Key Takeaways from the CAPSTONE Civil-Military Relations Module

Richard H. Kohn, list from “Six Myths about Civil-Military Relations in the United States,” Unpublished


Peter Feaver, “Elephants in the Room: Mattis was the Best Secretary of Defense Trump Could Have Had,” Foreign Policy, February 12, 2019, https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/02/12/mattis-was-the-best-secretary-of-defense-trump-could-have-had/

CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS
Refresher Summary of CAPSTONE Module

- **Bottom Line Up Front**: Civil-military relations has always challenged American leaders, but the relationship has been, with rare exceptions, manageable. The difficulties today are distinctive but not altogether different from many in the past, and can be overcome, as has been true historically, by building trust relationships.

- **Definitions**: Two baskets of issues: (i) interactions of senior leaders in the making of strategy/policy/operations and (ii) connections between the military and society, including institutions as well as people/populations.

- **At the top of Government** in Strategy, Policy, Operations: Sources of Misunderstanding, Tension, Distrust, and Conflict
  - A paradox of recent history: “No coup, no problem”?
  - Different people, different worlds, different cultures
  - Civilian control: The right to be wrong
  - What, if anything, is different now?
  - “Best Military Advice”
  - Speak up but not out
  - Congress: co-equal branch in civ-mil
  - Resignation: a real problem for trust

- **The Military and Society** (The “Gap Issue”)
  - Paradox of the “gap:” Public support/confidence vs. “the 1% and 99%”
  - Public confidence
  - Retired military...
    - ...and presidential campaigns
    - ...and policy disputes
  - A “contract”? The military budget and a civil-military balance “down range”

- **Wrap Up**: So . . . Why Does the System Work, and How Can We Help it Work Better?
  - More cooperation than conflict?
  - Military subordination, civilian control
  - Primacy of the Constitution, rule of law
  - Military Professionalism
  - Trust: the universal solvent
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SIX MYTHS ABOUT AMERICAN CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

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**Definition**: Civil-military relations is the entire set of relationships and interactions between the military and society: individually, group, and institutional.

For our purposes here, the most important portions are the relationships and interactions between topmost flag officers and political leaders in the White House, Congress, OSD/Service secretariats, and other executive branch organizations and agencies.

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**First myth**: Everything is, and always has been, fine in the relationship at the top between the most senior military and the most senior political officials in the government.

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**Second myth**: Civilian control of the military is safe, sound, and inviolate, i.e., “no coup (or open insubordination), no problem.”

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**Third myth**: There exists a clear, bright line between military and civilian responsibilities, with the corollary that the military should push back against orders that promise huge disaster or needless deaths, or are professionally untenable, or are immoral or unethical in a senior officer’s view, even to the point of speaking out publicly or either threatening or actually “resigning” [asking to be reassigned or retired] rather than carrying out the orders.

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**Fourth myth** (two versions): The military is non-partisan and a-political; the military is partisan and politicized.

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**Fifth myth**: Americans “love” their military; and (corollary) there exits some “bargain,” “covenant,” or “contract” between the military and the American people.

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**Sixth myth**: Civilian control is understood by both sides in the relationship, and by the American people.
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CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS: CIVILIAN CONTROL OF THE MILITARY
Richard H. Kohn

By the time that the United States became an independent nation, civilian control of the military was already firmly established as an axiom of government. On the basis of history and political theory, Americans considered standing armies to be instruments of despotism as well as defense. With their weapons and discipline, soldiers possessed the means to overthrow a government and destroy liberty. In the state constitutions written after independence, in the Articles of Confederation, and in the Constitution of 1787, the generation that founded the United States explicitly subordinated military forces to elected officials so that all the great decisions relating to war and peace, to raising and organizing armies and navies, to governing them internally, and to their use and support, rested in the hands of the representatives of the people, or those appointed by them to administer military affairs.

The system adopted at the end of the eighteenth century derived from English practice and American colonial experience. At the time of settlement in the early 1600s, military forces belonged to the crown. During and after the English Civil War of the 1640s, when Parliament sought control of the armed forces, executed the king who resisted this claim, and was then replaced by a military dictatorship under Oliver Cromwell, civilian control broke down. The Stuart monarchs who were restored to the throne after 1660 reasserted military command but seemed to threaten arbitrary rule by using the new standing army as their instrument. In the constitutional settlement of the Glorious Revolution of 1688-89, Parliament took control of military finance and discipline in what proved to be a watershed for English liberty. Henceforth, civilian control rested on dividing authority over the military between Crown and Commons so that neither could rule by force: Parliament would approve the existence of a military establishment through its power of the purse (appropriating money annually) and by passage of a mutiny act to govern the internal order of the forces. The monarchy retained command, deployed the regiments and ships, and raised and administered them in peace and in war.

In the century before independence, the colonies experienced a similar struggle between legislative and executive. Legislatures created militias or authorized the raising of volunteers or conscripts, voting the funds and setting the conditions of service by law, while command and administration rested with the governors. Gradually, using mostly the power of appropriation, the assemblies increased their influence when governors, desperate for forces for defense against European and Native American foes, compromised their authority in return for money, supplies, and permission to raise men. The governors, many of whom were military officers, wielded great influence, but fear of military rule was muted because local defense depended on militia or citizen volunteers—the adult white male population, officered by members of the local elite who rarely had reason to attempt to overturn the established order. During the struggles with France beginning in 1689, however, conflict with the British army, friction with the population, and the regulars' disdain for provincial forces all reinforced colonial antipathy to royal regular forces. By the time of the Revolution, the standing army had become a symbol of repressive authority and arbitrary rule. The Boston Massacre in 1770, when redcoats fired into a threatening mob, killing five civilians, and the imposition of military government in Massachusetts under the Coercive Acts in...
1774, engraved a century's concern with controlling military force into the American political tradition, confirming the belief that the safest way to defend a free people was to rely on citizen-soldiers.

During the Revolutionary War, military and civilian leaders took care to ensure civilian control of the forces raised. As commander of the Continental army, George Washington conspicuously deferred to Congress's authority. Throughout the war, he treated state and local officials with respect, working to minimize conflict. Even during the most desperate periods, there was no serious consideration of suspending civilian rule. And at war's end, in spite of intense bitterness over the prospect of demobilization without back pay or promised pensions, the officers at the main cantonment near Newburgh, New York rejected a call to revolt or resign en masse in the so-called Newburgh "Conspiracy." Washington's intervention in the crisis, the refusal of the officers to defy civilian authority, and Washington's solemn return of his commission to Congress a few months later, began a national tradition of loyalty and subordination that has characterized American military forces ever since.

The Constitution of 1787, following English and American custom, provided for civilian control by distributing authority over the military to the three branches of government and to the states, so that none could use force to seize power. Congress could "raise and support Armies," and "provide and maintain a Navy," and specify their organization and governance, but appropriations for the army were limited to two years, forcing every new Congress to consent to land forces. As commander in chief, the president would command and deploy the nation's armed forces and conduct war once Congress declared it, but Congress would approve all the president's nominations of officers and even, if desired, their assignments to duty. While Congress could "provide for organizing, arming, and disciplining the Militia," the states appointed officers and retained authority over the forces unless called into federal service. Because the military operated under law, and the national government acted directly on the citizenry rather than the states as under the Articles of Confederation, the judiciary could hold members of the military personally accountable. Finally, supposing that an armed citizenry provided the ultimate safeguard against an army overthrowing republicanism, the Second Amendment guaranteed "the right . . . to keep and bear Arms," preventing the government from destroying the militia by disarming the population.

For the next century and a half under this constitutional arrangement, the nation's military forces remained subordinate to civilian authority in spite of frequent tension and occasional conflict. Geographic separation from Europe and disentanglement from great power rivalry allowed the United States to keep its regular military forces very small and devoted largely to exploration, patrolling against Indians and pirates, and other constabulary activities. Defense rested upon mobilizing the population behind a shield of coast artillery and naval forces, with the regulars providing training, leadership, and weapons for the citizen forces raised. Congress exercised its powers under the Constitution in laws specifying the size, shape, organization, character, funding, and function of the armed forces (including in part the state militias), periodically expanding and contracting the forces, authorizing new installations and weapons, investigating problems, and generally dictating the broader policies and procedures under which the military operated. On a day-to-day basis, civilian control became an administrative matter, carried out by the secretaries of war and of the navy, who directed the armed services with the help (and sometimes over the
resistance of) senior military officers commanding forces or maintaining bureaus in the two cabinet departments.

Most important, civilian control functioned successfully because it was assumed by the public and internalized within the armed forces. Belief in the rule of law, combined with a reverence for the Constitution as the legitimate foundation of civic society, meant that any open disobedience would fail and invoke punishment—or plunge the country into crisis. As part of their professionalization during the first half of the nineteenth century, the officer corps of the navy and army began to disassociate themselves from partisan politics, viewing the armed services as the neutral instruments of the state and themselves as soldiers or sailors loyal to the government regardless of which party held sway. During the political upheavals of Reconstruction and the labor disorders of the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when the army ruled the South and was dragged into riot duty and law enforcement, Congress (with officers' blessing) in the Posse Comitatus Act (1878) prohibited the use of the regular army to execute the laws or to act under the command of local or federal officials other than the military chain of command as specified in the Constitution or law. The willing subordination of a nonpartisan military establishment has assured civilian supremacy down to the present day.

Yet beneath a seemingly placid surface, the peacetime relationship between the military and civilian leadership was filled with discord and struggles for influence that sometimes flared into open conflict. After the War of 1812, strong secretaries of war and of the navy had to establish the supremacy of their offices in confrontations with uniformed leaders. Top army generals fought with cabinet secretaries and with Congress over issues as personal as rank and as significant as their own authority, or the organization and funding of their armed service. Occasionally, the senior general and secretary were not even on speaking terms. Agitation by naval officers in the 1880s, by reform-minded army officers in the 1890s, and by army airpower advocates in the 1920s and 1930s were catalysts in the modernization of both services, but at the same time provoked schisms inside the officer corps and in Congress and the executive branch. In the case of Billy Mitchell, the controversy led to a spectacular trial for insubordination.

Between the Civil War and World War II, officers grew gradually more estranged from American society, which they viewed as undisciplined, unprincipled, and preoccupied with commercialism. In peacetime, the armed forces suffered lean budgets, pork barrel expenditures, skeletal forces, deteriorating equipment, and low combat readiness. But at the same time the increasing participation of the United States in world politics, and the growing complexity of war-making, particularly logistics and operations, gave professional officers greater influence in military affairs. And the maturation of the armed services into cohesive institutions, configured on the basis of doctrines of war fighting and attuned to their own organizational needs, gave their advice—now institutionalized in staffs and agencies in Washington—more authority.

War tended to mute the friction, but it never disappeared. After a weak beginning in the War of 1812, the dominance of the president in wartime was established by Presidents James K. Polk and Abraham Lincoln: managing mobilization, overseeing strategy, negotiating with allies and enemies, and even on occasion ordering operations. Except for a brief effort to oversee the conduct of the Civil War, Congress deferred to presidents, supporting requests for larger forces, new weapons, increased appropriations, and expanded executive authority. Disagreement between
military and civilian leaders, largely over strategy, generally remained out of public view. Except for rare instances, such as the struggle between Lincoln and Gen. George B. McClellan over taking the offensive during the early years of the Civil War, military commanders acceded to presidential wishes even when opposed to a particular policy or course of action. Presidents understood how quickly wartime heroes could become presidential aspirants (as numerous generals from Andrew Jackson through Dwight D. Eisenhower have done) and how difficult they could be to manage, which contributed to the tension. Polk, Lincoln, William McKinley, and Woodrow Wilson kept a tight rein over the direction of their conflicts, Wilson personally making overall policy while leaving the details of implementation, tactics, and fighting to the military.

The mobilization for World War II that began in 1940 spread the influence of the military more deeply into the fabric of American society than ever before. When the government, applying its World War I experience and plans readied during the interwar years, took control of society by drafting men into the armed forces, converting production to munitions, controlling raw materials and wages and prices, and harnessing virtually all activity to achieving victory over the Axis, the military became powerful arbiters in American life. Franklin D. Roosevelt never ceded any authority; he directed the war effort in broad outline and sometimes in small detail. But the needs of the military forces and the judgments of the uniformed leadership framed many choices and extended deeply into foreign policy and economic life. In ways both obvious and subtle, the power and prestige of the professional military reached a zenith in the American experience.

The creation of a large standing military establishment in the 1950s to contain and deter the Soviet Union while forestalling nuclear war overloaded the traditional procedures by which civilian control functioned. The military institutions were simply too large, their activities too diverse, their technology too complex, and their influence too pervasive for effective oversight by the legislative and bureaucratic procedures historically used by civilians on Capitol Hill and in the executive branch. Vicious struggles broke out between the armed services over roles, missions, strategy, and budgets, which the civilians, struggling to balance military needs with finite financial resources and lacking any consensus about how to meet the threat, could not contain, even under the new, more unified organizational structure of the Department of Defense (DoD). The need to control atomic weapons and to harmonize military operations with broad national objectives, particularly to keep limited wars from escalating into a general conflagration, drove civilians to invade what had become the customary prerogatives of military commanders in the field. In 1951, in the most public civil-military confrontation in American history, President Harry S. Truman relieved Douglas MacArthur, one of the century's most celebrated commanders, for openly opposing the administration's effort to keep the war in Korea limited to the peninsula and to conventional weapons. By 1961, the 20th century's only professional soldier-president, Dwight D. Eisenhower, had become so concerned about restraining defense spending and conflicts with (and between) the armed services that he could characterize the behavior of some senior officers as "damn near treason." Eisenhower left office warning publicly of a "military-industrial complex" whose "influence, whether sought or unsought," had the "potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power."

The Kennedy and Johnson administrations reasserted civilian control by installing new bureaucratic procedures in the Pentagon to unite strategy and policy with force structure and budgets, and by imposing special instructions or operational restrictions on commanders, notably
during the Cuban Missile Crisis and the fighting in Southeast Asia. But over the next three decades—partly in reaction to the disaster in Vietnam, partly in response to Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara's peremptory rule, and partly because the Republicans, dominating the presidency, became such vocal champions of national defense—influence over military affairs began gradually to shift back toward the uniformed leadership. Congress, controlled for most of the period by the Democrats, added staff and began to exert more power through appropriations and directives in legislation. But the Goldwater–Nichols Act (1986), a defense reorganization law, gave the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and senior commanders in the field more weight inside the DoD. Successful interventions abroad, especially the 1991 Persian Gulf War, restored the military's prestige. And a new generation of officers—more determined to resist policies that would damage military effectiveness or involve U.S. forces in quagmires abroad, less sensitive to the historical restraints involved in subordination to civilian authority, and more adept at political maneuvering inside the bureaucracy and on Capitol Hill—gained greater success in promulgating their views in policy and decision making, even after the end of the Cold War.

During the 1990s, after losing a public battle with the military and Congress over permitting homosexuals to serve openly in the armed forces, President Bill Clinton's administration relinquished much of its power over the military establishment in the areas of budget, organization, and strategy, thus preserving what was essentially the Cold War military establishment. The Clinton Administration exemplified the trend of more contentious relations between the military and Democratic presidents that began with Truman in the 1940s. A more conservative and politically conscious officer corps identified more with Republicans, who starting in the Vietnam War era had become the party of strong national defense and higher defense spending, with their opponents identified as anti-war and less supportive of the military. Only in foreign interventions did the President assert his authority, and then within limits negotiated with a military leadership wary of intervening with American forces abroad. The mid-1990s might have been a low point in the modern history of civilian control.

As the century ended, senior military officers, criticized for forgetting the proper limits of military resistance to civilian direction, became more cautious and cooperative. The conflicts, however, were not lost on the new administration in 2001. President George W. Bush had promised to make the armed services more lethal and agile; his secretary of defense, Donald Rumsfeld, perhaps the most experienced civilian in military affairs to hold the office, was acutely sensitive to civilian control. Aggressive and impatient, he provoked a level of tension with the armed services not seen since the days of Robert McNamara. As Rumsfeld constructed his vision of "transformation" of the military, he alienated senior officers, many of whom felt censored, disparaged, and disrespected. Oversight of military plans and operations in the Afghanistan and Iraq invasions became intrusive and contentious, but the follow-up to the initial campaigns—restoring order, creating governments, managing security, and establishing viable civil societies—were notably unsuccessful despite frequent consultations between political and military leaders. Eventually, however, criticism boiled over into public attacks by several retired generals. After Republicans lost the 2006 mid-term elections, President Bush replaced Rumsfeld with Robert Gates, whose quiet demeanor and emphasis on accountability restored some comity and respect between military and civilian, and strengthened civilian control. The President was careful to consult his military leaders when he ordered a surge of American forces in Iraq over the disagreement of many of the most senior of them. And he always praised the military throughout...
his years in office, increasing defense spending and generating public support for the wars and the larger struggle against terrorism

Barack Obama ran for president determined to reverse the longstanding reputation of the Democrats as soft on national defense. He reached out to the armed forces, promising to maintain their strength; he continued Robert Gates as secretary of defense and appointed several retired four-star officers to high office. And he avoided any undertaking that might alienate the Pentagon. However, Obama’s reconsideration of Afghanistan strategy in the spring of 2009 was hasty and unsystematic. When his new field commander's assessment of the war leaked to the press in the autumn of 2009, Obama and his advisers felt boxed in by the military leadership. Trust on both sides, never robust, evaporated. The President took almost three months to review the policy and strategy for the campaign against the Taliban, subjecting the Pentagon to painful questioning about the connections between the war’s outcome and its force levels, strategy, operations, and tactics. He concluded with a compromise, personally drafted in writing so that there would be no room for maneuver or misunderstanding from his commanders. Obama included a schedule for bringing home the extra forces. The next year Obama had to fire his second commander in Afghanistan when comments by his staff disrespectful of the Vice President and the strategy deliberations surfaced in the press. For the rest of his eight years in office, he personally got along with the senior military but the Pentagon chafed under micromanagement from an enlarged NSC staff, and friction over intervention in Syria and the indecisive campaign in Afghanistan kept both sides distrustful of the relationship.

Congress’s authority over military affairs, a foundation of civilian control, reached a dysfunctional extreme in the Budget Control Act of 2011. “Sequestration,” a compromise between Republicans and Democrats on the Hill, and with the White House, not only reduced future military spending substantially, but handcuffed the Pentagon by mandating the cuts proportionately across all spending categories. Micro management of defense from White House staffers became so intrusive that the first two of Obama’s secretaries of defense complained openly in their memoirs, and their successor's frustration was common knowledge in Washington. Obama's standing with the uniformed rank and file declined in line with his drop in the public approval polls. Subjected to withering criticism from the press and congressional opponents, Obama's continual praise of the military for its competence and sacrifice, his programs for their families and efforts to improve services to veterans, and his caution on committing the military to battle in Libya, Syria, and Ukraine--none of that could overcome suspicions that he was so reluctant a war leader that he was willing to waste the sacrifices of the soldiery in order to end the wars and avoid future ones. His administration exercised strong civilian control, but it came at considerable political cost.

The Trump Administration came into office determined to reverse Obama decisions and policies. The new President, without experience in government or military affairs (despite attending a high school military academy) questioned American alliances and insulted overseas friends and foes alike. His style and demeanor created conflict in the government; his decision process seemed haphazard and impulsive. With retired four-star Marines as secretary of defense and White House Chief of Staff, and an active duty army three-star expert in civil-military relations as national security adviser, conflict rarely broke out in public. The President avoided foreign interventions; friction with the military arose instead over his insistence on reducing American forces in Syria
(since reversed) and in central Asia, The president pronounced on policy on Twitter and made decisions without consulting, or by ignoring, military advice. Responding to campaign promises, the administration and a Republican Congress increased military spending which certainly smoothed the relationship, as did his refusal to initiate new deployments overseas. Midway through his term in office, the president’s relations with the military, while showing evidence of strain, remained stable.

Thus today, as in the past, civilian control lies at the heart of civil-military relations. It continues as a sometimes awkward, but always situational process shaped by the issues, personalities, and context of the moment. The relationship involves consultation and cooperation but also negotiation, tension, and conflict. Above all, the measure of civilian control remained not military overthrow of the government or even occasional insubordination or evasion, but the relative influence of the professional military and civilian authorities in policy and decision making. Congress and the president continued to pass the laws and decide upon war and peace, and the military to operate under law and civilian authority. At the same time, military and civilian leaders struggled in uneasy partnership to reconcile frequently diverging needs and perspectives in pursuit of the common defense, in an ever-uncertain world.
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Professional Supremacists versus Civilian Supremacists

The academic debate on civil-military relations emphasizes finely drawn and narrow distinctions (and this article follows in that noble tradition), but there are some important areas of consensus. Scholars agree that democratic theory requires civilians to be in charge and the military to be subordinate. Samuel Huntington argued explicitly that the purpose of carving out zones for professional supremacy (he called it “autonomy”) was that it was the best way to secure overall military subordination to civilians.13 (Huntington, The Soldier and the State, pp. 83–85.) Likewise, scholars agree that military professionals possess (or ought to possess) expert knowledge that civilian leaders must tap if they are to make wise decisions, especially about strategy and operations in wartime. Everyone recommends some sort of give and take between the military and the civilians, at least at the intellectual and advisory levels. What distinguishes different theorists from one another is where they position themselves along this mushy middle ground of who should be giving more and taking less and, crucially for this article, what is the prevailing bias in the system against which the participants should lean.

The professional supremacists say that the bias, at least in the modern U.S. system, tilts against giving the military adequate space and voice in the policy-making process; as a consequence, professional supremacists are prescriptively focused on empowering military officers to speak more candidly and forcefully to their civilian superiors, even to the extent of carving out large zones of professional autonomy where the presumption is that military preferences should trump civilian preferences. Professional supremacists believe that civilian leaders have ample incentives to ignore military advice and do so when it suits their interests; thus, the military must be vigilant and vigorous in pressing its case. Professional supremacists trace strategic disasters back to tragic moments when the wiser counsel of military leaders was ignored by headstrong civilians. Michael Desch put it this way, “Given the parlous situation in Iraq today [the spring of 2007]—the direct result of willful disregard for military advice—Bush’s legacy in civil-military relations is likely to be precisely the opposite of what his team expected: the discrediting of the whole notion of civilian control of the military.”14 (Desch, “Bush and the Generals,” p. 107.)

Some professional supremacists take the logic a step further: not only should civilians defer to the military; the military should insist that they do so—and take dramatic action to ensure that the military voice is heard and heeded. This extreme variant warrants a label all of its own: “McMasterism,” denoting its origin as a caricature drawn from the influential Dereliction of Duty book by H.R. McMaster.15 (I call it “McMasterism” to distinguish it from McMaster’s own, more nuanced, argument. McMaster argued that during the Vietnam escalation debate, senior military officers were derelict in two respects. First, they lied to their civilian superiors—to Congress, to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and to President Lyndon Johnson—about their true views concerning the military wisdom of various options. Second, they stood silent when executive branch civilians mischaracterized their views to the public and to Congress. McMaster did not argue that the military view was right and the civilian view was...
wrong, or that the former should have trumped the latter; he argued only that the latter should have had the benefit of fully hearing the former (although his own evidence suggests that McNamara and Johnson probably surmised the true views and were happy not to hear them). McMasterism argues that (1) in these matters, civilians are actively trying to suppress military opinion; (2) military opinion is right, or more right, than civilian opinion; and (3) the military should ensure not only that its voices are heard but also that its voices are heeded. The purest expression of McMasterism can be found in Milburn, “Breaking Ranks,” pp. 101–107. Richard H. Kohn and Martin L. Cook identify the ubiquitous misreading of McMaster in Kohn, “The Erosion of Civilian Control of the Military in the United States Today,” pp. 31–32; and Cook, “Revolt of the Generals: A Case Study in Professional Ethics,” Parameters, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Spring 2008), pp. 4–15.) McMasterism lays the blame for wartime failures at the feet of generals, but in a curious way: he blames them for going along with civilian preferences rather than blocking those preferences. Thus, in a scathing review of the performance of U.S. Army generals in the Iraq War, Paul Yingling also manages to chastise the generals for not making “their objections public” and calls on the generals to “and their voices.”16 (Yingling, “A Failure in Generalship.” He also faults the generals for not having “explained clearly the larger strategic risks of committing so large a portion of the nation’s deployable land power to a single theater of operations.” In the context of my article, this amounts to a complaint that the generals did not do more to block the surge.) McMasterism often reduces to a debate over two options—resign in protest or go over the heads of the president to the American people, the Congress, or both—because even hard-bitten professional supremacists would agree that the military should not use physical coercion to resist civilian authorities. A key feature of the professional supremacists is this purported military obligation to speak out in public. In a way, professional supremacists expand the “civilian” of “civilian control” to include the body politic. The public, professional supremacists claim has a right to know military views about policy, even or perhaps especially when these views run counter to what the commander in chief has directed as policy. McMasterism claims the military has an obligation to surface this information however it can.

Tantalizing, albeit scattered, data suggest that McMasterism may be an emerging norm among the professional U.S. military. For instance, the Triangle Institute for Security Studies civil-military gap study of the late 1990s found that clear majorities of elite officers embraced the view that the proper military role in decisions for the use of force went beyond “advise” to include “advocate” and even “insist” on such decisions as setting rules of engagement, ensuring that clear political and military goals exist, and deciding what kinds of units should be used.17 (Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, “Conclusion: The Gap and What It Means for American National Security,” in Feaver and Kohn, eds., Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), p. 465.) A more recent survey of a larger sample of U.S. Army officers showed similar results, with significant majorities of officers endorsing the “advocate or insist” norm on these matters.18 (Heidi Urben, “Civil-Military Relations in a Time of War,” Ph.D. dissertation, Georgetown University, 2010.) In addition, a survey of active-duty enlisted personnel found that fully one-third disagreed somewhat or strongly with the statement, “Members of the military should not publicly criticize senior members of the civilian branch”; only 16 percent of the (smaller sample of) officers likewise disagreed, so the norm’s power should not be overstated.19 (Donald S. Inbody, “Grand Army of the Republic or Grand Army of the Republicans: Political Party and Ideological
Preferences of American Enlisted Personnel,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas–Austin, 2009.) Yet the prominence of McMaster’s book on official military reading lists and the celebrated reception given Yingling’s article suggest that influential members of the military elite believe that the military voice needs to be louder and more insistent.20 (Thomas E. Ricks, “Army Officer Accuses Generals of ‘Intellectual and Moral Failures,’” Washington Post, April 27, 2007. McMaster’s book is on several U.S. Army and Air Force reading lists recommended for officers seeking promotion to senior ranks. See, for example, http://www.history.army.mil/html/reference/reading_list/list4.html; and http://www.militaryreadinglist.com/CSAF/csaf_officer_list.htm.) Thoughtful military ethicists have wrestled with this issue and identified norms that should govern “knowing when to salute.”21 (The term is from Leonard Wong and Douglas Lovelace, “Knowing When to Salute,” Orbis, Vol. 52, No. 2 (March 2008), pp. 278–288.) Although their treatments constitute an improvement over crude McMasterism, many strike the balance somewhere on the “professional supremacist” side of the divide.22 (Those tilting (albeit slightly) toward the professional supremacy side include George M. Clifford III, “Duty at All Costs,” Naval War College Review, Vol. 60, No. 1 (Winter 2007), pp. 103–128; Cook, “Revolt of the Generals,” pp. 4–15; and Wong and Lovelace, “Knowing When to Salute.” Don M. Snider, Dissent and Strategic Leadership of the Military Professions (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute Series, U.S. Army War College, February 2008), is in the middle of the spectrum because the author’s model raises far more barriers to military dissent than McMasterism does, although Snider puts the military’s obligation to its profession on an equal footing with its obligation to civilian society. James Burk, “Responsible Obedience by Military Professionals: The Discretion to Do What Is Wrong,” in Suzanne C. Nielsen and Don M. Snider, eds., American Civil-Military Relations: The Soldier and the State in a New Era (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), is more difficult to classify because Burk does not distinguish between policy disagreement and battlefield operations disagreement, though he appears to focus on the latter. Mark J. Osiel, Obeying Orders: Atrocity, Military Discipline, and the Law of War (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1999), does not fit in my taxonomy because Osiel focuses more narrowly on legal versus illegal orders, whereas McMasterism focuses on prudent versus imprudent policies.)

By contrast, the civilian supremacists say that the bias, at least in the modern U.S. system, tilts toward excessive civilian deference to military professionals when the subject concerns wartime decisions on strategy and operations; as a consequence, civilian supremacists are prescriptively focused on empowering civilian leaders to involve themselves more forcefully and directly in the business of war making, even to the extent of pressing military officers on matters that the military might consider as being squarely within their zone of professional autonomy. Civilian supremacists are not encouraging civilian leaders to run roughshod over their military subordinates, ignoring advice and clinging to foolhardy schemes. They are, however, encouraging civilian leaders to probe more deeply and even more critically the grounds of military advice: Why do you recommend this course of action? What are the assumptions underlying your recommendation? Why can we not do it another way? What would happen if we tried this alternative? Moreover, civilian supremacists discourage civilian leaders from reflexively deferring to military expertise on important decisions where the civilians’ strategic judgment differs from the military. Eliot Cohen put it succinctly, “Both [civilians and the military] must expect a running conversation in which, although civilian opinion will not dictate,
it must dominate; that that conversation will include not only ends and policies, but ways and means.”23 (Cohen, Supreme Command, p. 458.)

Civilian supremacists do not demand the military stands mute when policy matters are being debated, but they do demand its senior officers participate only within the chain of command, speaking to civilian superiors candidly and privately, without leaking to the public. Because Congress has a constitutional oversight role, civilian supremacists agree that military officers must respond truthfully and candidly to direct congressional queries. Contrary to McMasterism, once military advisers have given senior civilian leaders their candid views, the military obligation to speak up has been satisfied; there is no corresponding duty to speak out if civilian leaders decide on a course of action contrary to what the military advised. Instead, once a policy has been decided, the military is obligated to salute, obey, and implement.

To civilian supremacists, it is not a matter of professional expertise so much as a matter of political competence. Military professional expertise is still only one (albeit very important) factor that belongs in the strategic calculus. The military might be able to offer expert assessments on the probability of success or failure for a given course of action, but it is the civilian leader who has the authority to determine whether that probability is an acceptable risk. The military adviser can offer expert insight into the risks involved in shifting resources from one military conflict to another, but it is the civilian leader who has the authority to determine which conflict should have priority.24 (Feaver, Armed Servants, pp. 58-68, 298-302.)

Furthermore, civilian supremacists recognize that senior military officers often disagree among themselves, so the maxim of the professional supremacists to “heed the advice of the generals” raises the obvious question, “Which generals”? Professional supremacists rarely address the inconvenient truth of intra-military disputes, but such disputes are ubiquitous I real-world decision making. And, as I shall demonstrate, they were at the heart of the civil-military challenge the Bush administration confronted in the surge decision.25 (Hoffman, “Dereliction of Duty Redux,” pp. 227-292.)
Was Jim Mattis exercising civilian control, or was he under civilian control?

This question is difficult to answer not only because Mattis was just the second retired general to serve as secretary of defense, but also because of the way he conducted himself during his time in office and the degraded state of civil-military relations when he left the Pentagon. Jim Mattis may have become a civilian political appointee, but he never stopped being a marine. Although Mattis was the co-editor of an excellent book on American civil-military relations (to which I contributed a co-authored chapter), the former general’s tenure was filled with civil-military controversy. He stepped into the E-ring of the Pentagon at a time of immense political
polarization, with two ongoing wars and a host of global military deployments, amidst a widening of the civil-military gaps, after decades of weakening civil-military norms, to serve a president with an unconventional public communication style and no experience dealing with the military and a policy agenda that clashes with the Washington consensus. It was always too much to ask for civil-military relations to improve under these conditions. In fact, it was far more likely that civil-military tensions would increase.

Under these difficult conditions, Mattis avoided a true civil-military catastrophe and oversaw a period of two years without a major national security crisis. In doing so, however, he chose to prioritize his influence and longevity rather than healthy civil-military relations. This decision may have been understandable or even necessary, and at least some of Mattis’s civil-military missteps were sins of omission rather than commission, but they nevertheless will have real and lasting consequences for American civil-military relations. In particular, Mattis’s approach 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.

It is possible — some would even argue likely — that America is better off overall than it would have been under any of the other nominees considered at the time, but the decision to appoint a retired general — and Mattis in particular — had an impact on the proper functioning of American civil-military relations that will persist even now that he is gone. In the end, however, Mattis passed his most important civil-military test: by serving honorably and resigning without fanfare, he reminded us that no military officer, whether active or retired, can save the republic. Healthy civil-military relations require other civilians — not the military — to hold elected leaders accountable.

**General Confusion**

Simply by accepting the nomination to become secretary of defense, Mattis contributed to the ongoing blurring of lines between active-duty and retired military officers in American public life. Mattis’s behavior in the job reinforced this perception. Unlike Army Gen. George Marshall, who was an expert administrator and logistician with limited command time and extensive Washington experience — including 20 months as secretary of state — before becoming secretary of defense, Mattis was a commander and combat leader. Moreover, unlike Dwight Eisenhower, Brent Scowcroft, and Colin Powell, or other generals who made the transition to senior civilian posts before him, Mattis was never generally seen as a Washington insider or civilian political leader. In fact, it is not clear how Mattis would have approached the job differently if he still had been wearing the uniform. What is clear, however, is that few Americans — including the president — made the distinction between “Secretary” Mattis and “General” Mattis.

Even before Mattis became secretary of defense, the number of retired generals and admirals involved in American politics — and their role in presidential campaigns — had been growing
for decades. By explicitly drawing on these retired officers’ military credentials, candidates and causes attempted to co-opt the public’s high esteem for the military to advance their own political prospects or partisan agendas. In doing so, they also created the subtle impression that the military itself, and not just a particular retired officer or group of officers, supported their party or their candidacy.

Mattis’s elevation to secretary of defense represented an extension of this trend. Although Mattis himself never engaged in this type of politicking during campaigns and, often — at least privately inside the Pentagon — even emphasized that it was “secretary, not general,” in public he did not draw a clear line between his role as a political appointee and the responsibilities of those still on active duty. Was it realistic for him to correct this breach of civil-military etiquette every time it occurred? Perhaps not, especially because the president so often referred to him as “general” in public, but even a wry Mattis-ism, such as, “people keep calling me general, but I got promoted to secretary” might have mitigated or at least called attention to this harmful trend. But Mattis rarely, if ever, made this distinction in public.

Compounding the blurring of the lines between active-duty and retired officers, Mattis also oversaw a growing power imbalance between civilian and military authorities inside the Pentagon. As Mara Karlin and I argued last year, the power of the Joint Staff relative to that of civilian officials in the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Policy already was growing during the Obama administration. During Mattis’s tenure as secretary of defense, however, this trend accelerated. From my vantage point as a military officer serving as a special adviser on the National Security Staff for Vice President Joe Biden, and, later, for Vice President Mike Pence, I witnessed the assertiveness of uniformed officers on the Joint Staff grow in interagency meetings after the administration changed. After departing the White House, I wrote about some of these concerns for *The Strategy Bridge*.

At least some of this shift likely was due to the difficulty of vetting civilian political appointees during the early days of the Trump administration. Mattis initially pursued several Democrats, including Michele Flournoy, for top Pentagon posts, but he ran into opposition from the White House because they didn’t find many of his early picks ideologically acceptable. Rather than accepting these constraints and identifying candidates the White House would find tolerable to fill these posts more quickly, Mattis instead decided to double-down on some nonpartisan nominees, extending the time it took him to fill key civilian political positions in the Pentagon. With many of these civilian posts empty early in the administration, experienced military officers on the Joint Staff — who didn’t change out during the transition — stepped in to fill the void.

In addition to problems filling civilian posts, however, a large part of this power imbalance simply was due to Mattis’s choice to delegate responsibilities to uniformed military leaders, rather than empowering the civilian officials that remained in the Pentagon. He also could have emphasized better cooperation between the Joint Staff and senior civil servants as a way to mitigate personnel shortfalls until he had time to fully staff his slate of political appointees. Instead, Mattis delegated authority to officers he trusted on the Joint Staff and allowed, or
perhaps even encouraged, the balance of power to shift. This delegation became so severe that Luke Strange recently argued that the “unequal dialogue” may now be biased in favor of military, rather than civilian, leaders.

In its November 2018 report, the bipartisan National Defense Strategy Commission was even more pointed, arguing that the lack of civilian voices involved in defense and national security decision-making was “undermining the concept of civilian control.” The commission took particular aim at efforts to centralize global force management under the chairman of the Joint Chiefs.

The implementation of the National Defense Strategy must feature empowered civilians fulfilling their statutory responsibilities, particularly regarding issues of force management. Put bluntly, allocating priority — and allocating forces — across theaters of warfare is not solely a military matter. It is an inherently political-military task, decision authority for which is the proper competency and responsibility of America’s civilian leaders. Unless global force management is nested under higher-order guidance from civilians, an effort to centralize defense direction under the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff may succeed operationally but produce profound strategic problems. It is critical that DOD — and Congress — reverse the unhealthy trend in which decision-making is drifting away from civilian leaders on issues of national importance.

Prior to Mattis’s confirmation, Alice Hunt Friend and Erin Simpson suggested that close personal relationships with the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the director of the Joint Staff, as well as service parochialism, could play a role in how Mattis chose to manage the Pentagon. While it is unclear whether these factors caused him to delegate authority to trusted fellow marines with whom he had risen through the ranks, it is certain that the growth in the power of the Joint Staff will make it more difficult for the next secretary of defense, as well as for the White House and Congress, to rebalance the civil-military relationship between policymakers and uniformed leaders in the Pentagon.

Taking the Norms out of Normal

Although Secretary Mattis personally modeled norms of nonpartisanship even in the face of great pressure to pick a side in America’s domestic political struggles, civil-military norms eroded on his watch and he did little, at least in public, to police civil-military breaches. It is worth noting that Bob Gates sometimes failed to do the same during his tenure as secretary of defense, and he admitted in his memoir that it was harder than he appreciated to speak out on difficult issues in the heat of the moment. Nevertheless, Kori Schake has argued that Mattis’s greatest such failing came early in his tenure, when he allowed the president to “sign his travel ban in the Hall of Heroes at the Pentagon … and detrimentally associated our military with the ban,” which had little obvious connection to military policy. Perhaps Mattis discussed this breach with the White House, but numerous other infringements occurred as well, some obvious and some not, but all detrimental to healthy civil-military relations.
When President Donald Trump announced his ban on transgender servicemembers via tweet, for example, he stated, “After consulting with my Generals and military experts, please be advised that the United States government will not accept or allow .... Transgender individuals to serve in any capacity in the U.S. military.” As Dominic Holden and Vera Bergengruen have reported, however, subsequent Freedom of Information Act requests demonstrated that the Joint Chiefs were caught off guard by the announcement. Gen. Joe Dunford told the service chiefs, “When asked, I will state that I was not consulted,” and Reince Preibus, then White House chief of staff, wrote that it “would’ve been better if we had a decision memo, looped Mattis in.” Nevertheless, Mattis allowed this public mischaracterization of military advice to stand for months without correction.

There is no doubt that Mattis faced an extremely difficult tradeoff and immense political pressure to remain silent. He likely decided that it simply was not worth it to publicly address every violation of a civil-military norm. Mattis also received little support from members of Congress, especially on the Republican side, who should have been the first line of defense in upholding these important traditions, leaving him isolated and at risk on this issue. If he had spoken up at the time, it is possible that he would have faced retaliation or undermined his influence with the president and his senior staff. Moreover, speaking out on this topic could even have led to his firing and triggered an unintended, but major, civil-military crisis of its own. As a result, Mattis may have been correct to save his political capital for only the issues he viewed as truly vital, though we will not know for sure until we have a better understanding of what influence he had behind closed doors. Mattis may also have decided that it was better to remain resolutely nonpartisan himself as he attempted to exercise influence quietly through his personal engagements. And it is notable that the president’s controversial visits with troops in Iraq and Germany, which made news when the president signed “Make America Great Again” hats that several servicemembers had brought to the event, came only as Mattis was on his way out the door.

In either case, however, it also is unequivocally true that the frequency and intensity of civil-military breaches increased during Mattis’s tenure, even if he did not cause this change. As Tom Nichols has argued, President Trump’s approach to civil-military relations is unlike anything we have seen in living memory. But while many of these violations originated in the White House, others did not — such as when critics of the president suggested that the military in general, or Mattis in particular, as the “last adult in the room,” should attempt to constrain the authority of the elected president, if only temporarily. While we might pardon Mattis for not raising his concerns about politicization of the military in public every time they arose for fear of losing influence on important national security issues, it is much harder to understand why Mattis did not mention military politicization or the increasingly frequent use of troops as political props as concerns in his letter of resignation.

Mattis’s personal silence also became policy, as he directed the Pentagon to become less transparent, significantly decreased the frequency of press briefings, and limited public engagement by senior military leaders. As Loren DeJonge Schulman and Alice Hunt Friend showed, Mattis also took steps that decreased transparency surrounding ongoing military
deployments. These policies made democratic oversight and accountability more difficult. Recently, I argued that more frequent public engagement by senior military leaders — as long as it is done carefully — could enhance public discussions about national security decision-making because it would introduce relevant military information into public debates about national security policy. Perhaps more importantly, however, it would also expose military perspectives to criticism, accountability, questioning, and oversight. In this way, Mattis’s approach to public engagement — and his limitations on senior officers — actually made it more difficult for Congress to carry out its constitutional responsibilities to oversee the military and check executive power, and for the press to inform democratic decision-making and public debate. This problem became so stark that the then-chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Sen. John McCain, complained about Mattis’s lack of transparency, stating that he had a “better working relationship, back and forth, with Ash Carter,” Mattis’s predecessor. Transparency and public engagement make accountability and effective oversight possible, but Mattis did his best to keep himself and the department out of the spotlight. These habits will be hard for both the military and the Department of Defense to break, even now that he has left the building.

The Missing Civil-Military Dash

Mattis also failed to embrace his role as the “dash” in civil-military relations, shirking his responsibilities to connect the military with American society or to explain defense and national security policies to the American public. According to Bob Woodward’s book Fear, Mattis’s disdain for Sunday talk shows was so intense that, after numerous requests to appear, he finally told Sean Spicer (then the Trump administration’s press secretary, and a Naval reservist), “Sean, I’ve killed people for a living. If you call me again, I’m going to fucking send you to Afghanistan. Are we clear?” Whether he killed people for a living or not, Mattis’s reluctance to appear on talk shows — the sort of media appearances that had been normal for most secretaries of defense — meant that there was no one explaining to the American people why servicemembers were continuing to kill people or die in their name. That decision was a disservice to both the American public and to those doing the killing and dying. While it may be clever to declare that the American military does not “do stunts,” that quip alone was not a sufficient explanation — to either the American public or to those in uniform — of the administration’s political decision to send thousands of troops to the southern border. As secretary of defense, Mattis had a responsibility to explain, and not just to implement, administration policies related to national security.

Anyone who had read Mattis’s comments in his co-authored book on civil-military relations would understand that he saw a civil-military divide as somewhat necessary, if not inevitable. While it is not entirely surprising that he did not try to minimize the civil-military gap, there is little evidence that he even saw it as his role to bridge it. In fact, he seemed far more comfortable staying on the military side of the gap than trying to find common ground between civilians and the military. During an impromptu conversation with soldiers deployed in Jordan that was caught on video and went viral on social media, for example, Mattis stated, “You are a great example for our country. It’s got some problems, problems we don’t have in
the military. Hold the line until our country gets back to understanding and respecting and showing it, being friendly to one another.”

Whether he intended to or not, Mattis hinted at a claim of moral superiority among those in uniform when compared to civilian society. While Mattis’s comments were off-the-cuff and different in nature, they were in stark contrast to comments by Secretary Bob Gates at West Point only a few years earlier. But when you think about it, it is rather peculiar to suggest that attributes such as integrity, respect, and courage are not valued in the United States of America writ large. If you spent enough time getting around this country, especially in successful organizations or close-knit communities, you would find the seven Army values are considered pretty important and being practiced across our great country and by Americans across the world. Yet Mattis rarely chose to emphasize those things that bind us together as Americans, instead focusing on differences between those who wear the uniform and those who don’t. Perhaps this is because Mattis spent his entire adult life in uniform and wasn’t as familiar with civilian life as Gates was, which may be another reason why a retired general might not be the best fit to serve as secretary of defense.

Mattis’s comments on women in the military also probably widened the civil-military gap and likely will have an effect on recruiting for years to come. When asked his thoughts about women serving in infantry units at the Virginia Military Institute, Mattis stated that the “jury’s still out” on whether they can serve effectively in combat units. Not only did these comments fail to respect those women who already have served in combat roles and those currently serving in the infantry, but they also sent a signal to both young men and women about the culture of the U.S. military. In fact, data Mattis collected for his book on civil-military relations shows that both men and women are less likely to want to join the military, or encourage others to join, if they do not believe women have equal opportunities to serve in combat units. Finally, although Mattis often referred to Washington, D.C. as a “strategy-free zone,” it is not clear that the policies of his Defense Department were more closely linked to political objectives than previous administrations’ had been, or that he facilitated a strong relationship between senior military leaders in the Pentagon and civilian leaders in the White House and Congress. Strategy that is not connected to political objectives is at best ineffective strategy, and — at worst — no strategy at all. Mattis’s own National Defense Strategy, for example, argued that allies significantly reduce the U.S. defense burden, in stark contrast to the president’s National Security Strategy, which emphasized that allies fail to meet their fair share of the burden. The National Defense Strategy seems even more out of step when compared to the president’s actual statements, policy decisions, and tweets. Although Mattis was a more-than-able defense diplomat who reassured allies around the globe, the striking thing about his reassurances was often that they seemed so starkly at odds with the president’s actual policies. Moreover, they fed the narrative that Mattis was trying to constrain President Trump.

While a full assessment of Mattis’s record won’t be possible until we know more about what really went on behind closed doors, there are at least some indications that Mattis’s Pentagon was not responsive to White House demands for options and that the Pentagon attempted to “box the president in” during policy reviews focused on Afghanistan, Syria, and Iran. These
tactics would be nothing new, but they nevertheless would be concerning. Although some level of divergence between departmental preferences and White House policy is a normal part of bureaucratic control, this gap grew untenable over time and Mattis’s statements increasingly seemed to almost contradict those of the President. In the end, it appears these policy divisions led Mattis to resign.

Mattis Held the Line, but How Long Will it Hold?

In the waning years of the Roman republic, the people disregarded a law requiring ten years to pass before they could re-elect an individual to the position of consul, breaking a longstanding civil-military norm and re-appointing Gaius Marius for six straight terms. Marius was a competent military commander and reformer, and had become the most successful general of his era and the most popular man in Rome. Seeking to benefit from Marius’s personal popularity and the allegiance of his soldiers, a powerful senator named Saturninus formed an alliance with Marius, ensuring his re-nomination.

For several years, this uneasy alliance persisted despite Saturninus’s increasing attempts to co-opt Marius — and Marius’s veterans — to support his political causes. In late 100 B.C., Saturninus began to press for measures to give colonial lands to Marius’s veterans and to lower the price of state-distributed wheat. When opposition arose in response to one of the bill’s provisions, Saturninus called on a small contingent of Marius’s army to join him in the Forum. With the backing of these veterans, Saturninus imposed his measures by the threat of force. Riots continued, until the Senate turned to Marius himself — who still was consul — to restore the stability of the state. Marius then turned on both his erstwhile political ally and his veterans. He cut off their water supply and forced the contingent to surrender. Disgusted with their rash actions, Marius relinquished the opportunity to seize power and instead sided with the Senate in putting down the revolt. Although accounts of Marius’s ambitions differ, it ultimately was his virtue and professional identity as a servant of Rome that saved his city from even greater disorder.

At the same time, however, long-term damage to the republic had already been set in motion. Saturninus’s political opponents began to recruit their own generals to counter the threat of military force, and the generals, many less virtuous than Marius, began to seek their own power and glory. Once political leaders decided to use the military to back their own political causes, the military itself fractured and polarized, and with the rise of Sulla, Rome began its descent into a series of civil wars.

Although there are significant differences between Marius and Mattis, the history rhymes enough to heed its lessons. Like Marius, Mattis was not a perfect man but they served their nations well, often at great personal cost. Both men were at least partially complicit in the erosion of civil-military norms that had the potential to bring grave consequences to both their societies. Yet, like Marius, Mattis chose not to pursue his own ambitions. He noted his serious policy differences for the record, but he chose to leave on his own terms and departed with little pomp or fanfare after two years of honorable service in extremely trying times. Mattis
could have chosen a more boisterous departure, complete with a press conference and media tour, questioning the president’s legitimacy, judgment, or fitness to serve. If he had done so, the secretary who never quite stopped being a general almost certainly would have sparked a true civil-military crisis.

There certainly were those who would have liked him to do so, and indeed there was reason to think he may have had support. Upon his departure, Mattis was the most popular political figure in America, with strong bipartisan support (+40 percentage point approval among Republicans and +35 percentage point approval among Democrats). He also had the nearly unanimous approval of those in uniform. Instead, he told the president that he deserved a secretary of defense who is more aligned with his views and simply walked away.

Through his quiet but principled departure, Mattis reaffirmed his belief in America — his belief that the republic would endure and that there would be another election; that regardless of the outcome of that election, it is more appropriate for civilians, not the military, to determine the fate of the nation. As we already are seeing in the early days of 2019, elections have consequences.

The most important question today is not what happened during Mattis’s watch, but rather how Americans will respond after it. Some veterans are calling for Americans to disregard the civil-military norms that have served us well. Other pundits are arguing that their party must recruit military, rather than civilian, candidates for high office to be more credible and win elections. But answering military politicization with counter-politicization is a path to ruin. And there is no guarantee that future generals or admirals will be as virtuous as either Marius or Mattis, when push comes to shove.

Mattis didn’t cause our civil-military problems, but they did get worse on his watch. By stepping down of his own accord, however, he reaffirmed that no military officer, whether active or retired, whether general or secretary, can save a republic on his own. Although some tried to thrust that responsibility upon him, Mattis never viewed himself as a savior. He may not have been perfect, but we could have done far worse. When the republic called, Jim Mattis answered. And both as a general and as a secretary, he was always faithful.

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ELEPHANTS IN THE ROOM: Mattis Was the Best Secretary of Defense Trump Could Have Had

In grading him, we must adjust for the difficulty of the assignment.

BY PETER FEaver

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| FEBRUARY 12, 2019, 5:17 PM |

U.S. President Donald Trump and then-Defense Secretary James Mattis attend a cabinet meeting in the White House on March 8, 2018. (Michael Reynolds-Pool/Getty Images)
If you ever wondered what civil-military specialists who like and respect each other bicker about at the bar, you are about to find out.

Did James Mattis, who served as U.S. secretary of defense from January 2017 through December 2018, leave a positive or a negative legacy for civil-military relations?

Jim Golby, one of the finest of the next generation of experts in this area, raises this important question in a thoughtful essay for War on the Rocks. The essay tabulates a list of pros and cons but ultimately comes down with a negative verdict: “Mattis didn’t cause our civil-military problems, but they did get worse on his watch.” Golby praises Mattis for preventing worse things from happening and concedes that it is “possible” that “America is better off overall than it would have been under any of the other nominees considered.” But that is not good enough, in Golby’s view.

Golby is something of civil-military phenomenon himself. He is an active-duty lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army who holds a doctorate in political science from Stanford University, where he wrote a fine dissertation on contemporary U.S. civil-military relations. Even though he is a relatively junior officer, he has served near the pinnacle of political-military policymaking as an advisor to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and also to both former Vice President Joe Biden and Vice President Mike Pence on the National Security Council staff. (Full disclosure: He and I have co-authored several empirical studies of public opinion and the military, including a chapter in a book co-edited by Mattis before he joined the Trump administration, and we are working on another major project right now.)

Golby’s assessment of Mattis is careful, heavily qualified, and measured—a must-read for students of civil-military relations. But in the end, I think it goes too far in its critique and obscures the fundamental judgment: that Mattis may have been the best secretary of defense the Trump administration could have had.

Mattis was not perfect. No secretary of defense is. Even in normal administrations, this is a difficult job. One book on the subject made the point clearly in the title: Charles A. Stevenson’s SECDEF: The Nearly Impossible Job of Secretary of Defense. It is easy to identify slip-ups, dubious decisions, and adverse developments during the tenures of even the most successful people to hold the position. And there is not usually any harm in identifying these as a way of educating future leaders.

For instance, I have pointed out ways in which Defense Secretary Robert Gates, the most heralded secretary of defense of the post-9/11 era, could have handled certain matters better. In an interview with NPR, Gates complained about generals who spoke out too much, but in his memoir he repeatedly described standing silently by while something bad was happening in a meeting. I argued that we cannot ask generals to keep quiet about policy matters in public unless the senior civilians themselves speak up on those matters in private. Gates, a very good secretary of defense, could have been even better with a tweak here and there. This is a very
useful teaching point for senior civilian and military leaders who are wrestling with internalizing best practices in civil-military relations.

However, there is a reasonable counterpoint to my critique—and it is relevant to Golby’s critique as well. It is easy for me to say that Gates should have spoken up more in those private meetings, but what if he had and it had gone poorly, and his capacity to be effective in other matters was gravely compromised?

One of those silent moments, according to Gates, came when then-President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton mentioned that they had let partisan calculations of how best to position themselves for the 2008 election determine their public opposition to the Iraq surge. This was a shocking revelation, yet Gates reports he heard it and said nothing. I would have preferred that he had used the opportunity to point out how pernicious such a stance had been for American civil-military relations and for the national interest. But I have been in enough meetings with a president to know that it would have been a very costly thing for Gates to do in the moment. It would have angered both Obama and Clinton and put a great strain on the partnership they were forging. I think Gates had enough political capital that he should have risked it, but I understand why he did not.

Some of Golby’s criticism of Mattis fits this same pattern. Golby faults Mattis for not critiquing President Donald Trump more forcefully when Trump transgressed civil-military norms: for instance, when Trump held a highly partisan signing ceremony in the Hall of Heroes at the Pentagon, or when the president tweeted out a policy change on transgender military members without having consulted with the service chiefs. Golby is careful to note that we do not know whether Mattis raised these and countless other matters privately with Trump, which would have been the most proper course of action. We only know that he did not do so publicly, which would have been a highly unusual rebuke even in normal times. Golby also notes that had Mattis gone public he would have likely received no support from the political base Trump listens to—which would have left the defense isolated and exposed—and that raising the issue would likely not have changed Trump’s behavior, while at the same time increasing considerably the risk that Trump would have fired or marginalized Mattis even sooner. At the end of a tortuous paragraph in which Golby makes all of these allowances, which have the logical effect of exonerating Mattis—or at the very least, of granting Mattis the benefit of a generous grading curve—Golby concludes with a rather tepid lament: Mattis should have called out the president on this point in a parting shot in his resignation letter.

Likewise, Golby faults Mattis for not embracing the traditional role of the secretary of defense as a key communicator and explainer to the American people about defense policy. Golby argues that the secretary of defense should have been the “dash” in “civil-military,” reaching out across the divide and bridging the gap with greater transparency about policy. Instead, Mattis laid quite low, refusing to do the traditional press shows and having very little press availability. As a consequence, Golby writes, “there was no one explaining to the American people why servicemembers were continuing to kill people or die in their name.”
This is a fair critique in normal times, and I certainly faulted Obama for not doing more outreach to bolster public support for the killing and dying he had authorized. But Golby could do more to see the matter from Mattis’s point of view. Why was Mattis so reticent? Later in that section, Golby criticizes Mattis for hinting at a claim of moral superiority, looking down on civilian society. Mattis may have such a sense and, if so, that is indeed lamentable. But I do not think that is why Mattis avoided the press. It is far more likely that Mattis laid low so as to avoid getting crosswise with his boss. Trump was quick to take offense at underlings who were insufficiently fawning in their press availabilities. It would have been far worse for civil-military relations for Mattis to satisfy the president with such displays of sycophancy. If Mattis had joined the weekly gyre of explaining flip-flopping policy tweets, he might have developed low credibility akin to that of Trump’s press secretary, Sarah Huckabee Sanders. Avoiding that friction and preserving his credibility, at the expense of somewhat less transparency, is a reasonable trade-off given the time and circumstances in which Mattis served.

Golby is correct that Mattis was in a very difficult spot as a recently retired military officer whose first name was “General,” yet who also was supposed to personify the civilian in civilian control of the military. It would have been better if everyone understood clearly that he was a civilian political appointee and he had shed the uniform once and for all. It was a useful teaching point on Mattis’s first day in office when he did not return Gen. Joseph Dunford’s welcoming salute on the steps of the Pentagon, thus dramatizing his transformation from officer to civilian. I suspect he winced when Trump insisted on calling him “general.” But it would have been pedantic to correct the president in the moment, and it likely would have backfired. Having a retired four-star general personify civilian control blurred the civil-military lines in ways that all of us, including those of us who supported Mattis’s unusual appointment, acknowledge was unfortunate. But I do not see what Mattis could have done that would have changed this dynamic in fundamental and positive ways, given who his boss was. That has to be the pragmatic standard against which he is measured.

Golby may be on stronger ground when he faults Mattis for not doing more to restore the imbalance in power within the Department of Defense between the uniformed military and civilians. This imbalance grew to troubling levels under the Obama administration and got worse in the power vacuum that emerged early in the Trump administration. Some of this must be laid at doors above Mattis’s paygrade. The Trump campaign bears much of the blame for failing to build a cadre of qualified talent and then for failing to have a competent transition. To be fair, perhaps the so-called #NeverTrumpers, myself included, who signed letters of protest against candidate Trump also share some of the blame, because we made it harder for the Trump team to assemble talent.

Perhaps Mattis could have done more with the hand he was dealt. Arguably, he squandered precious political capital in a series of Pyrrhic victories and defeats trying to make senior appointments that were doomed given the partisan climate in Washington. And when he finally did have his civilian team in place, perhaps he could have done more to empower them, compared to their military counterparts. He did do more than he gets credit for in the public commentary, however. For instance, he added the undersecretary for policy to the so-called
“big four” meeting of the secretary of defense, deputy secretary of defense, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—a powerful signal in a rank-conscious hierarchy. He also brought country desk officers and other personnel from the Office of the Secretary of Defense into meetings with foreign dignitaries, thus empowering them. And he brought White House and Office of the Secretary of Defense staff, more than Joint Staff representatives, on the plane with him on foreign trips to further endow them with the most powerful currency in the bureaucracy: access to the principal. But these measures may not have been enough to compensate for the severe imbalance he inherited and for the blinding optics of a “team of Marines” at the top—the close, decades-long personal relationship that bound together Mattis, Dunford, former White House chief of staff John Kelly, and senior Joint Staff officer Kenneth McKenzie—in a town where appearances can dominate reality.

This problem of empowering the civilian side is likely to get worse before it gets better. The next secretary of defense will have an even harder time boosting morale in the Office of the Secretary of Defense than Mattis had. And the next chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is likely to have more access to Trump than Dunford has had, thus advantaging the uniformed side ahead of the civilians to an even greater extent.

Golby credits Mattis with a major achievement: **On Mattis’s watch, there was no grave national security or civil-military crisis.**

Most outside observers, myself included, feared that Trump’s erratic behavior would trigger myriad crises along multiple dimensions. That still could happen, of course, but it is worth listing the kinds of blunders that were in play but did not happen: arbitrary withdrawal from NATO, arbitrary abandonment of South Korea, a war on the Korean Peninsula triggered by the premature withdrawal of U.S. civilian personnel, regular Army troops instructed to shoot refugees trying to cross the U.S.-Mexico border, war with Iran, total withdrawal from Afghanistan without a political deal, families of Islamic State combatants tortured, Syrian oil fields seized and nationalized as U.S. property, and so on.

Here is where civil-military norms and best practices come crashing in to the reality of our current president. If it is generally accepted that presidents have a “right to be wrong,” was Mattis himself undermining the president and thereby also civil-military relations by acting as a restraint—not letting him commit his wrongs? Golby does not grasp this nettle firmly, but he does rightly warn that it is bad for the country to look to generals to be “adults in the room.” He also explicitly calls out Mattis for not being responsive to White House demands for military options to deal with foreign-policy problems and for trying to box the president in during policy reviews.

I agree with Golby that the Department of Defense should be responsive to the White House for options and should not try to box presidents in. I would note that there are few well-documented cases of Mattis (or anyone else in the Department of Defense) actively working to undermine Trump’s policies after a decision had been formally and properly delivered through official channels (though I concede that we are likely to find examples once the historical record
is fully available, since we can find them in previous administrations). There is plenty of
evidence of the Defense Department raising concerns about decisions before they were made.
And there is plenty of evidence of the department dragging its heels in response to stray tweets
and offhand remarks. In this respect, the difficulty that the Trump team has experienced in
turning presidential whims into policy wins is more normal than not.

And this normalcy may raise an even more intriguing argument that Golby does not make
explicitly in his piece but that I have heard from other experts: What if Mattis’s real fault was in
successfully tempering Trump’s worst excesses just enough to make the president seem far
more normal than he is and, as a result, enabling longer-term changes to the country and the
Republican Party that will hurt the country (and civil-military relations) for the long run? What if
future generals believe it is acceptable or even expected that they should be the “adults in the
room” and minimize the damage of transgressive policies? Would the United States have been
better off with a civilian secretary of defense who flamed out early in his tenure in a blaze of
righteous indignant protest, denouncing what they considered to be the president’s
deficiencies? I do not think that would have best served U.S. national interests, and I believe
that any salutary benefit in terms of reinforcing civil-military norms would have been quickly
eclipsed by the spiral of partisan action and reaction such a dramatic move would have
catalyzed.

This is at the heart of the questions that Mattis had to wrestle with every day but that Golby’s
critique only glancingly addresses: What is best civil-military practice in an administration in
which the president sees his political task as the defilement of taboos and professional norms?
What makes the U.S. Constitution functional on a day-to-day basis are the institutions and
norms that set limits to the “invitation to struggle” hard-wired into the republic. How best to
preserve the ones associated with civil-military relations for successive generations when the
electorate chose a president who promised he would not be shackled by those very
constraints? For that matter, how much should public servants weigh their own effectiveness
against the likely consequences of their own departures?

In sum, how normatively should we treat Mattis and his behavior for future instruction on best
practices? Perhaps the things you need to do to keep your plane aloft when the cockpit is on
fire are not the things you would teach pilots to do during regular flight operations.
Here I suspect Golby and I would come to a hearty agreement: The last two years should not
become the new normal in U.S. civil-military relations. The next administration will have repair
work to do. (The Trump administration inherited deferred maintenance in the civil-military
arena that it has been unable to attend to, so the job has only gotten tougher.) Mattis made a
number of compromises and trade-offs that future secretaries of defense should not have to
make. But in grading him, we must adjust for the difficulty of the assignment. Otherwise, I fear
we are guaranteeing that only people much less capable than Mattis will be willing to serve the
country in these demanding posts.

There is little likelihood that Trump could have appointed someone who would have faced key
civil-military challenges better than Mattis did. There is a decent risk that things will get worse
in the coming years. Mattis, for all his imperfections, was the best thing that happened to civil-military relations in the Trump administration.
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Civil-Military Behaviors that Build Trust

Richard H. Kohn*

For Senior Military:

1. Do everything possible to gain trust with the civilians: no games, no leaking, no attempts at manipulation, no denying information, no slow rolling, no end runs to Congress or up the chain, but total openness. Many, and probably most, civilians come into office without necessarily trusting the military, knowing that they have personal views, ideologies, ambitions, institutional loyalties, and institutional perspectives and agendas. There has been so much controversy, friction, and politicization in the last decades that they'd have to be Rip Van Winkles to think otherwise. Some, perhaps many, both fear and are jealous of senior military leaders: for their accomplishments, achievements, bravery, rank, status, and legitimacy in American society.

2. Insist on the right to give the military perspective, without varnish. But do not be purposefully frightening so as to manipulate outcomes—but straight, thoughtful professional advice. At the same time, do not speak out: that is, speak up but not out. Keep it confidential and don't let subordinates or staffs leak the advice or let it become public unless it arises appropriately in testimony before Congress. If the civilians want your advice known, let them make it known.

3. Do what's right from a moral and professional perspective, and don't let the civilians force anything otherwise. Help them. If they are making mistakes, warn them but then leave it at that. They have the right and the authority to make mistakes, and if they insist, then the military leadership should not prevent it by behaviors that undermine civilian control, which is foundational in American government. Military leaders have neither the experience, perspective, or functional responsibility to judge fully implications and outcomes. The integrity of our system of government overrides any conceivable national security problem short of the survival of the Republic—again, a judgment beyond the military profession.

4. Anticipate the civilians in military policy in terms of changing, reforming, adjusting, and thinking through national security problems, innovation, alternative thinking, etc. Evolution, transformation—however labeled—is ongoing and managing it is a chief professional duty. The standard is what's best for national defense, best for the country, broadly conceived—not necessarily what benefits one's service, or command, or the military in general. If some change or policy is in one's best professional judgment deleterious, say so when appropriate but leave it at that.

5. Resist pressures. Five come to mind but indeed there may be more.

   **A. First, Careerism.** The pressure to conform, to stay silent, to go along, to do what'll advance one's career, while universal, is one of the most deadly behaviors for effective civil-

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military relations. Do not remain silent. Do not suppress open discussion and debate in one's unit, command, or service in order to avoid angering civilian superiors. National defense requires that the military communicate honestly inside its institutions the proper courses of action, in the studying of warfare and current and past operations, in projections about the need for weapons, in doctrine and strategy and tactics, and in a large variety of professional issues and concerns. One cannot keep faith with subordinates or the American people by avoiding proper professional behavior. The military profession respects most, and requires, physical courage. All professions require and respect moral courage.

B. Second, what could be called **Institutionalism**: doing what's best for one's service, command, unit, etc. when the larger national interest suggests otherwise. Few things arouse more suspicion and engender more distrust from civilian leaders, Congress, and the American people. This lowers the reputation and credibility of the military.

C. **Politicization**. Don't be driven by personal ideology or belief about what are the best policy outcomes in offering advice or any other behavior. An officer's political leanings or affiliation should never come up or become known. To function as the neutral servant of the state, the military must be seen to be not non-partisan, but un-partisan—simply above and beyond partisan politics. George C. Marshall wrote: “I have never voted, my father was a democrat, my mother was a republican, and I am an Episcopalian.” Any discussion of partisan politics is out of bounds because it politicizes. If you vote, keep it private as a personal matter. There is a reason that in the old Navy, three subjects were out of bounds for discussion in the wardroom: sex, religion, and politics. All of them can cause dissension or can erode the neutrality and objectivity of an officer and the military as an institution. A distinguished senior general was once called by the White House personnel office, considering him for a job requiring Senate confirmation, to inquire of his party affiliation. The General told his aide, “tell them it's none of their business.” Ten days later they called again; same response. Actually, the General should have told them, “as an officer in the American armed forces, I have no party affiliation.”

D. **Manipulation**. Do not carry the water for the civilians on political as opposed to professional issues. Defending the necessity of a war, promoting a particular policy or decision, explaining how the war is going from anything other than a strictly military viewpoint is not the military's role, but merely politicizes the military, and if the issues are at all contested, reduces the military's credibility as the neutral servant of the state and its legitimacy in national life, both with the public and opposition political leaders, with attendant harm to civil military respect and trust. A recent Chairman of the Joint Chiefs on more than one occasion told public audiences that terrorism was the most dangerous threat the country faced since the Civil War. Not only did this lack believability as a historical interpretation, but it politicized the Chairman and injected him into partisan political debate.
E. Resignation. Personal and professional honor do not require request for reassignment or retirement when one's service, command, unit, department, or government pursues something with which you disagree. The military's role is to advise and then execute lawful orders. One individual's definition of what is morally or professionally ethical is not necessarily the same as another's, or society's. Even those officers at the top of the chain of command—much less those below—are in virtually all cases unaware of all the larger national and international considerations involved, which is the realm of the politicos, elected and appointed. If officers at various levels measure all policies, decisions, orders, and operations in which they are involved by their own moral and ethical systems, and act thereon, the military would be in chaos. Resignation—the act, the threat, even the hint—is a threat to the civilians to use the prestige and moral legitimacy and standing of the military in American society to oppose a policy or decision. It inherently violates civilian control. Nothing except lying does more to undermine civil-military trust. A senior officer whom the President permits to retire or reassigns can abandon their troops and the country if he or she feels the absolute necessity, in a most extraordinary situation. If so, however, the leaving must be done in silence in order to keep faith with the oath to the Constitution, that is, to preserve, defend, and protect it—because pervasive in that document is civilian control.

6. Finally, there are professional obligations that extend into retirement for the most senior military officers that connect directly to civil-military relations. The most important dictates against using one's status as a respected military leader to summon the reputation of the American military for disinterested patriotism, impartial service, and political neutrality, to commit political acts that in fact undermine civil-military relations and contribute to the politicization of their profession. Officers do not hang up their profession norms and values with their uniform, any more than lawyers or doctors do when they retire, or for that matter any other professional. When college professors retire, they do not suddenly promote or condone plagiarism. To endorse presidential candidates or to attack an administration in which they served at a senior level when it is still in office violates an old, and well-established professional tradition; it uses the legitimacy of the military and its reputation for impartiality for what is or inevitably becomes a partisan purpose. It tells officers still on active duty that it's OK to be partisan; it suggests to the American people that the military is just another interest group with its own agenda, rather than the neutral servant of the state; it warns politicians not to trust officers, and to choose the senior military leadership more for political and ideological loyalty and compatibility than for professional accomplishment, experience, candor, strength and steadfastness of character, courage, and capacity for highest responsibility. And it suggests that senior military officers cannot be trusted in the civil-military dialogue to keep confidences, not to abuse candid interchange, or not to undermine their bosses politically—in other words, it corrupts the civil-military relationship for those who still must work with civilians in the most intimate circumstances of policy and decision-making to defend the country.
For Senior Civilians:

1. Get to know the military: the people, the profession, the institutions, the culture and its needs, assumptions, perspectives, and behaviors in order to permit proper and informed decisions on the myriad of issues that decide peace and war. Read, travel, interact, and listen. Delegate but do not make the mistake of thinking that military issues, weapons, processes, behaviors, systems, strategies, operations, or even tactics are so esoteric or technical that they cannot be understood, and that civilian authority must be surrendered to uniformed personnel. Responsibility in the end will not be delegated with the authority. Ask many questions, continually, until there are answers that can be understood, and that make sense.

2. Treat military people and their institutions with genuine respect, and if that proves personally difficult or is insincere, serve elsewhere in government, or not at all. See to the needs of the troops insofar as at all possible, for it is one of the prime norms of military service that leaders take care of their people--their physical and emotional needs--before they take care of their own, down to the lowest enlisted ranks and most recent recruits.

3. Support and defend the military against unwarranted and unfair criticism and attacks, represent their needs and viewpoints elsewhere in government even if you are pursuing policies, or making or executing decisions that they do not like, such as cuts in forces or resources. Throwing them under the bus strains their loyalty and candor in spite of their professional obligations. It is not the job of civilians in the executive branch to criticize the military personally or institutionally. Political leadership includes political cover; if you want the military to stay out of politics, then you have to assume the responsibility.

4. At the same time, work to de-politicize national defense: don't use it for partisan advantage just as one attempts to avoid others from using it for partisan purposes against the Administration. Partner with the Congress in every way possible to avoid the menage a trois.

5. Hold the military accountable for its actions, within the normal, legitimate processes of the services and the Department of Defense. Do not be afraid to relieve or replace officers who do not perform their duties satisfactorily, as long as this is accomplished after due consideration, and in a fair and appropriate manner. Officers who need to be relieved do not need to be dishonored or disgraced, after a lifetime of service that qualified them and earned them high rank, for mistakes or malfeasance. The firing is enough of a penalty.

6. Likewise do not hide behind the military for your own, or your colleagues, mistakes or when bad things happen. Be personally accountable and responsible; one gains enormous credibility and respect for taking the political heat, and for protecting the military and not trying to shift the blame to them and leave them exposed because of civilian decisions or unexpected developments that they were not necessarily responsible for anticipating. If civilian control means civilians have the ultimate authority, they also have the ultimate responsibility and accountability.
7. **Exercise authority gracefully and forcefully** but not abusively, or peremptorily, or at the expense of anyone's personal or professional dignity. Military people want and respect forceful leadership. They want decisions, guidance, instructions, goals (in as explicit and comprehensive form as possible), and above all, in a timely fashion so that time, money, and most importantly lives are not wasted because of indecision or uncertainty. If they cannot have that, be certain to explain exactly why not. The military wants and needs as ordered and as predictable a world as possible in order to deal with the chaos and unpredictability of war; make every effort to meet deadlines and keep to schedules so that they do not succumb to the feeling that dealing with you is . . . war.
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