to be seen. But the circumstances that led to Mattis and Austin being chosen were unique. Trump seemed to have something of a fetish for generals, particularly those with outsized reputations for machismo, and had been renounced by much of his party’s national security establishment. He had relatively few options. Biden had been widely expected to make Flournoy the first woman SecDef. For whatever reason, he did not. But he was under enormous pressure to appoint a Black person to the post, and as Bishop Garrison ably demonstrated, that radically narrowed the available talent pool because so few Blacks serve as senators, governors, or Fortune 500 CEOs. Additionally, Biden had worked with Austin before and was especially impressed by him.

Still, while Hicks, by virtue of her appointment as Austin’s deputy, has likely supplanted Flournoy as the most likely candidate to be the first woman SecDef, it would certainly shock no one if retired admiral
Michelle Howard, who served on Biden’s transition team and has subsequently been appointed by Austin to a prestigious commission, added that post to her list of firsts. It is hard to imagine that she would face serious opposition in Congress.

Similarly, it is too early to know whether having two retired generals in short order appointed to the top Pentagon post will deter civilians from service there. Certainly, though, Biden has had no difficulty attracting top talent to the department.

**Was the Military Further Politicized?**

Within days of taking office, Trump committed several transgressions against the norms of CMR, often with Mattis or Kelly standing idly by. Critic Andrew Exum explained, “Whether it is the Memorial Wall at the C.I.A., or the Hall of Heroes at the Pentagon, he is using institutions that have previously been walled off from politics to generate political support for some of his more contentious policies.”

Trump opened his remarks to military personnel at MacDill Air Force Base by implying that most there had voted for him. Richar[d H. Kohn argued that Trump went too far: “Leading off with the election, attacking the press and talking about endorsements is a clear attempt to politicize the military and invite their partisanship. In rhetoric and style, his words mimicked a campaign rally.”

Jason Dempsey and Amy Shafer suggested that the cabinet generals amplified these transgressions. In their view, “Kelly and Mattis hold[ing] political roles so recently after stepping out of uniform place[d] the military in a particularly influential position within the Trump administration, and, accordingly, [put] its reputation and role in American politics and society at great risk.” They also indicated that Trump’s “comments may tie the military’s reputation very closely to that of his administration—with potentially negative consequences for continued bipartisan support for the armed forces.”

Despite much uproar and pushback from Mattis and Kelly, the pattern continued. In July 2017, Trump urged Sailors attending the commissioning of the USS *Gerald R. Ford* to wade into domestic politics, stating, “I don’t mind getting a little hand, so call that congressman and call that senator and make sure you get it” [referring to passing his defense budget]. He added, “And by the way, you can also call those senators to make sure you get health care.” Carter rightly termed this “a serious breach of presidential norms,” noting that “this could have been interpreted as an order from the commander in chief to the service members in attendance to support the Republican Party agenda.”
As both an active duty officer and one who had not previously held military posts of the prominence that Mattis and Kelly had, McMaster was in a particularly weak position. His prestige as a combat leader was frequently leveraged by the president for partisan political aims. Daniel Kurtz-Phalen was blistering in his critique of the situation, stating that “McMaster was sent to undercut stories about Trump’s disclosure of Israeli intelligence to the Russian foreign minister—only to be contradicted the next day by Trump himself.” Further, “in exchange for destroying his reputation, McMaster is not earning Trump’s gratitude for being so supine, according to recent reports, but Trump’s ire for not being supine enough.”

But, as with Mattis, not everyone put the blame on Trump’s shoulders. Jeet Heer stated, “If McMaster is willing to trade his good name for a chance to whisper in Trump’s ear, he’s no different than Jared Kushner, Steve Bannon, Paul Ryan, or any of the other courtiers bending the knee before Trump.” Twisting the knife further, he continued, “As always, Trump is a clarifying figure: in this case, disabusing us of the myth of the American military as non-ideological Svengalis. McMaster, by this light, isn’t sullying his reputation or that of the military. Rather, he’s showing his true colors.”

Thomas Ricks agreed, asserting, “I don’t see McMaster improving Trump. Rather, what I have seen so far is Trump degrading McMaster.” Additionally, McMaster co-authored an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal with Gary Cohn, director of Trump’s National Economic Council, critiquing the policies of the Obama administration. It declared, “This administration will restore confidence in American leadership as we serve the American people.” Consequently, Kimberly Dozier and Noah Shachtman reported, “A growing cadre of former military officers who served with . . . McMaster are quietly calling for him to retire from service, worried the embattled Trump administration is tarnishing the U.S. military’s reputation by deploying their own personal three-star general as a political shield.”

Beyond that, while many of these incidents had Trump in a leading role, some of the retired generals harmed their reputations as nonpartisan servants on their own. In his tenure at Homeland Security, Kelly was a strong champion of the travel ban, border wall, and other controversial policies. As White House chief of staff, he told reporters that veterans feel “a little bit sorry” for civilians who hadn’t “experienced the wonderful joy you get in your heart” from national service. Of course, Kelly was making those statements years earlier while still in uniform. In a December 2010 speech, he told a crowd of former Marines and local business people, “If anyone thinks you can somehow thank them for their service...
and not support the cause for which they fight—our country—these people are lying to themselves. . . . More important, they are slighting our warriors and mocking their commitment to this nation.”

Trump had a unique talent for putting officials who are supposed to be apart from partisan politics in awkward positions implying their endorsement of his policies. This was by no means limited to active or retired military personnel. Combining Justice Amy Coney Barrett’s swearing-in ceremony and a campaign rally was an especially egregious example. Thus, I tend to blame him more than Mattis, Kelly, and McMaster for these incidents. But their very presence lent the prestige of their service to Trump’s cause. Still, these incidents did not stop under Esper. Indeed, as previously discussed, the level of crisis escalated.

Once again, the longer-term predictions are difficult to assess. But there is little evidence that senior military officers have become any more prone to shade their advice to please their political masters or position themselves for postretirement appointments. Indeed, as previously noted, the opposite seemed to occur, as the chairman and the service chiefs pushed back time after time against not only Trump’s attempts to politicize them but also policies they deemed damaging to good order and discipline.

The exceedingly modest possibility of being chosen to be SecDef one day is unlikely to modify behavior given how much serendipity is involved. The prospect of a Trump presidency would have seemed absurd when Mattis took over CENTCOM in 2010. And his outsized persona, which attracted Trump to him, would almost surely have alienated him from just about any other president. Similarly, a Biden presidency was a long shot in 2013 when Austin succeeded Mattis.

**Was Trump Restrained?**

Simpson was quite prescient when she expressed doubt that Trump “will be able to manage a coterie of competing advisors, much less listen to them.” In the end, neither Mattis nor any of the other generals had much success in reining in Trump’s excesses. Then again, neither did any of the civilians, including his own family.

At the outset, though, the theory had promise. Less than three months into Trump’s term, Kimberly Dozier popularized the term “Axis of Adults” to describe “a new band in town that’s guiding national security by quietly tutoring the most powerful man in America.” She applied it especially to Mattis, Kelly (then still at DHS), and McMaster but also included Mike Pompeo (then still at CIA) and, importantly, then-secretary of state Rex Tillerson, who had no military experience. She attributed the coinage

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to former Obama staffer Colin Kahl, who used it in a Twitter thread a month earlier. Around the same time Eric Fehrnstrom declared, “Thank God for the generals,” observing that “in an administration riven by staff bickering and internal disputes, President Trump’s senior military appointees are taking a leading role and acting as a restraining influence.”

Senator Blumenthal declared Mattis, Kelly, and McMaster “standouts of dependability in the face of rash and impulsive conduct,” adding that “there certainly has been a feeling among many of my colleagues that they are a steadying hand on the rudder and provide a sense of consistency and rationality in an otherwise zigzagging White House.” His colleague Sen. Brian Schatz (D-Hawaii) agreed, stating that “I for one am glad they’re there—because they’re thoughtful . . . because they’re lawful and because they’re rational.” Yet he recognized the tradeoffs. Schatz asserted, “I feel like the concern about the need to maintain civilian oversight of the military is a totally legitimate one, but that concern should be addressed at a later time. In the meantime, we should be reassured that there are competent professionals there who want to make smart choices.”

Along these lines, Kurtz-Phelan argued in May 2017, “If we make it through 2020 without a civilization-threatening international calamity, a decent share of the credit will go to the men Donald Trump likes to call ‘my generals.’”

Even small returns to the norm, such as McMaster removing Trump domestic policy advisor Steve Bannon from the official NSC roster, were a sign the “adults” were winning. An anonymous senior administration official declared, “H. R. has been a steadying force.” Another stated, “There is now an efficient process to debate ideas, put them before the president and come to fairly swift decisions—a contrast to the chaos NSC staffers described in the early weeks under now-resigned National Security Advisor Mike Flynn.”

In August 2017, Jonathan Capehart wrote a column declaring that “in a wild twist that only Trump could pull off, the generals surrounding the president are the ones protecting our democracy—from him.” He cited in particular Mattis’s refusal to treat Trump’s Twitter announcement banning transgender troops from the military as an order. That this came a day after JCS chairman Gen Joseph Dunford’s declaration that all senior leaders would continue to “treat all of our personnel with respect” did not seem to bother Trump in the least.

Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay note that the early restraining influences went beyond countering the president’s excesses on Twitter to Trump being talked out of unconventional foreign policy choices. In par-
ticular, “when Syria launched chemical weapons attacks against rebels in April 2017, the Trump White House followed a textbook process in determining whether and how to retaliate,” and “Trump’s decision four months later to send additional U.S. troops to Afghanistan reinforced the belief that his advisers held the reins. They further observe that “Trump seemingly admitted as much when he announced the troop increase, saying, ‘My original instinct was to pull out—and, historically, I like following my gut.’ He had changed his mind because of meetings with ‘my Cabinet and generals.’”

But, quite naturally, having his instincts constantly challenged frustrated Trump. According to Daalder and Lindsay, “The Afghan troop increase came only after Trump railed at his generals for wanting to do more in Afghanistan, leaving Mattis visibly upset after one meeting.” In fact, Mattis, “worried by Trump’s poor grasp of global politics, . . . held a now-famous briefing for the president in July 2017 on why America played an outsized role in the world. With charts and maps, the briefers patiently explained how alliances and trade deals actually benefited the United States. Trump’s response was short and to the point: ‘This is exactly what I don’t want.’”

The ability to restrain was quite short-lived. Tillerson was fired via Twitter in March 2018 after 13 months of bitter struggles with Trump. McMaster was forced into retirement later that month, “a victim of his hawkish stances on Afghanistan and Syria and for saying publicly that the evidence of Russian interference in the 2016 election was ‘incontrovertible.’” Mattis and Kelly both made it to December before resigning in frustration.

In a phone interview just after he submitted his resignation, “Kelly defended his rocky tenure, arguing that it is best measured by what the president did not do when Kelly was at his side.” In particular, he claimed that he had held back “pullout of all U.S. troops from Syria and half the 14,000 troops from Afghanistan,” both of which Trump announced immediately after Kelly’s departure. Further, his supporters credited him with “persuading Trump not to pull U.S. forces out of South Korea, or withdraw from NATO, as he had threatened.”

The fact that McMaster was fired and Mattis and Kelly resigned in protest points to the limits of their ability to restrain Trump. Their military prestige likely gave them more sway than Tillerson had early on, but it only went so far; indeed, Trump would pillory them all once they departed.

Further, to the extent he was persuadable on foreign policy matters, Pompeo and Esper were just as effective as the retired generals. After the
abrupt withdrawal from Syria backfired, Trump allowed a significant reversal of the policy. Similarly, they successfully slowed his attempts to pull troops out of Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, and elsewhere. And, of course, America remains in NATO and South Korea. The constants were an ability to form a personal relationship with Trump and persuade him that their advice was in his best political interests, neither of which the generals were able to do.

Conclusions

While Trump’s tenure provided a natural experiment, constantly testing the norms of CMR, it was arguably sui generis. Notwithstanding the Austin appointment, Biden appears at this early juncture to be a return to a “normal” presidency and consequently will likely have fewer blatant challenges of the relationship.

In the short term, at least, the assessment of Hicks, Brooks, and others that the norms of US civil-military relations were strongly embedded in military culture proved correct. Despite enormous pressures from their commander in chief to become involved in partisan politics, they ultimately held fast to their oath to the Constitution. Despite coming too close for comfort to the first failure in American history to peacefully transition power after an election, we never had to test whether the American military would follow an illegal order from the president to keep him in office or declare him a “domestic enemy” and force him out of office. However, the suggestion it would ever come to that is absurd because our institutions are mature, with multiple safeguards built in. Despite enormous political pressure, state and local election officials, the judiciary, and Congress thwarted attempts to overturn the election results, rendering military interference unnecessary.

Yet there remains reason for concern for the future. That questions like “Should a lack of military experience disqualify someone from senior leadership roles at the Department of Defense?” and “Should the secretary of defense be required to have served in the military?” are being seriously entertained at this juncture demonstrates how far the debate has swung. This is not a function of Trump’s presidency but of the fact that, as Schake put it, the “public has outsourced its expertise to the military itself.” Further, the easy congressional votes on the Mattis and Austin waivers and the fact that so few military leaders understand why one is required to begin with are informative. These circumstances strongly suggest that almost half a century of an all-volunteer force and a large standing military
for eight decades have eroded our understanding of why these original concerns about civilian control existed in the first place.\textsuperscript{122}

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Notes
19. Hicks, 4.
31. Quoted in Hudson, “All the President’s Generals.”
32. Quoted in Hudson, “All the President’s Generals.”
33. Quoted in Burns, “Military Parade for Donald Trump Has Come Early.”
38. Hicks, “Civilian Control of the Armed Forces,” 3.
40. Brooks, “Don’t Freak Out about Trump’s Cabinet Full of Generals.”
41. Joyner, “Greater Deference to Generals Has Undermined Civilian Control of the Military.”


44. Simpson, “I Love Mattis, but I Don’t Love Him as SECDEF.”

45. As a technical matter, Gen Walter Smith, USA, who had been appointed DCI under President Truman in 1950, remained in his post for the first days of the Eisenhower administration (20 January–9 February 1953) but retired to accept the nomination as under secretary of state and fill several other posts under Eisenhower. See “Walter Bedell Smith,” George C. Marshall Foundation, accessed April 2020, https://www.marshallfoundation.org/.

46. It is beyond the scope of this article to survey the civil-military impact of having these officers serve in previous administrations to compare with that of the Trump administration. Indeed, doing so would almost certainly be a book-length project.


59. Friend and Hicks, “Trump Gave the Military More Power.”


63. Carter, “Military Chiefs’ Reluctance to March.”


66. Quoted in Seligman, “How the Generals Are Routing the Policy Wonks at the Pentagon.”


69. Schake, “Quiet Integrity of James Mattis.”


73. Seligman, “How the Generals Are Routing the Policy Wonks at the Pentagon.”


91. Dempsey and Schafer, “Is There Trouble Brewing?”


102. Simpson, “I Love Mattis, but I Don’t Love Him as SECDEF.”


112. Daalder and Lindsay, “RIP, Axis of Adults.”


114. Daalder and Lindsay, “RIP, Axis of Adults.”


121. Schake, “All the President’s Generals.”

Uncivil-Military Relations: Politicization of the Military in the Trump Era

Jim Golby

Abstract

This article provides a comprehensive framework that scholars can use to assess civilian efforts to politicize the military in democratic regimes. Extending existing research, I develop a framework to assess politicization through “civilian activation” based on four criteria: frequency, gravity, messaging, and political context. Drawing on new data that measures the frequency of civil-military news coverage from 1981 to 2020, a collection of past presidential statements about the use of military force on domestic soil, and a compilation of civil-military conflicts from 2016 to 2020, I apply these criteria to assess civilian activation during the Trump administration. My initial analysis suggests that politicization by civilian activation during Trump’s tenure was both unique and alarming; nevertheless, there are few indications that the incentive structures that encouraged Trump’s behavior have abated. This framework may provide a fresh way to categorize civilian behavior and reframe civil-military norms to help arrest their decline.

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Donald Trump’s tenure was a tumultuous time for American civil-military relations. Although most scholars agree that the 45th president politicized the military as much as—if not more than—any commander in chief in recent memory, this claim remains largely subjective and untested. Scholars lack a comprehensive conceptual framework of politicization that can distinguish between different civilian and military behaviors that can be detrimental to a healthy civil-military relationship in a democracy. Consequently, politicization of the military remains a much-discussed but often mispronounced and little-understood concept in the literature.

I attempt to fill this gap by providing a more complete framework scholars can use to assess efforts to politicize the military in democratic regimes, focusing especially on the civilian side of the relationship. Scholars to date
primarily have explored the military’s role in politicization, but civilian leaders can—and often do—court or co-opt all or part of the military for their own partisan or electoral gain. Extending existing research, I distinguish between two categories of politicization. The first is civilian activation, which I define as attempts by civilian leaders to co-opt the military for personal, partisan, or electoral gain. The second—and more traditional form of politicization—is military activism. Military activism involves individual or collective efforts by the military to inappropriately influence policy outcomes or provide political advantage to a party, candidate, or group.

I develop a framework to assess politicization via civilian activation based on four criteria: frequency, gravity, messaging, and political context. I argue that these criteria provide scholars and policy makers a more comprehensive and rigorous framework with which to assess the actions civilian leaders take to politicize the military in democratic regimes. Drawing on new data that measures the frequency of civil-military news coverage from 1981 to 2020, a collection of past presidential statements about the use of military force on domestic soil, and a compilation of civil-military conflicts from 2016 to 2020, I apply these criteria to assess civilian activation during the Trump administration.

My initial analysis suggests that politicization by civilian activation during Trump’s tenure was both unique and alarming; nevertheless, there are few indications that the incentive structures that encouraged civilian activation have abated. Civilian behaviors by elected leaders need urgent reexamination. My criteria—frequency, gravity, messaging, and political context—provide a comprehensive framework to categorize civilian politicization and reframe civil-military norms to help arrest their decline.

Military Activism Is Not the (Only) Problem

For good reason, civil-military relations theory focuses on politicization primarily as a military phenomenon, especially in the context of democratic or democratizing regimes. Civilian control of the military is necessary for democracy to exist, let alone flourish, and military power can be a key impediment to both democratic transition and the endurance of democratic governance.

Suggestions that civilian leaders themselves might pose a challenge to civilian control have been common but often brief and underdeveloped. In his classic work, The Soldier and the State, Huntington asserts that the “basic problem in defining civilian control is [this:] How can military power be minimized?” But the answer he proposes is paradoxical. His solution is not, in fact, the reduction of military power. Rather, it is the maximization...
of military professionalism within an apolitical officer corps under a system he calls objective control. Huntington argues that civilian leaders can encourage this development but recognizes they often do not. He writes that “the achievement of objective civilian control, however, has been hampered by the tendency of many civilian groups still to conceive of civilian control in subjective terms. . . . They continue to insist upon the subordination of the officer corps to their own interests and principles.”

Huntington offers little more to help us identify problematic civilian behaviors, even though he argues that states should try to draw a bright line between political and military functions. Other scholars have followed his lead to develop a rich literature on political activism by military officers and the special dangers it can pose. Samuel Finer, for example, proposes a useful typology that distinguishes between “military influence” and “military pressure or blackmail.” More recently, Risa Brooks has identified a comprehensive list of tactics military leaders can use for activist purposes in a democracy. A growing body of literature has documented trends of increasing political activism by both active and retired generals and admirals, especially in the US case.

Elsewhere in this special CMR edition, Risa Brooks makes a compelling case that scholars who study civil–military relations in the United States have much to learn from the broader comparative literature. This body of research has developed sharp insights about the ways that authoritarian—and perhaps even democratic—leaders can “coup proof” their regime to protect against the effects of military politicization. Moreover, recent scholarship by Polina Beliakova develops the concept of “erosion by deference,” a phenomenon under which civilian leaders often unintentionally weaken civilian control and strengthen the military’s power in politics by delegating “policymaking prerogatives to the members of the military profession.”

Elected leaders in democracies sometimes behave in ways that intentionally weaken democratic civilian control of the military to advance their own personal, partisan, or electoral interests. At the extreme, civilian leaders can even attempt to politicize the military as part of an effort to overthrow a democratic regime and retain personal power using a self-coup or “autogolpe.” Nevertheless, civilian attempts to politicize the military in a democracy may—and usually do—fall short of such extreme measures.

Although this form of politicization requires at least the tacit cooperation of all or part of the military, it is distinct in that civilian leaders must actively court or co-opt military leaders or groups to their cause. Consequently, I describe this type of politicization not as military activism but as politicization by civilian activation. Civilian leaders may, of course, attempt
to use politicization by activation without military cooperation, but the success of this approach depends on a willing military partner.

Politicization by civilian activation does not strive to pit civilians against the military; rather, it attempts to build a civil-military coalition to help civilian leaders expand or retain their political power. Civilian activation thus shares a similar logic to—and many characteristics of—coup-proofing attempts that Erica De Bruin describes as counterbalancing. In a democratic context, many civilian behaviors designed to politicize the military may at first appear relatively benign. Over the long term, however, political activation likely weakens democratic accountability, harms military strength and effectiveness, and undermines the proper functioning of governmental processes. The next section proposes a framework to better identify and understand the impact of politicization by civilian activation.

**Politicization by Civilian Activation**

Assessing the health of a nation’s civil-military relationship can be a frustrating and difficult exercise. Measurement challenges abound, and the difficulty of operationalizing relevant concepts as variables for large-N, cross-national analysis is significant. Although exciting new research in the subfield is exploiting new methodological techniques, much civil-military research focuses on binary or simplistic measures of coup occurrence. Coups are important phenomena to understand, but the variation in civil-military power dynamics that fall short of coups is vast, and even the strategic logic of different coups can vary significantly.

Politicization, whether by civilian activation or military activism, is no different. In fact, assessing both the extent and the consequences of politicization can be exceptionally challenging. Even identifying when politicization by civilian activation occurs can be a daunting task. Elected political leaders often provide alternative explanations to legitimate or excuse their behavior and to provide themselves plausible deniability. We can neither observe their intent nor definitively know whether norms should prevail in specific situations, especially in circumstances where competing values conflict with one another.

But surely political scientists trying to identify politicization can do better than lawyers who apparently remain satisfied to recognize pornography “only when they see it.” Indeed, previous work by Samuel Finer, Risa Brooks, and other scholars has already created useful typologies to help us better understand military activism and assess its attendant risks. In that spirit, I offer a definition of civilian activation as well as four concepts to help identify and assess its extent in practice.
Civilian activation is an attempt by civilian political elites to court or co-opt the military for personal, partisan, or electoral gain. Ultimately, politicization by activation can be difficult to identify with certainty, but four concepts can help us better understand its occurrence and extent: frequency, gravity, messaging, and political context.

**Frequency**

Even rare incidents of politicization by civilian activation can have serious consequences. Nevertheless, the frequency of statements or behaviors designed to draw the military into partisan, electoral, or personalistic political fights is likely an indicator of whether politicization represents opportunism in response to extreme circumstances or whether it is a more intentional effort. Although political elites sometimes find that all or part of the military is sympathetic to their goals, the act of courting a military ally or normalizing politicized behavior often takes sustained effort in a democracy.\(^ {17}\) Eroding the strength of nonpartisan norms and values opposing political violence usually occurs over time as well, though the initial acts can sometimes be explosive.

**Gravity**

The most important factor when assessing the extent and severity of politicization by civilian activation is the activity’s consequences. Except in cases of direct physical threat to the government or its citizens, however, even the gravity of politicized actions can be difficult to recognize. Indeed, one criticism facing scholars who have advocated for civil-military norms that restrict the involvement of retired generals and admirals in campaigns—including me—is that these actions continue but have not created more visible harm. While my research suggests these actions do have tangible, though sometimes difficult to identify, impacts on the practice of democracy and civilian control, there nevertheless is value in distinguishing between those actions and norms that are more threatening or less threatening to democratic practice.

To better identify the gravity of civil-military breaches, I propose the two-by-two framework presented in figure 1. This framework consists of two dimensions, one distinguishing between an action that is symbolic or coercive and another differentiating between foreign and domestic behaviors. These two dimensions create four somewhat malleable boxes that I identify as “Sword and Shield” (Symbolic-Foreign), “Potted Plant” (Symbolic-Domestic), “Wag the Dog” (Coercive-Foreign), and “Repressive Force” (Coercive-Domestic).\(^ {18}\)
Activities in both coercive boxes represent significant danger for a democracy, with the domestic use of “repressive force” more directly threatening to a nation even though diversionary wars can have devastating consequences for the target state and unintended secondary effects on the democracy. Based on existing research, however, it is less clear that civilian activation using senior military officers as “potted plants” is, in fact, worse than their use as “swords or shields” in foreign policy debates. Existing research shows that statements by military officers tend to be more effective in shaping foreign policy decisions than they are in shaping perceptions about domestic elections.¹⁹

The question of how closely these four boxes are connected is unclear. We do not know whether acts of symbolic politicization increase the likelihood that a leader will attempt to use coercive threats or force for personal or partisan reasons. We also cannot predict how the public or the military will acquiesce to a leader using these tactics. Of course, executive leaders and other political elites often have wide legal authorities that they can abuse. When combined with the types of messaging discussed in the next section, it can make civilian attempts to court or activate military activism difficult to recognize.

**Messaging**

How civilian elites talk about the military in public can sometimes help us identify overt attempts to activate politicized military support. Even so, their ability to mask their intent using subtle language or imagery makes it difficult to decipher when behavior is innocent and when actions have nefarious intent. Particularly when the democratic norms supporting a non-partisan military are strong, civilian leaders have an incentive to make their efforts to activate military support as benign and nuanced as possible—at
least at first. In this way, civilian elites can retain plausible deniability. They can argue they are not attempting to pull the military into politics while still trying to benefit from association with a popular military or from support from within the ranks. Consequently, civilian activation involving the use of overt public statements and actions to draw the military into partisan or electoral politics will usually indicate a more severe threat—or at least extreme ignorance of the value of democratic norms. When civilian elites no longer feel even the need to veil their attempts to politicize the military, it is a signal of danger.

**Political Context**

Scholars assessing the extent and severity of politicization by civilian activation should also consider the political, societal, and cultural contexts in which civilian elites’ words and actions occur. Since the early 1990s, there has been a recurring debate about whether civil-military relations in the United States are “in crisis.”

Scholars have rarely defined what they mean by crisis, leaving wide latitude for disagreement. For my purposes, I think of a civil-military crisis as an open door for the use of the military for “repressive force.” More precisely, I define a civil-military crisis as the circumstances under which the only impediment to the coercive use of the military for domestic partisan or electoral purposes is the self-restraint of civilian elites or military leaders. Self-restraint is not the same thing as saying that norms create an obstacle to repressive force. As Hugh Liebert and I have argued elsewhere, norms are more than individual self-restraint: they rely on shared values and beliefs about appropriate behaviors and on the belief that norm violators will be caught and face credible punishment for their actions. This definition rests on the assumption that some leaders with power can be trusted to show restraint some of the time but that no leaders with power can be trusted not to abuse their power all the time.

When assessing the political context in which civilian activation occurs then, scholars should focus on whether this type of politicization is accepted among the political elite, broader society, and military culture. Do the members of these groups, individually or collectively, possess both the will and the tools with which they can credibly enforce punishment for politicization by civilian activation? If they do not, civilian elites face a permissive environment and an open door. In other cases, where shared values and norms are strong and threats of punishment are credible, the door for civilian activation may be locked tight. Under these circumstances, we should see few leaders even attempt a nudge. But in many cases, the
door may be slightly cracked, tempting ambitious civilian elites to test how much resistance they will face if they try to widen it just a bit.

By more precisely defining civil–military crisis as I have, I hope to encourage more constructive and thoughtful engagement on the merits of my argument and fewer knee-jerk reactions asserting that a democracy’s civil-military relations are not in crisis. It is far more useful and productive to develop prior indicators of civil-military threats to a democracy when the door can still be locked than it is to describe the conditions that allowed someone to barge through the door after the fact.

Assessing the Trump Era

As noted at the outset of the previous section, it is unlikely that any one of these indicators will be of much value when used in isolation except in the most egregious cases. However, by analyzing each of them in relation to one another, I hope this framework might bring more rigor to debates about the threats that politicization by civilian activation poses in democratic states.

Next, I offer a brief assessment of President Donald Trump’s civilian activation attempts in relation to those of other modern presidents. Admittedly, the empirical record available remains spotty. This analysis is somewhat speculative and will need to be corrected as the historical circumstances of Trump’s unusual term in office become clearer. Even so, by applying my framework for politicization by civilian activation to this case, I hope to demonstrate its utility and provide a more rigorous account of Trump’s civil-military record than has been done to date.

Frequency

To assess the frequency with which President Donald Trump attempted politicization by civilian activation, I used LexisNexis Academic Universe to collect data on national news coverage. Although I collected these data using an established method from the political communications literature, they should be treated somewhat skeptically. US media consumption has changed significantly, even since 2010, with a strong plurality of Americans now obtaining their news from online sources. Even so, they represent a plausible initial measure of the quantity of substantive news coverage devoted to civil–military relations since the beginning of the Clinton administration. National news coverage of civil–military conflict is not necessarily the same thing as civilian activation. Nevertheless, I use it here as a measure that is easily comparable across administrations while also encouraging future researchers to develop more sophisticated measures that might better capture this concept (table 1).
Table 1. Media sources analyzed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media Source</th>
<th>Start Date</th>
<th>Years Available</th>
<th>Average Number of Articles per Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>26 November 1997</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td>CBS</td>
<td>1 February 1990</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>1.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>CNN</td>
<td>1 January 1990</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>1.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>USA Today</td>
<td>3 January 1989</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2.2</td>
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<tr>
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<td>20 January 1981</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>1.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wall Street Journal</td>
<td>20 January 1981</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Searches were conducted from the first date available through 20 January 2021. The last column shows the average number of articles found only for the first two keyword searches depicted in figure 2.

Figure 2 displays the results for both keyword searches, with the results of the searches focused on US civil–military relations or civil–military conflict depicted in the top panel and searches for the narrower term “civil–military crisis” or “civilian–military crisis” on the bottom. The results across both sets of search terms are largely consistent, with the same ranking from most to least articles for Trump, Clinton, Bush, and Obama.

Figure 2. Average number of civil-military articles per year, by administration
Mentions of both “civil-military relations” and “civil-military crisis” during the Trump administration were more than twice as high as they were during Clinton’s tenure, the second highest. It is notable, however, that the Clinton total represents at least a slight undercount since data for two sources was not available until well into his tenure. These early years in the Clinton administration were especially conflictual, including high-profile fights between Clinton and Colin Powell, then the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Clashes involved the controversial “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, civil-military conflict over the political decisions related to the Battle of Mogadishu in Somalia, the appointment of several general officers Clinton’s opponents characterized as politicized, and Clinton’s highly publicized jog with Gen Barry McCaffrey after a White House staffer allegedly insulted the general. Moreover, there were several extraordinary instances of active duty military officers inappropriately demeaning or criticizing Clinton in public. The most notorious case involved Maj Gen Harold Campbell, who was forced to retire after he described Clinton as “draft-dodging,” “pot-smoking,” “womanizing,” and “gay-loving” during a 1993 speech to a military audience at an Air Force base in the Netherlands. Indeed, it was during this period that Richard Kohn’s article in the National Interest, “Out of Control,” popularized the phrase “civil-military crisis” among scholars of American civil-military relations. Given that only two of nine sources were not available during a small portion of the Clinton era, however, it seems extremely unlikely their inclusion would more than double civil-military news coverage or cause Clinton to pass Trump.

George W. Bush and Barack Obama engaged in civilian activation at times, especially when using senior military officers to sell the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan or military audiences as convenient backdrops for high-profile speeches. Nevertheless, these data match the popular intuition that neither administration saw the steady drumbeat of stories recounting attempts by either president to politicize the military that occurred during the Trump administration. Nor did either Bush or Obama grab headlines with insults directed against serving or retired senior officers in the way that Trump did during the 2016 presidential campaign, when he proclaimed during a debate that the “generals have been reduced to rubble” or suggested that he knew “more about ISIS than the generals do.” These insults—and others captured in the more than 43 civil-military stories written each year during the Trump administration—almost surely would damage civil-military trust, but they might not represent a serious risk on
their own. In the next section, I assess the gravity of civilian activation that occurred during the Trump administration.

**Gravity**

A full assessment of all the incidents involving politicization by civilian activation during the Trump administration is too ambitious a task for this article. Arguably, however, there is at least one incident that might potentially fall in each quadrant represented in figure 1, though evidence about Trump’s intent in taking these actions remains incomplete and inconclusive. Table 2 displays a partial list of cases of civilian activation that Trump instigated, or participated in, during his presidency.28

**Table 2. Partial list of civil-military incidents during the Trump administration**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Civil-Military Incident</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Dec 2016</td>
<td>Trump appoints Mattis as secretary of defense (and other retired generals to key posts)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 Jan 2017</td>
<td>Trump signs controversial immigration order in Pentagon’s Hall of Heroes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Feb 2017</td>
<td>At MacDill Air Force Base, Trump tells military audience they supported him during election</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Feb 2017</td>
<td>Trump selects active duty lieutenant general H. R. McMaster as national security adviser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 Feb 2017</td>
<td>Trump invites wife of deceased Navy SEAL William “Ryan” Owens to State of the Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 Feb 2017</td>
<td>Trump blames senior military leaders for death in special operations raid in Yemen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 May 2017</td>
<td>McMaster defends Trump’s disclosure of sensitive intelligence with Russian officials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 Jul 2017</td>
<td>Trump urges sailors to lobby Congress on health care and other topics during troop visit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 Sep 2017</td>
<td>Trump calls NFL players kneeling disrespectful to the military and veterans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Oct 2017</td>
<td>Trump places responsibility for Niger raid on military leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Jan 2018</td>
<td>Trump asks Mattis and Joint Chiefs for military parade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Aug 2018</td>
<td>Retired admiral William McRaven publishes op-ed criticizing Trump’s leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 Oct 2018</td>
<td>Trump orders 5,200 active duty troops and 2,000 National Guard to southern border</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Nov 2018</td>
<td>Trump says military should shoot rock-throwing migrants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Nov 2018</td>
<td>Trump attacks McRaven on Fox News; suggests he should have caught bin Laden faster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Dec 2018</td>
<td>Mattis announces resignation in protest, giving two months notice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 Dec 2018</td>
<td>Trump demands Mattis instead depart by 1 January 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 Dec 2018</td>
<td>Trump signs MAGA hats for US troops during troop visit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 Dec 2018</td>
<td>Retired general Stanley McChrystal criticizes Trump as immoral and dishonest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Jan 2019</td>
<td>Trump tweets that McChrystal is a “Hillary lover!” that was “fired like a dog by Obama”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Jan 2019</td>
<td>Trump falsely claims he fired Mattis and criticizes Mattis on Afghanistan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 May 2019</td>
<td>Trump pardons Army lieutenant Michael Behenna, who murdered an Iraqi prisoner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 May 2019</td>
<td>Airmen on the USS Wasp wear “Make Aircrew Great Again” patches to Trump speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 May 2019</td>
<td>Trump denies knowledge of request to keep USS John S. McCain out of sight during troop visit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Jul 2019</td>
<td>Expanded use of military equipment and troop participation in July 4th parade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Oct 2019</td>
<td>Trump tweets “We train our boys to be killing machines, and then prosecute them when they kill!”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Jim Golby

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Civil-Military Incident</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>29 Oct 2019</td>
<td>Trump tweets attack on Alexander Vindman after testimony; calls him “Never Trumper”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Nov 2019</td>
<td>Trump pardons Mathew Golsteyn, reverses the demotion of Edward Gallagher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 Dec 2019</td>
<td>Trump invites Eddie Gallagher to Mar-a-Lago for election fundraiser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Jun 2020</td>
<td>DC National Guard supports as police violently clear Lafayette Square; helicopter intimidation incident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Jun 2020</td>
<td>Trump conducts photo op at St. John’s church; Gen Mark Milley joins him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Jun 2020</td>
<td>20,400 National Guard troops from 28 states arrive in DC; 82nd Airborne positions 700 troops outside DC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Jun 2020</td>
<td>Retired admiral Michael Mullen, Mattis, and other retired military leaders criticize Trump</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Jun 2020</td>
<td>Secretary Mark Esper states he does not support using the Insurrection Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Jun 2020</td>
<td>Trump rejects Pentagon plan to rename military bases named after confederate generals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Jun 2020</td>
<td>Gen Mark Milley apologizes for attending photo op with Trump</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Aug 2020</td>
<td>Marine guards featured on camera during Republican National Convention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Sept, 2020</td>
<td>Trump accuses generals of advocating “endless wars” for personal financial gain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Sep 2020</td>
<td>More than 200 retired generals and admirals endorse Trump</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Oct 2020</td>
<td>Trump runs ad featuring Joint Chiefs chairman Gen Mark Milley without permission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 Nov 2020</td>
<td>Trump pardons former Army lieutenant general Michael Flynn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Dec 2020</td>
<td>Washington Times ad urges Trump to declare martial law and have “military oversee a re-vote”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 Dec 2020</td>
<td>Flynn asserts Trump can declare martial law and use military to rerun election during Newsmax interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Dec 2020</td>
<td>Flynn visits Oval Office and allegedly previews plan, but Trump rejects it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Jan 2021</td>
<td>Trump speaks at stop the steal; mob attacks the Capitol to disrupt certification of election results</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are, however, many almost indisputable cases where Trump used senior military leaders or other military personnel as “swords or shields” to attack his political opponents or to defend himself or his administration from criticism. During the 2016 Republican National Convention, for example, retired lieutenant general Michael Flynn served as Trump’s sword, criticizing Hillary Clinton and presiding over chants of “Lock Her Up” from the crowd. Trump also used senior military leaders as a shield following raids in Yemen and Niger during which US military personnel died in early 2017, distancing himself from the decisions that put military personnel in harm’s way and laying the blame on military leaders. The former president took a similar public tact over time as he increasingly became dissatisfied with the Afghanistan policy he endorsed in August 2017.

Similarly, there are several high-profile cases of Trump using senior military leaders or personnel as “potted plants” for domestic political purposes. These instances were designed specifically to bolster public support for the president or his policy decisions by associating them with military symbols or personnel. During Trump’s first visit to the Pentagon as presi-
dent, he signed executive orders related to his controversial immigration policies in the Pentagon’s Hall of Heroes, using military imagery to further legitimate his policies. Perhaps most notably, Trump also asked the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen Mark Milley, to follow him across Lafayette Square on 1 June 2020. This occurred just after the area had been cleared with force by a combination of federal agents and local police with the support of National Guard personnel so that Trump could participate in a photo op at Saint John’s Church. General Milley apologized for participating in the event several days later, stating, “I should not have been there. My presence in that moment and in that environment created a perception of the military involved in domestic politics.” Trump also granted clemency to several service members accused of war crimes and then used them to support fundraising efforts. Although these were the highest-profile events that fall into the “potted plants” quadrant, they are far from the only such incidents. Indeed, Trump frequently referred to “my generals” and “my military” while also expressing the “love” he believed soldiers felt for him.

In addition to this symbolic politicization, critics also accused Trump of using, or threatening to use, the military for coercive purposes against US citizens. Several controversial cases of coercive uses of the military warrant careful consideration. One is Trump’s October 2018 decision to deploy active duty military personnel to the southern border. Others are the 1 June 2020 deployment of National Guard personnel in Washington, D.C., and Trump’s subsequent consideration of the Insurrection Act. Trump’s decision to send approximately 5,200 active duty soldiers and 2,100 National Guard personnel to augment Customs and Border Protection (CBP) personnel was contentious, with critics accusing him of “using the military to concoct a threat that will galvanize Republican and swing voters days before a highly contested election.” Military deployments designed to distract or generate approval right before an election, or “wagging the dog,” are notoriously hard to identify and even harder to prove. Absent inside information or access to historical records, reaching a definitive conclusion about this case is probably premature. There are, however, strong reasons to suspect Trump may have used—or at least magnified and publicized—the southwest border deployment for electoral purposes rather than for pressing national security aims. Although Bush and Obama both authorized election year deployments, Trump’s actions differed in important ways: timing, threat level, scale, and composition.

Unlike previous deployments, Trump’s border mission—originally named Operation Faithful Patriot before Secretary Mattis later removed
the label due to its “political overtones”—occurred in the last month before an election that Trump referred to as a “referendum” on his performance in office. Trump ordered the deployment on 26 October, less than two weeks prior to the 6 November 2018 congressional midterm elections. Ostensibly, the threat at the border was the arrival of caravans of hundreds or, in some cases, thousands of civilians fleeing gang violence or poverty in the Northern Triangle of Central America. Although Trump claimed that terrorist groups may have infiltrated these groups on numerous occasions, there was no publicly available evidence to substantiate those claims. Moreover, according to reporting in late October, US Army North’s own assessment was that only approximately 1,400 of the 7,000 migrants in southern Mexico would ever reach the US southern border.

Given the expected threat and anticipated numbers, it is unclear why a deployment of more than 7,000 total troops—with another 7,000 designated as a “surge force”—was necessary. The decision to send active duty troops rather than only National Guard personnel, as Bush and Obama had done before, may have reflected either the lack of capabilities within the CBP or the desire to move troops visibly and quickly. But the size, scale, and composition of the deployment were considerably different than previous border missions, which had been billed as stopgap measures until the CBP could recruit and train additional personnel. Although there is no definitive proof that Trump engaged in this activity for purely electoral purposes, at a minimum he exaggerated the threat and used the deployment as a primary part of his political messaging prior to the 2018 midterm elections, a topic I discuss in more detail in the next section.

Trump’s flirtations with the Insurrection Act and advocacy for aggressive tactics by the National Guard and federal agents he dispatched to Portland were threatening and potentially coercive, especially when directed at US citizens. Unlike the case of the 2018 border deployment, however, there is some question whether Trump possessed the legal authority to invoke the Insurrection Act and use either National Guard or active duty troops to support domestic law enforcement during the Black Lives Matter protests over the summer of 2020. Although the Posse Comitatus Act does place limitations on the use of federal troops for law enforcement missions, however, scholars agree that few practical obstacles stood in Trump’s path had he decided to invoke the Insurrection Act.

Perhaps the clearest uses of military personnel for potentially repressive purposes occurred on 1 June 2020. Both the involvement of National Guard personnel to assist in clearing Lafayette Square before Trump’s photo op and the use of a National Guard helicopter to intimidate protestors crossed
a clear line into coercive violence. Although there is little evidence that Trump directly gave orders that led to either of these specific events, multiple reports suggest this approach was the result of a compromise after the president proposed even harsher measures. Nevertheless, the bulk of existing evidence suggests Trump did attempt to activate the military to “wag the dog” on the border and for “repressive force” against protestors, though he faced opposition in the latter case that may have prevented Trump from going even further. As I discuss next, Trump’s public messaging suggests that the former president was inclined to use military personnel even more aggressively in Washington, D.C., Minneapolis, and Portland.

**Messaging**

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to conduct a comprehensive comparison of Trump’s civil–military rhetoric to that of his predecessors, this section illustrates Trump’s approach. The former president’s messaging on important civil–military issues often differed in substance and tone when compared to other modern presidents. Moreover, even his most ardent supporters argue that Trump’s brash rhetorical style distinguishes him from other American politicians.

The overt way that Trump talked about members of the military as part of his political constituency is one of the most distinctive aspects of the 45th president’s approach to civil–military relations. Trump’s comments during the January 6th “Stop the Steal” rally that occurred just before the mob attacks on the Capitol are one clear example. After calling “third world” elections more honest than the US election, Trump pleaded, “And I’d love to have, if those tens of thousands of people would be allowed, the military, the Secret Service, and we want to thank you, and the police, law enforcement. Great. You’re doing a great job. But I’d love it if they could be allowed to come up here with us. Is that possible? Can you just let them come up, please?”

Even in a charitable reading of Trump’s speech, a call by the president to have military members join him at a partisan, political rally—particularly one dedicated to overturning the election he alleged had been stolen—would have been remarkable. This statement was hardly unique. Although Trump’s rhetoric was unusual in many ways, my analysis focuses on the three areas in which Trump’s civil–military rhetoric differed the most from that of his predecessors: border deployments, domestic missions, and military partisanship and voting.

Table 3 displays illustrative comments by Trump and previous US presidents when speaking about similar—though not identical—topics.
The third topic, military partisanship and voting, is not listed in the table because there simply is no corresponding precedent in the modern era.

Table 3. Presidential comments about domestic uses of military force

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic: Border Missions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>President</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trump (2018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bush 43 (2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obama (2010)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic: Racial Protests or Riots</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>President</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trump (2020)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ike (Little Rock, 1957)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LBJ (1967, Detroit)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bush 41 (1992, LA Riots)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A comparison of Trump’s public messages about his controversial border deployment and his predecessors’ statements for similar deployments
suggests a striking difference. As the quotes in table 3 indicate, George W. Bush and Barack Obama took a far more measured approach when discussing the border threat, emphasizing the temporary nature of the deployment and the limitations placed on the military’s activities. Trump’s overt statement that he intended to militarize the southern border stands in stark contrast to Bush’s approach. Moreover, his controversial statements about loosened rules of engagement against rock-throwing migrants diverged significantly from both previous missions and were never implemented after internal pushback from civilian and military leaders at the Pentagon.  

Trump's comments about the use of the National Guard or active duty military for protest and riot support were even more inflammatory, especially when placed in historical context. Presidents Dwight Eisenhower, Lyndon Baines Johnson, and George W. Bush all invoked the Insurrection Act to federalize the National Guard or to deploy federal troops during their presidencies. In their public statements, however, each man distinguished between legitimate peaceful expression of rights and mob violence; emphasized the unity of the nation; and noted reluctance to act, emphasizing that they were doing so only in the face of dire circumstances. During his public comments about domestic protest and potential use of the military under the Insurrection Act, Trump took a more belligerent and divisive tone while displaying no evidence that he was reluctant to use the military on domestic soil.  

Trump’s brash messaging style on issues related to the military represented a striking change from other recent presidents. Although presidents often use military audiences as the backdrop for policy speeches, few have made overt partisan references in front of military audiences. Presidents have, however, trumpeted policies aimed at the military or veterans. Obama, for example, highlighted veteran- and military-focused policies his administration planned to prioritize the first time he addressed the Veterans of Foreign Wars in 2009. He also rolled out his new Afghanistan policy at the United States Military Academy at West Point before an audience of cadets in 2009. And since at least Ronald Reagan, all presidents have expressed their love and gratitude for the military in somewhat hyperbolic language.  

Trump continued this trend of voicing his affection for the military, but he also was not hesitant to express his belief that the military loved him back or that the military was a key partisan political ally of his. During his first visit to MacDill Air Force Base in February 2017, Trump began his remarks by stating, “We had a wonderful election, didn’t we? And I saw
those numbers, and you liked me, and I liked you. That’s the way it worked.”

Whereas previous presidents often pandered to military or veteran audiences in nuanced language, Trump instead jumped over the line and claimed their support. This change was a significant one and represented either a misunderstanding of, or complete disregard for, norms prohibiting partisan political activity by uniformed military personnel. Andrew Exum, a Pentagon political appointee during the Obama administration, stated, “[Trump’s actions are] part of a pattern. Whether it is the Memorial Wall at the C.I.A., or the Hall of Heroes at the Pentagon, he is using institutions that have previously been walled off from politics to generate political support for some of his more contentious policies.”

**Social and Political Context**

The frequency, gravity, and messaging involved in Trump’s attempts to politicize the military represent an escalation of trends, even though such strategies had been developing for several decades. But the political and social circumstances in which Trump engaged in these actions facilitated his behavior while also ultimately guaranteeing that he would not be able to politicize the military in more nefarious or dangerous ways.

Trump recognized, perhaps before others did, that conditions were set that might allow him to activate the military in ways that might benefit him politically. Although the door was not wide open, Trump noticed a crack and decided to push. This crack was formed by mutually supporting political, social, and military trends. On the political front, partisan polarization and negative partisanship had increased the likelihood that elected political leaders and citizens would judge Trump and other political leaders based on partisan politics rather than on whether they were upholding American democratic values or civil–military norms. A growing body of research has demonstrated that partisan considerations often overrule these normative concerns. Consequently, Trump was able to avoid sanction for his civil–military transgressions because his co-partisans in Congress and conservative media protected him even as Democratic elites called for active and retired military officers to constrain Trump’s policies as the “adults in the room.”

At the same time, elevated public confidence in the military relative to other federal institutions made the military an attractive political target. It also made members of the public more accepting of military involvement in partisan and electoral politics, at least when the military appeared to be supporting their own party’s political goals. In this context, President
Trump enjoyed wide latitude to push the limits of civil-military convention with little fear of pushback from members of his own party.

General Milley’s participation in the photo op on June 6th and the images of National Guard personnel supporting the police who cleared Lafayette Square did trigger opposition from another group, however: retired military generals. The public backlash Trump faced from retired admirals and generals following these events was unprecedented. Several days later, Trump’s own Secretary of Defense, Mark Esper, also expressed his opinion that it would be inappropriate and unnecessary to invoke the Insurrection Act or use active duty troops to support law enforcement. It is unclear whether, or how far, Trump would have pushed efforts to use the military domestically absent this opposition.

As the election approached, both Trump and Biden attempted to use both active duty military personnel and retired officers and veterans as potted plants to support their presidential campaigns. Despite intense pressure from all quarters, however, Milley and other senior military leaders on active duty kept a relatively low public profile while also reinforcing the military’s commitment to uphold its nonpartisan norm and not interfere in the election.

The perception that the former president might use the military to intervene in the election process became even more pronounced as the inauguration approached, however. After Trump pardoned his former national security advisor, retired general Michael Flynn, Flynn stated in an interview that the president could use the military to rerun the election. He also expressed these ideas directly to President Trump, though there are no indications that the president entertained it as a serious possibility. Nevertheless, all ten living secretaries of defense—both Republicans and Democrats—signed an unprecedented joint letter on January 3rd that warned against use of the military to interfere with the election results.

**Looking Ahead**

Politicization of the military by civilian activation unfortunately looks likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, the framework presented here—centered on the concepts of frequency, gravity, messaging, and political context—will provide a more rigorous tool for assessing the dangers civilian activation poses.

Several important questions remain unanswered or underexplored. Although I attempted to demonstrate the utility of this framework by analyzing civilian activation during the Trump administration, it remains uncertain whether the criteria I described are independent or interactive.
In Trump’s case, these four concepts seem to be highly correlated. Additionally, a better understanding of whether and how the types of civilian activation described in figure 1 relate to one another could give scholars and practitioners greater insight about how to define civil-military norms in clear and enforceable ways. If coercive types of politicization are separable from symbolic types, scholars might focus on how to refine civil-military norms in ways that best avert these types of behaviors. If increased symbolic activation ultimately leads to greater coercive activation, however, scholars might need to educate the public about how these small incidents can cumulatively pose substantial threats. Rebuilding civil-military norms that support democratic values is an urgent task.

Further theoretical development and empirical analysis would also help us understand how civilian activation and military activism are related. Although there is often a great deal of uncertainty, savvy military and political leaders are likely to pay close attention to the signals from other elites and from broader society. As I noted earlier, Trump sensed the door was cracked and decided to push. However, it appears he may have overestimated the willingness of senior military leaders to go along with his plans. Future research could attempt to broaden these concepts for application to other democracies for comparative analysis to help us better gauge when civilian leaders might sense an opportunity to attempt to forge a political alliance with the military.

Although the initial analysis I presented suggests that Trump’s politicization was unique and troubling, there is little evidence that the social and political conditions that gave Trump the opportunity to push the door open in civil-military relations have fundamentally changed. In fact, the door may have inched open even farther. The longer-term trends of negative partisanship, low confidence in civilian leaders and overconfidence in the military, and weakening norms within the military itself likely will continue unabated. Even the public opposition from retired generals and admirals that appeared to constrain Trump may help normalize military activism in lasting ways. This type of criticism can be especially damaging to the trust necessary for effective civil-military cooperation. Absent a concerted effort by political and military leaders to recommit to democratic values and reestablish weakened civil-military norms, the framework for civilian activation described in this article may unfortunately become even more applicable in the future.

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Notes


6. Huntington, 85.

7. Finer, Man on Horseback.


15. In a colorful opinion (Jacobellis v. Ohio, 1964), Supreme Court justice Potter Stewart did not establish formal criteria to identify pornography. Instead, he used only the memorable phrase “I know it when I see it.”


28. A complete list of more than 75 civil-military incidents during the Trump era are available upon request from the author. Although I do not discuss all cases in detail, there are several cases that don’t neatly fit my framework. Trump frequently insulted several retired generals and even some currently serving generals. Trump’s tweets and public statements to this effect likely were intended to marginalize his critics and paint them as partisan or self-interested actors.


43. Wormuth, “U.S. Military’s Border Enforcement Role.”


51. The top words repeated in Trump’s tweets about the summer 2020 protests were thugs, looting, radical, ANTIFA, riot, anarchy, terrorists, weak, fake news, lowlife, losers, takeover, violence, fools, and chaos. In his tweets specifically referencing the use of the National Guard or other federal forces, Trump repeated the following words: domination, law and order, success, and strength.


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