

*From Huntington to Trump: The Civilian Military Imperative for Foreign Policy*

*Professionals*

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Robert ZIMMERMAN<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:**

This article offers an introduction to Civilian-Military relations for the foreign policy professional (including members of the armed forces). Its author contends that the study of some aspect of Civilian Military relations is warranted for officers seeking command positions that involve analyzing a foreign nation's institutions. He further argues that examining the state of a military's professionalization may help analysts to better understand the country they are studying, while allowing them to develop more salient recommendations for the leaders to whom they report. Lastly, he comments on the changing state of Civilian Military relations taking place in the United States under the Administration of President Donald J. Trump.

**Resumen:**

*Este artículo presenta una introducción a las relaciones civilo-militares para los profesionales del ámbito de la política exterior (incluyendo a los miembros de las fuerzas armadas). Su autor asevera que los oficiales que buscan puestos de mando que impliquen un análisis de las instituciones de una nación extranjera deben estudiar las relaciones civilo-militares. También argumenta que examinar el estado de profesionalización de una fuerza militar permite comprender de mejor manera el país estudiado, y presentar mejores recomendaciones a los líderes a los que rinden cuentas. Finalmente, hace un comentario sobre el estado cambiante de las relaciones civilo-*

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<sup>1</sup> The author is a U.S. Department of State Foreign Service Officer on assignment to the Inter-American Defense College in Washington, D.C. In that capacity, he served as an assistant professor, teaching civilian-military relations and military-media relations, from 2016 to 2018. Professor Zimmerman obtained a B.A. from the University of Maryland in 1983, and a juris doctorate from the University of Baltimore in 1986. After practicing public interest law for several years, he became a Foreign Service Officer in the former U.S. Information Agency in 1993, where he specialized in public diplomacy. Professor Zimmerman transferred to the U.S. Department of State in 1996. The views expressed in this article do not reflect the policies of the U.S. Government or the U.S. Department of State.

*militares que existen en Estados Unidos bajo la administración del presidente Donald J. Trump.*

**Keywords:** Civilian Military Relations, Samuel Huntington, Morris Janowitz, Department of Defense, Professionalism, Donald J. Trump, H.R. McMaster  
**Palabras claves:** Relaciones Civiles Militares, Samuel Huntington, Morris Janowitz, Departamento de Defensa, Profesionalismo, Donald J. Trump, H.R. McMaster

## Introduction

How do governments control a military that is both strong enough to defeat or deter a foreign enemy, while ensuring it never turns its guns “the other way,” against the state its members are sworn to defend? Here lies a conundrum that has vexed scholars since the days of the ancient Greek philosophers.<sup>2</sup> The question is still being asked today, even in countries enjoying strong civilian-led governance institutions.<sup>3</sup>

Latin American nations, viewed at least in the past as inordinately coup d'état prone, have largely made peace both externally within the region and internally over the past 25 to 30 years. Their armed forces have returned to the barracks. Constitutions have been amended in many instances to ensure that for the most part, the Western Hemisphere's armed forces will no longer be used as supreme arbiters in national politics. The region's military is seen as valued participants in peace support or disaster relief operations beyond the borders they are sworn to defend. The traditional principles of civilian-military relations are now firmly held tenets of democratic rule in the Western Hemisphere, in the view of this author.

In the wake of the election President Donald J. Trump in 2016, the United States has seen a historically high number of senior active duty and ex-military officers serving in “weighty” policymaking positions. These appointments do not suggest to this author that any sort of coup is in the offing, be it silent or overt. Their outsized presence

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<sup>2</sup> Eliot Cohen, *Supreme Command* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Or, as one scholar wrote in 1996, “in the American context...220 years of apparently successful civil-military relations have obscured its importance.” Peter Feaver, “The Civil-Military Problematique: Huntington, Janowitz, and the Question of Civilian Control,” *Armed Forces and Society* 23, (Winter, 1996): 169.

in the current administration, however, is a departure from history. Scholars must now reconsider the tenets of the theory of civilian military relations, which include discouraging active duty or ex-general officers from holding such jobs.

A few years ago, while serving abroad, this author heard a story about a diplomat from a Large Asian Country who cabled his foreign ministry in search of the definition of “soft power.”<sup>4</sup> The response from headquarters: “Soft power is ‘no power.’” This answer came as no surprise. For decades, even leaders of a Large North American Country seem to have expressed similar feelings.

Whether professional diplomats and academics like it or not, no small number of elected representatives favor using the military as an instrument of diplomacy. This is particularly true of the United States. Politicians with backgrounds in business seem particularly so inclined.

The business community and military leadership even share terminology and tactics. Who in government aside from the military can offer more “bang for the buck” (emphasis on *bang*)? What do you do with your inventory if you are not going to use it, particularly weaponry nearing the end of its useful life? Can an item be put to productive use beyond the shelf life imagined at the time of manufacture, such as the B-52 bomber? Could it instead be sold to a foreign purchaser, as is the case with the F-15 fighter? This storied aircraft of the 1970s is no longer found in the U.S. Air Force inventory but has been purchased and put to productive use by Israel.

Corporate principals and their military counterparts often face similar dilemmas. Both may be pressed to satisfy immediate or quarterly demands. Military action, or the threat thereof, will produce some sort of tangible result, often in short order, and satisfy a demand for action. World conferences and regional summits with their laborious fighting over words, punctuation, and outcome documents simply cannot compete.

At present, U.S. armed forces spending figures surpass those of its next six or seven largest competitors – combined.<sup>5</sup> The Trump Administration agenda calls for increased funding for the military.<sup>6</sup> So long as military expenditures remain a large

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph Nye, *Bound to Lead, The Changing Nature of American Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> “U.S. Defense Spending Compared to Other Countries,” Peter G. Peterson Foundation, April, 2017, [https://www.pgpf.org/chart-archive/0053\\_defense-comparison](https://www.pgpf.org/chart-archive/0053_defense-comparison).

<sup>6</sup> Jeremy Herb, “Military budget stuck between a wall and a hard place,” *CNN Politics*, August 25, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/08/25/politics/military-budget-wall-shutdown/index.html>, reporting

component of the U.S. budget, economics as well as strategic considerations suggest putting it to some use.<sup>7</sup>

*Even the ideas of military strategists ranging from Sun Tzu to Clausewitz and Colin Powell have been adapted into a small industry of business and leadership texts, designed to help the reader harness his or her warrior instinct in the battle for the big seat.<sup>8</sup> When was the last time a CEO talked publicly about the collected wisdom of Prince Metternich...let alone George F. Kennan, at least in print?*

For these reasons, a grounding in Civilian-Military Relations, should be an essential element of foreign affairs education. Aside from offering a greater understanding of our own armed forces, Civilian-Military Relations may allow us to better assess indigenous foreign militaries and determine their strengths and weaknesses. Do we sell or grant equipment and weapons to particular foreign militaries, or would professional training serve them better – and be a more sound investment for the donor? Civilian-Military Relations presents a framework for analyzing the issues and fostering better-informed decision-making.

### **The Origins of Civilian-Military Relations**

The public and more than a few military and other foreign policy professionals sometimes refer to Civilian-Military Relations as the “civilian affairs” component of a peacekeeping force and the on-the-ground interaction involving competing civilian and military points of view.<sup>9</sup> Civilian-Military Relations is better viewed as an analysis of

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that the Trump Administration has proposed \$603 billion for base national security spending, \$72 billion over what current law allows.

<sup>7</sup> As a famous diplomat once said, “what’s the point of having this superb military that you’re always talking about, if we can’t use it?” Madeline Albright, *Madam Secretary: A Memoir* (New York: Hyperion Books, 2003), 182.

<sup>8</sup> Colin Powell and Tony Koltz, *It Worked for Me: In Life and Leadership* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> I observed this in September 2016, as a professor of civilian military relations to a class composed of colonels, navy captains, and police officials of comparable rank from about 16 Western Hemisphere armed forces and law enforcement agencies. Some had served as peacekeepers and/or in combat zones.

how and why the *highest* levels of civilian and military leadership behave, work together, and compete.<sup>10</sup> To help clarify these distinctions, all would do well to read “Supreme Command,” a classic by the Johns Hopkins University/SAIS Professor Eliot Cohen.<sup>11</sup> He presents the field’s most compelling analysis of how Lincoln, Churchill, Ben-Gurion, and Clemenceau managed admirals and generals while successfully guiding their countries through existential threats.

Though contemplation of the roles of state and constabulary date to ancient Greece, Professor Samuel Huntington is the name indelibly associated with the contemporary study of this academic discipline. Many may be familiar with the Harvard academic’s popular works, such as “Clash of Civilizations,” and “Who Are We?” which focus on the challenges America faces from diffuse world leadership, a changing population, and globally-oriented institutions.

In the view of this author, Huntington’s 1958 treatise “The Soldier and the State” is the cornerstone text of Civilian-Military Relations. The Harvard professor’s long and detailed treatise contains the groundwork for the contemporary study of the field.<sup>12</sup> Reader be warned: “The Soldier and the State” wants for slogans on the order of “war is the continuation of politics by other means,” and “every battle is won before it is fought.” Huntington’s opus is essential reading for anyone who wishes to understand the field.

“The Soldier and the State” suggests to this author, an attorney by trade, that military and civilian leaders are parties bound by an unwritten but enforceable agreement. Much reminded me of the contracts curricula required of first-year law school students. Huntington implies that military and civilian leaders must give “consideration,” in the legal sense, and have an obligation to perform. Moreover both have a duty to avoid impeding the other’s performance.<sup>13</sup> Herein lays one of the critical challenges infringing on the relationship.

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<sup>10</sup> Alternatively “...the relation of the officer corps to the state.” Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and the Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1957), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Cohen, *Supreme Command*.

<sup>12</sup> Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*.

<sup>13</sup> “Objective civilian control...produces the lowest possible level of political power with respect to all civilian groups,” implying that the military is expected to leave the job of governance to a country’s civilian leadership. Huntington, 84.

As the military sees things, change flows in one direction - theirs, and in the military's view, often unfairly and without the *elected* leadership fully appreciating the consequences. On occasion, armed forces brass have all but accused their civilian counterparts of breach of agreement when they impose societal values on a less-than-pliant military.<sup>14</sup> In Latin America's coup d'états days, it was the generals who frequently assessed civilian rulers as being incapable of governing, and justified coups d'états on this basis.<sup>15</sup> Noteworthy examples involving the U.S. military include the integration of the armed forces in the 1950s; the opening of positions to women that were traditionally reserved for men; and the acceptance of LGBT soldiers.<sup>16</sup>

The professional military virtually anywhere operates under a set of values and standards that differs from the civilian society it has pledged to serve. The officer corps, and often the non-commissioned officer ranks, view efforts to superimpose civilian norms over its own as a breach of the contract it has with the elected leadership. As its membership sees it, how often does government demand self-sacrifice, honor, and a sense of duty from those it governs?<sup>17</sup>

For their part, civilian leaders contend that they impose society's values on the military because democracy mandates that they do so. The breaches *they* fear are the consequences of an armed forces, which, as an institution, does not reflect its country's values or its ethnic composition.<sup>18</sup> Civilian leaders generally contend that an effective military must appear familiar, rather than alien, to the country it has pledged to protect. In short, the elected leadership may view the relationship as a partnership in which the military, to its chagrin, is a junior partner whose performance is nonetheless key and binding.

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<sup>14</sup> Lt. Gen. (ret.) William "Jerry" Boykin, "Jerry Boykin – Secretary Mattis: Focus on War-Fighting, Ditch the Social Engineering," *Breitbart News*, May 30, 2017, <http://www.breitbart.com/big-government/2017/05/30/boykin-secretary-mattis-focus-on-war-fighting-ditch-the-social-engineering/>.

<sup>15</sup> Gregory Weeks, "Civilian Expertise and Civilian-Military Relations in Latin America," *Journal of Latin American Policy* 3 (November, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> Walter Douglas Bristol, Jr. and Heather Marie Stur, *Integrating the U.S. Military: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation Since World War II* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, n.d.).

<sup>17</sup> Benjamin Hart, "Mattis Tells Troops: 'Hold the Line, Amid Divisions in U.S.,'" *New York Magazine*, April 26, 2017, <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/08/mattis-tells-troops-hold-the-line-amid-divisions-in-u-s.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Bristol and Stur, *Integrating the U.S. Military*, 101-102, citing the President's Committee on Civil Rights (the Fahy Committee), whose October 1947 report discussed "a wide discrepancy between America's ideals of equality and freedom for all and its racial policies in practice." This same report warned "...the Communists could use racism in America as fruitful propaganda."

Huntington argued that military officers were professionals in every sense of the word, not unlike their counterparts in law or medicine.<sup>19</sup> However, their profession, “the management of violence,” is a specialty reserved onto them. Since officers are usually paid less than their civilian counterparts, their motives boil down to honor and patriotism rather than economics, which really sets them apart from much of society.

On the other hand, the armed forces has a corporate character, with rank determining who does (and gets) what. Norms and values ideally are standardized worldwide. The American military officer’s *professional* training and ethos should resemble those of his or her counterparts in Europe and the developed states of Asia and the Americas as they closely as they do for surgeons from these regions.<sup>20</sup>

The late Harvard professor postulated two key Civil-Military Relations theories he labeled *objective* and *subjective civilian* control.<sup>21</sup> In brief, the former directs domestic political leaders to allow their military counterparts to adhere to political neutrality. Issues internal to the armed forces, such as promotions and performance standards, should be decision-making prerogatives for its leadership alone. Huntington viewed the armed forces officer corps as professionals. Again, they should be educated and held to the standards of their field, as is the case with doctors and lawyers, among others.

Huntington preferred objective to *subjective* civilian control. The latter mandates greater civilian oversight. The late Harvard professor feared subjective control would demoralize and weaken the military through its subjugation to societal norms rather than its own ethos and traditions.<sup>22</sup> He clearly opposed civilian government enmeshing itself into routine military matters, such as personnel decision-making.

Readers of “The Soldier and the State” should bear in mind its date of publication. The norms and standards of 1958 would be deemed unworkable and objectionable to much of the U.S. body politic today. At the time, Africa’s first decolonized and independent country was just one year old; much of Asia and the Middle East was subject to colonial rule or sway. Though Latin America offered a rich environment for Civil-Military Relations study, Huntington focused instead on Europe.

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<sup>19</sup> Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, 7-11.

<sup>20</sup> Huntington, 13.

<sup>21</sup> Huntington, 80-85.

<sup>22</sup> Huntington, 84.

The later author and professor's motivations are obvious. World War Two had ended only 13 years earlier and the Cold War was in full swing. University enrollment ballooned with ex-servicemen, thanks to the G.I. Bill of Rights. Many had served in Europe or Asia.

University social science departments grew to accommodate a population for whom the dream of a college education was now in reach. In an effort to understand better the authoritarian Soviet Union, scholars must have felt a need to take a hard look at the defeated Axis powers. The German military was viewed as a heavyweight among the world's professional forces. Yet this had little if any effect on its role in the barbarities of the Second World War; nor did it stem the creation and extensive use of the politicized Waffen S.S., the Third Reich's parallel military armed force.<sup>23</sup>

### **The Benefits of Military Professionalism**

The principle of civilian control of the military is one of the U.S. Constitution's core precepts. The "power to raise armies," and declare war are duties reserved for the United States Congress. Furthering this point, a January 2010, small but telling study of Marine Corps War College students demonstrates the extent to which the officer corps has adopted civilian norms – or better: it is trained to avoid actions which would have civil, legal or criminal consequences were they committed by civilians in their world.<sup>24</sup>

This query solicited military participants, all officers from the U.S. and two foreign nations, about the circumstances under which they would disobey a lawful order.<sup>25</sup> Without exception, those surveyed said they would do so under circumstances ranging from an inability to live with obeying the order to the prospect of mission failure or needless death. Others cited an inability to look at themselves in a mirror as a consequence of carrying out an objectionable order.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Cohen, *Supreme Command*, 260. "The units of the Waffen S.S...repeatedly turned in an outstanding fighting performance."

<sup>24</sup> Andrew Milburn, "Breaking Ranks: Dissent and the Military Professional," *U.S. Army*, October 26, 2010, [https://www.army.mil/article/47175/breaking\\_ranks\\_dissent\\_and\\_the\\_military\\_professional](https://www.army.mil/article/47175/breaking_ranks_dissent_and_the_military_professional).

<sup>25</sup> Milburn.

<sup>26</sup> Milburn.



Nearly 60 years have passed since the publication of Huntington's Civil-Military Relations treatise. It is still the field's gold standard, though a large crop of authors followed who sought to improve upon, or poke holes in, the late Harvard professor's work. In 1970, the sociologist Morris Janowitz focused on how fealty to tradition and regulation undermined the U.S. armed forces during the Vietnam era.<sup>27</sup> Writing under the backdrop of this U.S.-Southeast Asian conflict, Janowitz observed what he called a "clash of generations" within the military, which he criticized for trying to protect itself from a changing American society.<sup>28</sup> Another important Civil-Military Relations scholar, Duke University's Peter Feaver, is noteworthy for his work on the ways in which the military evades diktats from its civilian leaders.<sup>29</sup>

Foreign policy professionals who evaluate how well military commanders respond to civilian government supremacy may find value in the paradigm which appears in Samuel Finer's 1962 classic "The Man on Horseback."<sup>30</sup> The British academic provided scholars with a model linking domestic military intervention with instability and underdevelopment.<sup>31</sup> Though conditions (and countries) have changed in the decades that followed, Finer's work is still useful to those who assess a government's coup risk or potential for instability.<sup>32</sup>

The late British scholar was concerned with military uprisings, which were a frequent occurrence during the period he researched and published "The Man on Horseback." Finer concluded that armed forces-led intervention in civilian political affairs were an entirely natural state of affairs. As he put it, "Instead of asking why the military engage in politics, we ought to surely ask why they ever do otherwise... (They) possess vastly superior organization. And they possess arms."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait* (New York: The Free Press, 1971).

<sup>28</sup> Janowitz, xviii.

<sup>29</sup> Feaver, "The Civil-Military Problematique."

<sup>30</sup> Samuel Finer, *The Man on Horseback: The Role of the Military in Politics* (London: Transaction Publishers, 1962).

<sup>31</sup> Finer.

<sup>32</sup> Note: The author of *this* article disagrees with a proposition linking a country's poor level of economic development to a propensity for coup d'états. For example, the standards of living and literacy rates in Uruguay, Argentina and the United States did not vary radically during the early and middle periods of the twentieth century. The two southern cone states enjoyed strong middle classes, arguably through the 1980s. Though the causes of the coups these countries experienced exceed the scope of this article, they could arguably be attributed to weak civilian governance institutions, among other causes, rather than economic development.

<sup>33</sup> Finer, 5.

Finer links military professionalism to a reduced risk of a coup d'état. According to a view of the world which he encapsulated in a paradigm, advanced democracies constitute the most stable form of government (e.g., Britain, North America, Australia, and Scandinavia).<sup>34</sup> Military professionalism is a given in such countries. The late British academic became increasingly skeptical of states whose armed forces enjoyed either a direct or even an indirect role in governance. Finer identified countries whose militaries wielded power with a hidden hand, and others that made themselves indispensable to the party in power. Worse still were generals who could stack cabinets or force changes in government, either through blackmail or via circumscribed constitutional power.

States that are subject to direct military rule occupy the bottom rung of Finer's paradigm. Armed forces professionalism, he infers, is weakest or absent in such countries. A state dominated by its military will, at some point, need to confront its domestic enemies, peacefully or otherwise. In a world in which the smartphone is often mightier than the sword, a violent confrontation between the two can be broadcast in real time. A country's armed forces might be successful on the streets – and lose the battle of public opinion, the fight that often determines which side has ultimately won an internal struggle.

### **Civil-Military Relations as Balancing Act**

Recent events proved Finer prescient. Consider the Middle East uprisings often referred to as the Arab Spring, which took place in the beginning of this decade, and whose consequences we continue to observe. Weak civilian governance characterized the regimes most affected by these events. This may explain why Tunisia, which had relatively viable civilian governance since its independence from France, has avoided the instability and open turmoil that continues to plague states throughout the region.

Militaries or constabularies are expected to bring the greatest strength to bear when societal forces collide, and civilian casualties can easily turn an initially sympathetic public against them. Allied foreign governments run risks by appearing

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<sup>34</sup> Finer, xvi.

linked to armed forces which deploy troops to confront their own citizenry. The bad press ostensibly friendly states may garner can be harsh, especially where a history of weapons sales and mutual military cooperation exists.

A foreign state connected to a military involved in a national insurrection should expect to confront the enmity of the most active segments of the international NGO community. These organizations are often media savvy. Civilians who may one day replace a domineering armed forces leadership will usually return their troops to the military barracks; perhaps put its leaders on trial; and reexamine relations with the armed forces-led regime's foreign allies.

A prescient Morris Janowitz, writing in the 1970s, discussed how the print and electronic media influences changed the American polity's traditional deference to the armed forces and its opinion about how it handled the Vietnam War.<sup>35</sup> Neither he nor such scholars as Huntington and Finer could have imagined the role social media platforms, Twitter and Facebook, now have on the conduct of military institutions and practices. By rendering visible previously unseen practices, conduct, and even real-time events on the battlefield, these ubiquitous devices are ensuring the predominance of subjective over objective control.<sup>36</sup>

Finer's analysis, like the subject of military professionalism itself, is not immune to criticism. The armed forces of the former Soviet Union or China may not be the professional equal of their Western counterparts; but the regimes were stable for decades. China remains so. On the other hand, decades-long NATO membership and professionalism-oriented training failed to dissuade rogue elements of the Turkish armed forces from attempting to topple President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2016. Indeed, the Turkish leader may owe his life to a smartphone interview he gave during the height of the crisis, on a device he borrowed.

Governments directly ruled by the armed forces are not likely to endure long, Finer tells us.<sup>37</sup> Yet engaging less stable regimes remains a foreign policy prerogative for advanced democracies. With Finer's conclusions in mind, states occupying the higher rungs of his societal development paradigm would do well to identify promising

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<sup>35</sup> Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier*, xxxviii.

<sup>36</sup> A U.S. officer and former student who wishes to remain anonymous described to this author the challenge of keeping younger soldiers under his command from using smartphones to broadcast battlefield events in near-real time to families and friends. "They couldn't stop themselves," as he put it.

<sup>37</sup> Finer, *The Man on Horseback*, 4.

midlevel officers for participation in professional exchanges that highlight the benefits of civilian control of the military.<sup>38</sup>

Exchange programs involving military professionals have enabled thousands of officers to both learn and even experience the benefits of armed forces professionalization.<sup>39</sup> Participants can study how their contemporaries elsewhere gained legitimacy while avoiding being called upon to manage the economic contractions and societal upheavals that all states inevitably confront. They can also deliberate over how armed forces intervention in domestic politics seldom ends well for the military as an institution. Examples abound, from Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s, to the attempted coup d'état in Turkey in 2016.

### **Are These the Praetorians Our Parents Warned Us About?**

A primer on Civilian-Military Relations would no longer be complete without discussing the Administration of U.S. President Donald J. Trump and its selection of U.S. cabinet secretaries and agency heads for policymaking positions. Many scholars oppose conferring such appointments on active duty or even retired career military officers, arguing that a defense secretary or national security advisor be a “buffer” between the executive branch and the armed forces.<sup>40</sup> The professional soldier, they imply, might offer one-sided views or prove too loyal to his or her branch of the service.<sup>41</sup> As some writers see things, politicians or academics are better suited for such jobs.

Civilian-Military Relations thus became a timely issue in the United States once the Trump Administration named two retired generals to serve as cabinet secretaries,

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<sup>38</sup> The Inter-American Defense College, an organ of the Inter American Defense Board, offers an example of an effective institution predicated on international academic exchanges.

<sup>39</sup> This author presently works in one such program at the Inter-American Defense College in Washington, D.C. This institution offers an M.A. in security studies to as many as 70 military officers, police officials, and civilians defense ministry employees from about 16 Western Hemisphere countries. Faculty and staff are similarly diverse.

<sup>40</sup> Wright Smith, “The President’s Generals, *Harvard Political Review*,” *Harvard Political Review*, January 30, 2017, <http://harvardpolitics.com/united-states/the-presidents-generals/>.

<sup>41</sup> David Pion-Berlin, “Defense Organizations and Civil-Military Relations in Latin America, *Armed Forces and Society*,” *Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society* 35, no. 3 (April 2009): 567.

while selecting a third as the President's National Security Advisor. One of the three, James Mattis, continues to hold the role of Defense Secretary. General John Kelly, an ex-Trump Administration Homeland Security Secretary, has since become the President's Chief of Staff. In that position, he is arguably the most influential figure in the United States Government after the Commander in Chief, since he controls access to his boss.

An active duty military officer currently holds the influential National Security Advisor position in the Trump Administration. U.S. Army Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster replaced retired Lieutenant General Michael Flynn, who resigned after serving 24 days in office. The incumbent is in the unusual position of being able to argue against or even overrule the decisions made by the four-star generals and admirals who technically outrank him.

As of this writing, no evidence suggests the military backgrounds of any of the President's "three key generals," have had a negative influence on their performance. Actually, they may be *uniquely* suited to the positions they currently encumber. All appear to be held in high regard by the Commander in Chief.

Promises to change policy and upend established norms were a hallmark of Donald J. Trump's campaign to hold the office of President of the United States. In the field of Civilian-Military Relations, he has made his mark. In July 2017, the President announced via his Twitter account that transgender service members would no longer be allowed to serve in the military. Media reporting suggests that President Trump did not discuss his position on the issue while campaigning, though he had met with members of the U.S. conservative movement who opposed the presence of such individuals in the U.S. armed forces.

The President based his tweet – and change in established military policy – on the grounds that the armed forces "cannot be burdened by the tremendous medical costs and disruption that transgender soldiers in the military would entail."<sup>42</sup> At least in its initial stage, the ban's scope failed to state whether current transgender service members would be forced out of the military, in addition to a prohibition on recruiting new members from that community.

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<sup>42</sup> Paul Waldman, "Policy by Tweet: Trump's Transgender Ban Moves Forward," *Washington Post*, August 24, 2017.

The President's tweet took America's military brass by surprise.<sup>43</sup> A follow-up memo from the White House gave Defense Secretary James Mattis six months to prepare to implement the ban.<sup>44</sup> However, the retired Marine Corps General directed the Defense Department to maintain its current policy on transgender, pending a panel review of the matter, an action that appeared to run counter to what his boss, the President, wanted – and *ordered*. On October 30, 2017, a Federal District Judge in Washington, D.C. temporarily blocked the proposed ban, on the ground it would likely violate the U.S. Constitution.<sup>45</sup>

President Trump's public comments on the legal proceedings against U.S. Army Sargent Bowe Bergdahl constituted another departure from established Civil-Military Relations doctrine. Bergdahl walked off his post in Afghanistan in 2009 and was subsequently taken captive by Taliban forces, who held him prisoner for about five years. Afghan insurgents released the U.S. Army Sargent in 2014, as part of an agreement they made with the Obama Administration that led to the exchange of five Taliban leaders then in United States custody in its Guantanamo Bay prison.

Bergdahl underwent court martial proceedings in 2017. Traditionally, senior U.S. leaders have refrained from commenting publicly on juridical cases or hearings involving soldiers subject to court martial.<sup>46</sup> According to lawyers for Bergdahl, President Trump made disparaging remarks about the soldier on at least 45 occasions while campaigning, and remarked, "In the old days when we were strong and wise, we [would] shoot a guy like that."<sup>47</sup>

Bergdahl's lawyers used President Trump's comments on the case to contest the fairness of the proceedings that could have garnered their client a sentence of life-in-prison. U.S. military justice rules prohibit commanders from either giving the appearance or actually exerting influence over proceedings -- an edict that extends to

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<sup>43</sup> Waldman.

<sup>44</sup> Waldman.

<sup>45</sup> G. Robert Hillman, "Mattis Allows Transgender Troops to Serve as Pentagon Studies Trump's Ban," *Politico Magazine*, August 29, 2017.

<sup>46</sup> David Phillips, "Judge Blocks Trump's Ban on Transgender Troops in Military," *New York Times*, October 30, 2017.

<sup>47</sup> Mark Lander, "Obama Aide Defends Remarks on Bergdahl's 'Honor,'" *New York Times*, June 6, 2014. Note that the subject of the article, former National Security Advisor Susan Rice, stated that the just-freed sergeant served with "honor and distinction," following his release from Taliban captivity. Testimony from the Bergdahl trial raises doubts about that conclusion.

the Commander in Chief.<sup>48</sup> In line with custom, President Trump refrained from discussing the case until the trial concluded and sentencing occurred. However, the presiding judge “ruled that he would consider Mr. Trump’s comments as mitigating evidence at sentencing.”<sup>49</sup> The tribunal concluded with a sentence that allowed the defendant to avoid imprisonment, a verdict the President labeled “a disgrace.”<sup>50</sup>

The U.S. military’s emphasis on professionalism was on full display in the wake of the “Unite the Right” rally on August 11-12 in Charlottesville, Virginia. With the goal of dissipating any ambiguity about where they stood, the chiefs of practically every armed forces branch issued public statements condemning racism and intolerance.<sup>51</sup>

While a military foray into the U.S. domestic political arena would normally be rare and frowned upon, in this case, the American brass praised publicly and widely. The national mood was best summed-up in an editorial published a few days later in the small but influential “Washington Jewish Weekly” newspaper, which covers the nation’s capital and its suburbs. Entitled “A Lesson in Morality from the Military,” the outlet’s editorial board praised the U.S. armed forces leadership for putting itself on record as having inexorably linked America’s values with a commitment to civil rights, and in unyielding opposition to extremism.<sup>52</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The author believes that the Trump Administration has laid to rest one key tenet of Civil-Military Relations: the proposition that active or retired career military officers should not hold senior-most policy-making positions. The underlying concerns about bias or a myopic point of view, while potentially legitimate, do not appear to be borne out by the facts on the ground.

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<sup>48</sup> This is technically referred-to in the U.S. military as “undue command influence.”

<sup>49</sup> Meaghan Keneally, “President Trump Slams Bowe Bergdahl’s Sentence: ‘Complete Disgrace,’” *ABC News On Line*, November 3, 2017. <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/president-trump-bowe-bergdahl/story?id=50912155>.

<sup>50</sup> Richard J. Opiel, Jr., “Bowe Bergdahl Avoids Prison for Desertion; Trump Calls Sentence a ‘Disgrace.’” *New York Times*, November 3, 2017.

<sup>51</sup> David Phillips, “Inspired by Charlottesville, Military Chiefs Condemn Racism,” *New York Times*, August 16, 2017.

<sup>52</sup> Editorial Board, “A Lesson in Morality from the Military,” *Washington Jewish Weekly*, August 29, 2017.

Actually, the current White House cabinet lineup demonstrates the advantage of having career military officers occupying senior policy-making positions. As noted above, these generals have substantial experience with the Washington, D.C. political environment and on the battlefield. Media reporting suggests that they have expressed their differences privately with the Commander in Chief, “pushed back” artfully on occasion, and have kept their jobs. Examples of prior defense secretaries acting similarly must surely be rare. In the case of the current U.S. President, his actions tell us he respects his military subordinates, even when media reporting suggests their views are at variance.

The contemporary senior military officer in the United States, like his or her counterpart in many other nations, is no stranger to the academic realm. The path to the senior ranks in the American Armed Forces appears to mandate a year of study in a military staff college. It is not impossible to find officers with two masters degrees under their belt. A few have earned doctorates.

In the present day, most professional military services that offer at least a few of its personnel the opportunity to study for a masters degree. The Washington, D.C.-based Inter-American Defense College offers an M.A. in security studies to at least two officers from every Organization of American States member country. Approximately 16 states avail themselves of the opportunity, and several exceed their annual two student quota. About ten percent of the students at this institution join the staff for second year, to serve as mentors to an incoming masters degree class that may number 70 students. Other Washington, D.C.-based military staff colleges also permit foreign military students to participate in seminars or in degree-granting programs.

The United States military is one of the few employers that offers *full-time* graduate level university training to those it employs. Soldiers selected to pursue advanced degrees may do so while receiving their salary and other standard benefits. Advancement may inure to those who complete their academic work.

The possibility of studying at reduced or no cost is arguably one of the U.S. military’s key recruiting tools. Some officers may become professors for temporary periods in military academies and staff colleges, during various stages of their careers. Others may serve in armed forces think-tank equivalents. Unlike many of their counterparts in academia, officers can complement their academic backgrounds with experience managing large numbers of people and complex budgets.



A few U.S. officers are known to have penned scholarly articles or texts while in uniform, among them Lt. General McMaster, the Trump Administration's National Security Advisor as of this writing. His book "Dereliction of Duty" analyzed U.S. leadership during the Vietnam War.<sup>53</sup> McMaster assigned low grades to a number of policy makers of the period. Moreover, he did not spare senior members of his own branch of the U.S. armed services from criticism for their failure to properly "manage up" the executive branch of government at the time.

Anyone whose duties involve political and military affairs (or who seek to go that route) would do well to become acquainted with the authors who dominate the field of Civil-Military Relations. I believe this holds especially true for diplomatic professionals who analyze foreign governments. Moreover, civilians lacking military experience may certainly gain a better understanding of the posture taken by their colleagues in the armed forces. The situations we face have parallels in the past; all of us would do well to see which approaches our predecessors took, successful or otherwise.

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<sup>53</sup> H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997).

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