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Civil-Military Behaviors

Civil-Military Relations in the United States: What Senior Leaders Need to Know (And Usually Don’t)

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Abstract

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

American military officers enter the relationship with a view of “proper” civil-military relations derived from the classic argument laid out by Samuel P. Huntington in the mid-1950s. His Soldier and the State proposes a relatively clean division of responsibility. Civilians should properly determine policy and grand strategy matters with advice from the military. The military should decide on issues largely centering on weapons, operations, and tactics according to the dictates of war, experience, and professional expertise. In Huntington’s view, the military voluntarily subordinates itself to civilian direction in exchange for civilians respecting this division of responsibility. Civilians decide the weighty matter of who to fight and when, how much military budgets will be, what weapons will be purchased, and what policies will govern the military. They then give the military autonomy on the implementation of how to fight and how to execute civilian decisions. As one experienced journalist explained to us, “Civilians tell us where they want to go but leave the driving to us.” Huntington’s real genius was in describing an approach that already aligned with a traditional military point of view. His argument is still taught in professional military educa-
tion as the “normal” theory of civil-military relations, leaving attentive officers to assume that this is the approved model.6

Nevertheless, few civilian leaders—including those assigned to senior national security posts—have spent much time, if any, thinking through civil-military relations either in theory or practice. Even those who have thought about it generally act in a way that aligns with a very different model. The rest simply act according to a logic internally consistent with the dictates of civilian politics.7 Civilians know that there is no fixed division between what is “civilian” and what is “military.” The dividing line is where civilian leaders say it is at any given time, and where they draw it can change. This line may fluctuate with the president’s personal interests, the threat and political stakes, changes in technology, larger national security considerations, and even with what is going viral in social media that day. Frequently, the dividing line between a decision that civilians believe is theirs to make on strategy and operations can fall far into the domain that the military believes is best insulated from civilian encroachment. In such cases, the recurring lament of American military leaders is that civilians misunderstand or are misplaying their role. They especially call out those civilians involved in the national security policy process who are not in the formal chain of command as are the president and secretary of defense. Faced with civilian oversight from anyone other than the narrow chain of command, the military may think or say, “I believe in civilian control, but you are the wrong civilian.” Or if the president or secretary of defense is in the scenario, the military may counter, “You are violating best practice by micromanaging us.”8 Of course, it is the president and secretary of defense’s prerogative to micromanage if they deem it necessary. Moreover, while it would be inappropriate for any civilian other than those two to issue an actual order to the military, it is not inappropriate for other civilians to request information for and visibility into military matters if the president or secretary of defense has tasked them to oversee military affairs. The point stands: service members and civilians in the policymaking process often believe they are acting properly while the other is falling short in some way, and those beliefs derive from different standards and expectations of how relations ought to go in the ideal.

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

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

There is one crucial way the marriage analogy breaks down, for this is a decidedly unequal relationship not based on love and often unchosen by either partner. Democratic theory and historical practice recognize that military members are professionals with distinctive expertise that gives them an indispensable voice worth respecting in discussions of strategy. But they are the agents, not the principals. Military subordination to civilian authority is a defining feature of most governments, particularly republican ones, and democracy cannot survive for long without it. Civilian authority derives not from some superior wisdom but from the fact that civilian politicians are chosen and unchosen by the ultimate principal: the electorate. Civilians oversee national security decisions not because they are right but because the Constitution and laws give them the right, the authority, and the responsibility. And it is their right, even when they are wrong in the choices they make. They have a right to be wrong.9

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

Recent chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, when pressed to describe their roles, have often responded that one was “to provide best military advice.”¹⁰ Viewed in the most positive way, the leaders are trying to indicate that their assignment is to give advice in the policy-making process that conveys their professional judgment about the military dimensions of the problem and that reflects good staff work. It is decidedly not “telling the boss what he or she wants to hear based on political calculations and irrespective of hard military realities.” But “best military advice” rarely works in an optimal way. It is misleading as a mantra and, most problematically, often poorly received by civilian superiors when framed that way.¹¹

To civilian ears, “best military advice” can sound like a threat. Civilians do not trust the benign connotation, for when do professionals ever render less than their best opinion or judgment? Instead, it comes across as a thinly veiled attempt to box in the decision makers because “best” implies a singularity. Pick it or else. Or else? Sometimes the “else” is explicit and sometimes just implicit. For instance, the consequences might be militarily dangerous or the domestic political costs significant, but the phrase can in any case feel uncomfortably like a threat. If this single recommendation is rejected and it leaks, that advice becomes the basis for criticism of the decision maker. Perhaps there are occasions when professional military opinion embraces only one alternative, but in practice senior civilian leaders quickly learn, as did Abraham Lincoln, that their challenge is not deciding whether to listen to the generals but deciding which generals to listen to.¹² When in 2006 President George W. Bush had some distinguished military professionals advising in favor of the surge and others advising against it, which was the “best military advice”?¹³

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

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

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

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

**Why No Norm of Resignation?**

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

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

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

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

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

The closest example of a possible resignation as a protest in the last three
decades is Air Force chief of staff Ron Fogleman’s departure before com-
pleting his four-year term. In reality, treating this as resignation stems from
a fundamental misunderstanding of what happened and why. Fogleman
requested an early retirement when he believed that the senior Pentagon
civilian leadership had lost confidence in his judgment. He also went si-
ently in the hopes of preventing his leaving being interpreted as a clash
with the secretary of defense over blocking the promotion of the general in
charge in Saudi Arabia during the lethal Khobar Towers terrorist attack.
Nonetheless, Fogleman’s effort backfired. His silence led many to believe
his was a “resignation in protest,” a misinterpretation that persists today.
In the American system, there is no norm of resignation because it undermines civilian control.\textsuperscript{20} For the top two dozen or so flag officers—the service chiefs, combatant commanders, and commanders of forces in active combat—resignation either in silence or with protest would be a huge news story and trigger a political crisis for the president or secretary of defense. Even the threat of resignation would constitute an attempt to impose military preferences on civilian authorities. Going beyond the role of advising and executing a decision properly ordered by civilian authority directly contradicts civilian control, and the consequences for civil–military relations would reverberate far into the future. Civilians would choose the most senior officers based on their pliability rather than on experience, expertise, ability, character, and other criteria necessary for high command and responsibility. Political leaders already have some incentive to vet appointments for compatibility with administration priorities or policies—in effect, politicizing the high command. There is some tantalizing evidence suggesting this might happen on the margins.\textsuperscript{21} Nevertheless, the motivations for this sort of corruption in senior officer selection would be far greater if a norm of resignation in protest took hold. Fearing the political consequences of resignation, presidents, secretaries of defense, and service secretaries would trust senior officers less, weakening the candor necessary for intense discussions of critical matters. To forestall the possibility of resignation, consultation with senior officers could become perfunctory window dressing to prevent criticism or political attacks. The threat of resignation could also cause civilian leaders to bend to the will of the military to forestall a politically costly resignation. Either way, resignation with protest as a common practice would soil the advisory process and diminish healthy civil–military relations. As long as the military retains its high standing with the public and high partisanship continues to characterize American politics, the precedent would weaken and perhaps poison civil–military relations to the detriment of effective candor, cooperation, policy, and decision-making. Indeed, there is a strong norm against resignation for good reason, but there is growing evidence that attitudes are changing about whether resignation is appropriate.\textsuperscript{22} Senior military leaders need to internalize the norm against resignation and reflect on how it shapes and constrains their role in the policy-making process.

**Congress and the Challenge of Civil–Military Relations**

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

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

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

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

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

The Distinctive Features of Trumpian Civil-Military Relations

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Civil-Military Interaction across Society**

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

The largest concern is a fear that civilian society and the military will become so alienated from each other the result will be a military incapable or unwilling to serve society. Though they had different diagnoses and prescriptions, this was the common concern animating the two great founders of American civil-military relations scholarship, Huntington and Morris Janowitz.25 Huntington saw civilian society and the military as distant from each other, especially at the level of norms and values, and urged civilian society to embrace more of the military’s thinking, norms, values, and worldview. Janowitz saw the same disconnect and advised the military to develop a new conception of its role and its professionalism to better align with civilian society. Both saw a natural gap as a problem because they doubted that two groups, so dependent on each other but so antithetical in perspectives, could maintain sufficient respect to sustain effective national security policies.

Concerns about the gap escalated with the end of the draft in the early 1970s and have remained high as the all-volunteer force reached maturity in the post–Cold War era. There were brief rally-round-the-flag moments during the invasion of Kuwait in 1991 and in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, but those quickly gave way to doubts about public connections to the military when “the 1 percent went to war and 99 percent went to the mall,” a common aphorism heard in the national security community.26 The extensive polling data over the past several decades support several basic conclusions.27 The public holds the military in high regard but seems to be happily unknowing about most military policies and activities. Military officers are not so divorced in attitudes and opinions from the general public, but there often is a wide gulf of opinion and values between the officer corps and civilian national security elites and elected officials. Both tend to caricature the other and not always in positive terms. Public ignorance about the military extends to the norms of civil-military relations, which have only the most tenuous support from the general public and, in some cases, the military as well.

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

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

Politics and Politicization

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

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

Notwithstanding a new partisan appearance, the military remains one of the few institutions held in high regard across the political spectrum. Consequently, politicians have increasingly used the military to further partisan political ends. Thus, every four years, we have the unseemly spectacle of political candidates—especially those seeking the presidency—recruiting endorsements from senior retired military officers to persuade Americans to vote accordingly. Regulations forbid the active duty military to express an open preference, so candidates look for the next best thing: retired senior officers whose first names remain “General” or “Admiral” after they stop wearing the uniform. The higher the rank, the more recently retired, and the more famous, the better. Every chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the past 20 years has expressed dismay in private or public about this practice because it falsely implies a preference for the active duty military, making the job of serving the commander in chief and working with Congress, regardless of party, more difficult. But the practice continues and in 2016 reached a new, tawdry level with senior retired officers going well beyond anodyne endorsements. At the national party nominating conventions, their rhetoric crossed over into the most vitriolic of ad hominem attacks of the sort considered inappropriate for the candidates themselves to level. Campaigns cannot be expected to exercise self-restraint in this area.
Hence, the military will escape the political muck only if retired officers resist the temptation to trade on their institutions’ reputation for lack of partisanship to commit a brazenly political act. If they wish to join the political fray, they should do so openly as political candidates themselves and not pretend to speak as apolitical observers.35

Senior officers on active duty also worry about another form of politicization: the prominent role given retired military veterans as pundits in ongoing policy debates, usually as talking heads on television or purveyors of “gotcha” quotes in news stories. This occurrence has a long pedigree in American civil-military relations. President Dwight Eisenhower worried aloud in his farewell address about a “military-industrial complex” that distorted policy debates by throwing the power of mutual interests behind a certain course of action.36 These concerns have increased in an age when the news cycle never ends and “everything became war and the military became everything.”37 In our view, this form of politicization is less worrisome if only because the military perspective on policy is a legitimate concern and in practice, every veteran voice on one side of a policy issue is usually counterbalanced by an equal and opposite veteran voice on the other. If anything, this dynamic only reinforces the fundamental civilian challenge in policy making: not whether to heed military advice but which military opinion to heed. Yet the public second-guessing by former senior officers who may have lost situational awareness of the full picture is especially grating to the current military advisors. Senior military leaders need to think in advance how they want to wield their remaining influence once they join the ranks of the retired.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Conclusion: What Can Be Done**

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

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

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

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

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


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


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


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


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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 exists 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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In this excerpt from an article on the decision to “surge” American forces in Iraq in 2006, Peter Feaver (who as a senior member of the NSC staff participated in the decision), explains the broad difference between two groupings of civilian scholars and military thinkers on the way civilian control should function at the top of the U.S. government. [Full disclosure: Feaver was a PhD student of Samuel Huntington, cited at the beginning of this excerpt; and Kohn directed the PhD thesis of H.R. McMaster that resulted in Dereliction of Duty, discussed further in the excerpt.] Which group do you fall into? Your colleagues? Are there problems with both?


Professional Supremacists versus Civilian Supremacists

The academic debate on civil-military relations emphasizes finely drawn and narrow distinctions . . . . 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,” (Huntington, The Soldier and the State: The Theory of Civil-Military Relations Cambridge, MA, 1957, pp. 83–85)) was that it was the best way to secure overall military subordination to civilians. 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, . . . 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,” Foreign Affairs, May/June 2007, 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. (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,” Naval War College Review, pp. 31–32; and Cook, “Revolt of the Generals: A Case Study in Professional Ethics,” Parameters, Vol. 38, No. 1 [Spring 200], 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 “add their voices.”16 (Yingling, “A Failure in Generalship,” Armed Forces Journal, May 1, 2007, 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 supremacism school 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. (Feaver and 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, MA, 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. (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. (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. (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/csf_officer_list.htm.) Thoughtful military ethicists have wrestled with this issue and identified norms that should govern “knowing when to salute.” (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. (Those tilting [albeit slight] 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, 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, 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, NJ, 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.” (Eliot Cohen, Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in War [New York, 2002, p. 458].)

Civilian supremacists do not demand the military stand 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. (Feaver, Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations [Cambridge, MA, 2003], 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 in real-world decision making. And, as I shall demonstrate [in this essay], they were at the heart of the civil-military challenge the Bush administration confronted in the surge decision.
The Trump Administration and Beyond

The Trump Administration provoked a great deal of controversy over civil-military relations, raising all sorts of issues senior military officers and civilian officials, and the American public, should ponder. This review, by a professor of security studies and department head at Marine Corps University, covers the arguments as of the spring of 2021 comprehensively. What are your views of the pros and cons of having senior military officers, active or retired, in high political positions, of Mr. Trump’s statements and behavior in office, and of the way senior military officers on active duty, and retired, reacted, and handled the stresses and the issues?
Trump’s Generals: A Natural Experiment in Civil-Military Relations

James Joyner

Abstract

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

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

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

**Predicting a Civil-Military Relations Crisis**

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

**Concerns of Militarization of Foreign Policy**

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

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

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

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

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

**Concerns over Civilian Control**

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

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

Just over three years later, owing to the twin crises of the “revolt of the admirals” against the second SecDef, Louis Johnson, and the debacle at the outset of America’s entry into the Korean War, President Harry Truman requested a waiver. Writing Congress, he urged, “I am a firm believer in the general principle that our national defense establishment should be headed by a civilian. However, in view of the present critical circumstances and General [George] Marshall’s unusual qualifications, I believe that the national interest will be served best by making an exception in this case.”

While controversial, the request was honored but accompanied by a statement expressing “the sense of the Congress that after General Marshall leaves the office of Secretary of Defense, no additional appointments of military men to that office shall be approved.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Concerns of Politicization of the Military**

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

While allowing that Mattis was her preferred option among the names being floated and was “not especially worried about how Mattis the man will handle the job,” Alice Hunt Friend was nonetheless “worried about how the military as an institution will respond and what comes after Mattis.” She was concerned not only about service parochialism that led to the cooling off period being included in the law but also about the military becoming “associated with one party over the other, robbing the profession of its historic political impartiality.” Relatedly, “active-duty officers may begin to view political appointments as natural addenda to their careers—rather than the rarity it is now—encouraging partisan ambitions prior to retirement.” Hicks was in agreement. Just as routinely appointing senior retired officers would discourage civilians from pursuing careers in defense, “it would risk furthering incentives for active-duty officers to politicize their speech and/or actions and for civilians to seek to ascertain the political viewpoints of officers as part of the recruitment and hiring process for political positions.”

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

Hope of Restraining Trump

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

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

Lt Gen David Barno, USA, retired, and Sen. John McCain were similarly inclined. Barno observed that “most of these officers are relatively non-partisan, publicly endorsed no candidate during the campaign, and have lifelong records of public service leading large, complex organizations.” He predicted that “they could bring a wealth of sober judgment and experience to a Trump foreign policy team in need of both.” A month into the administration, McCain, a frequent Trump critic, declared, “I could not imagine a better, more capable national security team than the one we have right now” when McMaster replaced Flynn.

However, Simpson was unpersuaded, observing, “His Mattis-inspired about-face on waterboarding notwithstanding, I’m not convinced the president-elect will be able to manage a coterie of competing advisors, much less listen to them.”

Assessing the CMR Concerns

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

Was US Foreign Policy Further Militarized?

A quick survey shows that Trump did have an unusual number of general officers, retired and otherwise, in key policy-making positions. The table below provides a snapshot of general and flag officers, retired or active, broken down by administration and post, in the period since the passage of the National Security Act of 1947, which began the modern era.
### Table. General officers in key policy-making positions since 1947

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<tr>
<th>President</th>
<th>Secretary of State</th>
<th>Secretary of Defense</th>
<th>NSC</th>
<th>WHCOS</th>
<th>DCI/DNI</th>
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<td>Harry Truman</td>
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<td>Gerald Ford</td>
<td>Brent Scowcroft</td>
<td>Alexander Haig</td>
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<td>Jimmy Carter</td>
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<td>Stansfield Turner</td>
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<td>Ronald Reagan</td>
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<td>Colin Powell</td>
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<td>George H.W. Bush</td>
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<td>(20 Jan 1989–20 Jan 1993)</td>
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<td>Bill Clinton</td>
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<td>George W. Bush</td>
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<td>Mike McConnell</td>
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<td>Barack Obama</td>
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<td>James Jones</td>
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<td>James Clapper</td>
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<td>Donald Trump</td>
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<td>H. R. McMaster</td>
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<td>(20 Feb 2017–9 Apr 2018)</td>
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- Sidney Souers (23 Jan 1946–10 June 1946)
- Hoyt Vandenberg (10 June 1946–1 May 1947)
- Roscoe Hillenkoetter (1 May 1947–7 Oct 1950)
- Walter Smith (7 Oct 1950–20 Jan 1953)
- Walter Smith (20 Jan 1953–9 Feb 1953)
- James Jones (20 Jan 2009–8 Oct 2010)
- Dennis Blair (29 Jan 2009–28 May 2010)
The table includes only the most prominent roles: secretary of state, secretary of defense, national security advisor, White House chief of staff, director of central intelligence (DCI)/DNI, and secretary of homeland security. It excludes those who served only in an acting capacity. These criteria ignore retired officers like Gen Barry McCaffrey, USA, who served as President Bill Clinton’s “drug czar”; Gen Eric Shinseki, USA, who served as veterans affairs secretary under President Barack Obama; and Anthony Zinni, who served as a special envoy on the Qatar crisis for Trump. Doing so keeps the focus on those in the most powerful posts. It also allows a reasonable consistency in comparison since most have existed since either the very beginning (state secretary, defense secretary, chief of staff, DCI) or very early (national security advisor) in the period in question. The sole exception is the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), created in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. I have taken the liberty of consolidating the DCI and DNI positions, given that they perform the same ostensible function notwithstanding some key organizational differences.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Was Civilian Control Diminished?**

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

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

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

Here, having a recently retired Marine general clearly clouded the issue. It would be perfectly normal for a “regular” civilian SecDef to resist the president who appointed him on matters of policy pursuant to the best
military advice of the brass. But because Trump continued to call him “General Mattis” and continued to cultivate his “Mad Dog” persona, the distinction was blurred.

Carter noted that it “is significant and telling that the highest-ranking military officers—such as Gen Joseph Dunford, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the four chiefs of the armed services—did not file affidavits in support of the government in the transgender cases.”61 He defended these actions, contending that “military leaders have struck a posture that’s not disloyal but still allows the ship of state to correct its course when steered in the wrong direction by an errant president.” He added, “Call it respectful disobedience or selective engagement or lawful resistance or some other euphemism—but it’s clear that military leaders have found a formula for saluting their commander in chief while keeping his worst excesses at bay.”62

Here, having retired generals in prominent civilian roles arguably played a factor. As Carter put it, the uniformed leaders were “probably aided by a secretary of defense and White House chief of staff who have literally worn their shoes. Jim Mattis and John Kelly may not be able to moderate the president’s worst statements or most egregious tweets, but they almost certainly provide cover for senior military leaders behind closed doors, where they can explain to the president why the generals are behaving a certain way.”63 Beyond that, while impossible to assess at this juncture, it’s more than reasonable to assume that Mattis’s relationship with Dunford, who had been his subordinate in the Marines, contributed to this impulse.64

Lara Seligman reported in late 2018 that “frustrated by lack of influence and disheartened by U.S. President Donald Trump’s rhetoric, Department of Defense civilians are heading for the door, leaving key positions unfilled in a Pentagon increasingly run by active-duty or retired military officers.” Moreover, “interviews with a dozen current and former Department of Defense civilians reveal an increasingly hollow and demoralized workforce, with staffers feeling they no longer have a seat at the table.”65 According to one anonymous former official, civilian oversight of the military “was already weakening in the last administration, and I think it basically fell off a cliff.”66

Writing the day after Mattis resigned in protest over his inability to restrain Trump’s decision to withdraw US forces from Syria,67 Schake praised the “quiet integrity” with which Mattis had done his job in the face of “gale-force political winds.” She stated, “The president of the United States has transgressed civil-military norms frequently—treating speeches to troops as campaign rallies, using military titles for civilian appointees to
give the appearance of military support for him personally and for his policies.” 68 In particular, she found it “shocking” when Trump signed his travel ban in the Hall of Heroes at the Pentagon early in the administration, which she saw as a “trap” he had sprung on Mattis and other senior leaders. 69 Tom Nichols likewise blamed Trump for the state of affairs, declaring that “the president has taken a dangerous path, excoriating retired military leaders who criticize him and lavishing praise and make-believe pay raises on the active-duty military voters who he believes support him.” 70

Jim Golby was less forgiving. He cut to the chase by observing, correctly in my view, “Jim Mattis may have become a civilian political appointee, but he never stopped being a marine.” Acknowledging that Trump often placed him in impossible situations, he gave the former secretary credit for having “avoided a true civil-military catastrophe” and going “two years without a major national security crisis.” In the end, though, he assessed that Mattis’s tenure “further: (1) blurred the lines of authority between civilian and military, as well as between active-duty and retired military; (2) enabled the rapid erosion of civil-military norms; and (3) widened gaps between the military and American society as well as between the military brass and elected political leaders.” 71 While seemingly damning, none of these trends was reversed in the second half of the Trump administration when civilians were at the helm of the Pentagon.

Writing in September 2019, nine months after Mattis vacated the post but just two months into Mark Esper’s formal tenure as secretary, Schulman, Friend, and Mara Karlin welcomed the return of a Senate-confirmed civilian to the role after months of acting officials and lauded statements by Esper that he would seek to fill civilian posts that had been long vacant. 72 Indeed, this was a clear failing under Mattis, although not one entirely of his making. His staffing was dominated by the likes of Craig Faller, an active duty rear admiral who was his senior military advisor, and Kevin Sweeney, a retired two-star admiral who was his chief of staff, both of whom had worked for him at CENTCOM. 73 But while this staffing issue was partly a function of leaders naturally wanting to surround themselves with trusted advisors, it was mostly a function of one of the problems that led Trump to select so many generals for his cabinet. Many Republican foreign policy professionals had disqualified themselves from serving by signing Never Trump letters or otherwise declaring the now-president unfit for office. 74 Additionally, Mattis was reportedly rebuffed when he tried to make Michèle Flournoy, who had served as under secretary of defense for policy under the Obama administration, his deputy secretary. 75
Regardless, Schulman, Friend, and Karlin asserted, “Civilian control is a process, not simply a person. And out of sight of most Americans, civilians are losing control over key processes that manage war plans, deployment decisions, and the programs that determine what kind of military the U.S. builds for the future.” Further, “over the last several years, formal engagements for civilian review of war plans have been cut back, with significantly less secretary-level oversight.”76 They especially lamented the chairman having assumed the roles as the “global integrator” of war plans, which they argued “can impute to the military the kind of strategic, diplomatic, and political context that civilians traditionally provide.”77 While they are by no means alone in this concern (indeed, I share it), this development didn’t happen on Mattis’s relatively brief watch and predates Trump’s tenure.78 It was what was left from the failed Goldwater-Nichols 2.0 initiative that survived into the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act signed into law in the last days of the Obama administration.79

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

Regardless, the tensions over civilian control continued once Mattis departed. Indeed, they arguably intensified. In the wake of a series of standoffs in spring 2020, including the firing of tear gas to disperse peaceful protesters, Esper and Army general Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs—in his combat fatigues—marched by Trump’s side so that Trump could stage a photo opportunity at a church. Adding to this turmoil were a series of statements and policy letters from Esper, each of the Joint Chiefs, Mattis, and several retired four-stars critical of militarized responses to demonstrations and the handling of other crises. Karlin summed up the situation: “If this isn’t a civil-military relations crisis, I don’t know what is.”80 But, as I argued at the time, these statements were consistent with their roles. Specifically, “to the extent any of these statements are seen as political, let alone partisan, it says a lot about our state of affairs and should cause us great shame as a nation. But they’re not only consistent with the values of the Constitution, federal law, and the Uniformed Code of Military Justice but it would be unconscionable for men who lead so many African-American service members to not get out in front of this issue.”81
In terms of the balance of power between the uniformed military and civilian policy makers shifting in favor of the former during the Trump administration, it was both a continuation of preexisting trends and a clash between the values of the military profession and the actions of a highly unusual president. While Mattis’s relationship with Dunford and being steeped in those same values might reasonably have been expected to reinforce that tension, we see that it continued, even escalated, under Esper’s tenure. The key variable, then, was Trump, not whether the SecDef was a “true” civilian.

It is too soon to fully assess other predictions in this ambit, but we have some early clues. The long-standing norm, enshrined in law since 1947, of the SecDef being a “true” civilian seems to have been discarded. Logically, Mattis’s confirmation as SecDef made it easier for Austin to be nominated and confirmed, although the direct evidence is mixed. Mattis’s waiver was approved 268–151 by the House and 81–17 by the Senate in 2017.82 Four years later, the House voted 326–78 and the Senate 69–27 for Austin’s appointment.83 Granting that two elections had altered the membership of both bodies, that is an increase of 58 votes in the House but a decrease of 12 in the Senate. There are a variety of possible explanations for that, including the fact that so many Democrats, particularly in the Senate, had been so adamantly opposed to the Mattis waiver and insisted that it be a one-time measure.84 Still, the margins in both cases were overwhelming, lending credence to those who argued that the norm no longer reflected a consensus.

Whether the de facto eligibility of retired generals and admirals to serve as SecDef will lead to them being routinely appointed remains to be seen. But the circumstances that led to Mattis and Austin being chosen were unique. Trump seemed to have something of a fetish for generals, particularly those with outsized reputations for machismo, and had been renounced by much of his party’s national security establishment. He had relatively few options. Biden had been widely expected to make Flournoy the first woman SecDef. For whatever reason, he did not. But he was under enormous pressure to appoint a Black person to the post, and as Bishop Garrison ably demonstrated, that radically narrowed the available talent pool because so few Blacks serve as senators, governors, or Fortune 500 CEOs.85 Additionally, Biden had worked with Austin before and was especially impressed by him.86

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

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

Was the Military Further Politicized?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Beyond that, while many of these incidents had Trump in a leading role, some of the retired generals harmed their reputations as nonpartisan servants on their own. In his tenure at Homeland Security, Kelly was a strong champion of the travel ban, border wall, and other controversial policies. As White House chief of staff, he told reporters that veterans feel “a little bit sorry” for civilians who hadn’t “experienced the wonderful joy you get in your heart” from national service. Of course, Kelly was making those statements years earlier while still in uniform. In a December 2010 speech, he told a crowd of former Marines and local business people, “If anyone thinks you can somehow thank them for their service...
Trump had a unique talent for putting officials who are supposed to be apart from partisan politics in awkward positions implying their endorsement of his policies. This was by no means limited to active or retired military personnel. Combining Justice Amy Coney Barrett’s swearing-in ceremony and a campaign rally was an especially egregious example. Thus, I tend to blame him more than Mattis, Kelly, and McMaster for these incidents. But their very presence lent the prestige of their service to Trump’s cause. Still, these incidents did not stop under Esper. Indeed, as previously discussed, the level of crisis escalated.

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

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

**Was Trump Restrained?**

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

At the outset, though, the theory had promise. Less than three months into Trump’s term, Kimberly Dozier popularized the term “Axis of Adults” to describe “a new band in town that’s guiding national security by quietly tutoring the most powerful man in America.” She applied it especially to Mattis, Kelly (then still at DHS), and McMaster but also included Mike Pompeo (then still at CIA) and, importantly, then-secretary of state Rex Tillerson, who had no military experience. She attributed the coinage...
to former Obama staffer Colin Kahl, who used it in a Twitter thread a month earlier. Around the same time Eric Fehrnstrom declared, “Thank God for the generals,” observing that “in an administration riven by staff bickering and internal disputes, President Trump’s senior military appointees are taking a leading role and acting as a restraining influence.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Conclusions**

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

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

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

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Notes
19. Hicks, 4.
31. Quoted in Hudson, “All the President’s Generals.”
32. Quoted in Hudson, “All the President’s Generals.”
33. Quoted in Burns, “Military Parade for Donald Trump Has Come Early.”
38. Hicks, “Civilian Control of the Armed Forces,” 3.
40. Brooks, “Don’t Freak Out about Trump’s Cabinet Full of Generals.”
41. Joyner, “Greater Deference to Generals Has Undermined Civilian Control of the Military.”
44. Simpson, “I Love Mattis, but I Don’t Love Him as SECDEF.”
45. As a technical matter, Gen Walter Smith, USA, who had been appointed DCI under President Truman in 1950, remained in his post for the first days of the Eisenhower administration (20 January–9 February 1953) but retired to accept the nomination as under secretary of state and fill several other posts under Eisenhower. See “Walter Bedell Smith,” George C. Marshall Foundation, accessed April 2020, https://www.marshallfoundation.org/.
46. It is beyond the scope of this article to survey the civil–military impact of having these officers serve in previous administrations to compare with that of the Trump administration. Indeed, doing so would almost certainly be a book-length project.

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


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


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


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


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


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


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


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


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


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


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While civil-military relations focuses largely on the interactions of the President, White House, and Congress with the senior military leadership, a great deal goes on across the military establishment with political appointees at top levels in the Pentagon, as well as elsewhere. The extent to which civilian control of the military affects policy, planning, decision-making, and other critical activities of the armed forces, depends often on civilians at levels that often escape notice or comment in the defense community. In this essay, three experienced and knowledgeable observers believe civilian control has weakened inside the Pentagon, the product of vacancies in key positions and increased influence of military staffs. Is this a legitimate worry? Are there downsides to a diminished civilian perspective in these key defense areas?

https://www.defenseone.com/voices/mara-e-karlin/13220/?oref=d-article-author

Two Cheers for Esper’s Plan to Reassert Civilian Control of the Pentagon

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SEPTMBER 9, 2019

One might believe that leaving more decisions to uniformed experts would depoliticize policy. The opposite is true.

Updated with a response from a spokesman for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and a response from the authors.
The longest-ever gap in civilian leadership atop the Department of Defense came to an end on July 23, when Mark Esper was sworn in as secretary of defense. His presence in the chain of command, second to Trump, may seem enough to ensure civilian control of the Armed Forces. But the implementation of this American tenet is more complex. Civilian control is a process, not simply a person. And out of sight of most Americans, civilians are losing control over key processes that manage war plans, deployment decisions, and the programs that determine what kind of military the U.S. builds for the future.

Many see no problem with this tilt toward military management of the department. The U.S. military is one of the most-respected government institutions, its technical and operational expertise seemingly unrivaled. It can seem counterintuitive for civilians to manage key decisions of war planning, conflict, and building the future military. But even those who urge civilian deference to military expertise know strategist Carl von Clausewitz’s observation that “war is the continuation of politics by other means.” Statute, and history too, have determined that America is better served when politicians shape the nation’s approach to its defense, even though it is messy, difficult, and naturally infused with tension.

This balance between civilian and military influence over defense policy shifts frequently. But last year, the bipartisan, congressionally mandated National Defense Strategy Commission warned that “civilian voices have been relatively muted on issues at the center of U.S. defense and national security policy.” We three authors have all advised defense secretaries on these areas — one of us also worked on the Commission — and we fear that these recent changes privilege military perspectives with consequences for democratic control of the armed forces. Disrupting this balance is not simply a matter of law or scholarship. It upends comparative advantages that servicemembers and civilians can bring to bear on complex security challenges, and it deeply increases the risk of politicizing the military.

Secretary Esper seems attuned to the general problem. During his Senate confirmation hearing, he told Chairman Inhofe and Senator Shaheen that he intended to fill extended vacancies in key civilian roles. He pledged to work closely with the Congress on budgetary matters to ensure that defense resources are in line with national interests and priorities. And during a recent press conference, he asserted the importance of civilian control over the military. We applaud his approach so far. And we urge him to do more.

Digging into the war plans should be at the top of Esper’s to-do list. Title 10 instructs the secretary of defense to provide military planners with up-front policy guidance for war planning and then to periodically review those plans, ultimately approving of or rejecting the final product. In his own confirmation hearing, William Perry said his top priority would be “reviewing and assessing war plans and deployment orders.” As the 19th defense secretary understood, these issues are rife with high-stakes, political-military consequences and require critical oversight by civilians. Concerns about the faithful execution of the law in recent years has led to language in the annual Defense authorization bills re-emphasizing the importance of civilian oversight of war planning and reviews.
Over the last several years, formal engagements for civilian review of war plans have been cut back, with significantly less secretary-level oversight. Guidance to the Joint Staff also eliminated several of the secretary’s in-progress reviews, a key component of civilian control over the planning process. Instead, planning revisions and the role of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff have evolved to become more symbiotic. The Chairman now serves as the “global integrator” of war plans requiring a global view of the potential crisis. Such practice, though conceptually attractive, can impute to the military the kind of strategic, diplomatic, and political context that civilians traditionally provide.

Civilian oversight and input of war plans is not only an expectation of Congress, but a logical division of labor. War-planning is an inherently political endeavor, reliant on not only the operational options the military uniquely provides, but also the domestic and geopolitical choices embedded in deterrence, escalation management, and acceptable costs and risks. Moreover, civilians have shown that when offered war plans that ignore political-military interests, they will develop their own options that poorly consider military capacities. Esper can reassert civilian oversight of this process immediately by restarting planning reviews.

Title 10 also gives authority to the defense secretary to direct the deployment of the U.S. military. How, where, and in what ways the military operates plays a crucial role in shaping and setting the global security environment in line with U.S. national security priorities. The secretary generally offers long-term guidance on the regular allocation of forces and provides specific approval for crisis deployments, with inputs from his civilian and military staff. But under the “global integrator” approach, this practice has shifted to enable the Chairman to make his own tradeoffs of forces against global needs and threats below a particular threshold. On the margins, such changes are not a catastrophic release of civilian control, and a compelling case can be made that time sensitive or low-impact decisions of small numbers of forces do not merit the secretary’s attention. But cumulatively and over the course of many secretary-chairman relationships, this arrangement may erode the secretary’s power over military activities. As the National Defense Strategy Commission asserted, “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.”

Secretary Esper should review at length the delegation authority given to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs in deploying forces, adjusting the number, type, and purpose for which he feels comfortable signing away his Title 10 authority. As importantly, he should involve the defense undersecretary for policy in shaping these decisions.

Finally, Title 10 also requires the defense secretary to direct the “goals, priorities, and objectives” for building the future U.S. military. He is responsible for managing more employees than Walmart and leading an institution whose annual budget is more than three times larger than ExxonMobil. In doing so, the secretary must consider how best to spend the hundreds of billions of dollars requested of the Congress to ensure the military has a force that appropriately balances among capability, capacity, and readiness to ensure it can win future wars. This requires not only broader political context, but also choosing winners and losers across the military services.
In 2018, Secretary Mattis released a blunt defense strategy that refocused the military away from fighting terrorists and wrestling with Middle East conflicts toward competing with China and Russia. Yet the strategy faces real challenges in its implementation. From near-term crises with Iran to competing strategies that offer alternate priorities, there is no shortage of distractions in time, attention, and resources.

Esper will need to ensure that his priorities drive the military’s priorities in guiding the future force’s shape and purpose, not the reverse. Implementing the National Defense Strategy will only occur through his vigilant supervision and willingness to take risk in those areas where the military will be reluctant. It is not easy for a generation of military leaders who have grown up fighting wars in the Middle East to deprioritize the region. Nor is it simple for the defense institution to give up long-standing assumptions on force structure. But Esper has to be the one to calculate the political and policy risks on these sensitive issues, which can give the military the space needed to generate the innovative operational concepts only it can build.

Perhaps it is tempting to believe that if the military assumes one or more of these political decisions, the questions will lose political relevance and therefore can be answered in a purely technocratic way. And here is an area where Esper’s instincts may be failing him. At the end of August, he declared that he will keep DoD out of politics, in part, by acting “in an apolitical way” himself. Perversely, this is much more likely to lead to the politicization of the military. Military officers will be used by political leaders for their own ends; senior leaders will be promoted based less on their service branch’s institutional interests and more on domestic political considerations. The defense secretary and his staff serve as a crucial buffer between the military and the political whims precisely by being the ones to engage in politics on behalf of the Department. Esper should not dodge these bullets; he should take them so the military does not have to.

Esper should take a zero-tolerance approach to politicization of the military. And he should strengthen the technocratic bulk of the civil service to ensure that he and his successors have a professional class who can support him in these crucial roles.

To be clear, the goal is not civilian micromanagement. The Founders and their successors determined a division of labor between civilian and military servants that maximizes their comparative advantages while also demanding frustrating but productive friction. But in the end, that division is designed to favor the judgment of elected politicians. For Esper to shift power back toward civilian officials while demanding excellence from both elements of his staff in these three processes—planning, force allocation, and sizing and shaping the military—is not only by the book, it’s a democratic outcome.

Defense One received a response to this piece from Col. Patrick S. Ryder, USAF, Special Assistant for Public Affairs to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff:

Your Sept. 9 op-ed titled ‘Two Cheers for Esper’s Plan to Reassert Civilian Control of the Pentagon’, while properly highlighting the constitutional importance of civilian control of the military, inaccurately characterizes the role and authorities of the Chairman of the Joint
Chiefs of Staff. Everything the Chairman and the Joint Staff do is done under the principles of civilian control of the military. To be clear, no Soldier, Sailor, Airman or Marine deploys anywhere worldwide without oversight from the Secretary of Defense and input from DoD civilian policymakers. Contrary to the authors’ assertions, the Chairman exercises no operational control over any U.S. military forces and his duties as global integrator are purely advisory in nature in accordance with Title 10 and his role as principal military advisor to the President and Secretary of Defense. In fact, rather than eroding civilian control of the military as the authors suggest, the Joint Staff’s global integration efforts are all focused on enhancing the ability of the Secretary and DoD civilian policymakers to make globally informed decisions as they lead the Department of Defense.

The authors respond:

We appreciate the enthusiastic and thoughtful response that this piece has generated across the defense community. Civilian control of the military remains a strongly held principle among defense practitioners. We also welcome the spokesman’s serious engagement with the piece. But we believe some of his assertions are flawed. First, the piece makes no claims about changes in operational control, but about deployment and posture decisions. Second, we do not argue that civilian control has evaporated, but that it is weakening significantly, as demonstrated by the trends in important DoD processes we describe and supported by a wide range of defense community members from across the political spectrum. Principle may exist without the processes to support it; without those, principle is an aspiration rather than a practice. Everyone in the defense community is familiar with Huntington’s work on civil-military relations; however, Huntington made a later argument that “structural decisions” such as the ones we highlight often have constraining effects on strategic matters in defense policy. It is this slow reduction in civilian control over structural defense matters that we call attention to in our piece.

We welcome further engagement with the Joint Staff and other interested parties on these issues.

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Open Letter from Retired Generals and Admirals

Our Nation is in deep peril. We are in a fight for our survival as a Constitutional Republic like no other time since our founding in 1776. The conflict is between supporters of Socialism and Marxism vs. supporters of Constitutional freedom and liberty.

During the 2020 election an “Open Letter from Senior Military Leaders” was signed by 317 retired Generals and Admirals and, it said the 2020 election could be the most important election since our country was founded. “With the Democrat Party welcoming Socialists and Marxists, our historic way of life is at stake.” Unfortunately, that statement’s truth was quickly revealed, beginning with the election process itself.

Without fair and honest elections that accurately reflect the “will of the people” our Constitutional Republic is lost. Election integrity demands insuring there is one legal vote cast and counted per citizen. Legal votes are identified by State Legislature’s approved controls using government IDs, verified signatures, etc. Today, many are calling such commonsense controls “racist” in an attempt to avoid having fair and honest elections. Using racial terms to suppress proof of eligibility is itself a tyrannical intimidation tactic. Additionally, the “Rule of Law” must be enforced in our election processes to ensure integrity. The FBI and Supreme Court must act swiftly when election irregularities are surfaced and not ignore them as was done in 2020. Finally, H.R.1 & S.1, (if passed), would destroy election fairness and allow Democrats to forever remain in power violating our Constitution and ending our Representative Republic.

Aside from the election, the Current Administration has launched a full-blown assault on our Constitutional rights in a dictatorial manner, bypassing the Congress, with more than 50 Executive Orders quickly signed, many reversing the previous Administration’s effective policies and regulations. Moreover, population control actions such as excessive lockdowns, school and business closures, and most alarming, censorship of written and verbal expression are all direct assaults on our fundamental Rights. We must support and hold accountable politicians who will act to counter Socialism, Marxism and Progressivism, support our Constitutional Republic, and insist on fiscally responsible governing while focusing on all Americans, especially the middle class, not special interest or extremist groups which are used to divide us into warring factions.

Additional National Security Issues and Actions:

- Open borders jeopardize national security by increasing human trafficking, drug cartels, terrorists entry, health/CV19 dangers, and humanitarian crises. Illegals are flooding our Country bringing high economic costs, crime, lowering wages, and illegal voting in some states. We must reestablish border controls and continue building the wall while supporting our dedicated border control personnel. Sovereign nations must have controlled borders.

This letter was released with 124 signatories (with the number still climbing), all who had retired from military service at the O-7 and above rank. Is this an appropriate letter for retired senior officers to sign and promote? Whether or not you think this letter is appropriate, are there any limits retired officers should observe regarding collective partisan commentary and, if so, what are those limits?
China is the greatest external threat to America. Establishing cooperative relations with the Chinese Communist Party emboldens them to continue progress toward world domination, militarily, economically, politically and technologically. We must impose more sanctions and restrictions to impede their world domination goal and protect America’s interests.

The free flow of information is critical to the security of our Republic, as illustrated by freedom of speech and the press being in the 1st Amendment of our Constitution. Censoring speech and expression, distorting speech, spreading disinformation by government officials, private entities, and the media is a method to suppress the free flow of information, a tyrannical technique used in closed societies. We must counter this on all fronts beginning with removing Section 230 protection from big tech.

Re-engaging in the flawed Iran Nuclear Deal would result in Iran acquiring nuclear weapons along with the means to deliver them, thereby upsetting Mideast peace initiatives and aiding a terrorist nation whose slogans and goals include “death to America” and “death to Israel”. We must resist the new China/Iran agreement and not support the Iran Nuclear Deal. In addition, continue with the Mideast peace initiatives, the “Abraham Accords,” and support for Israel.

Stopping the Keystone Pipeline eliminates our recently established energy independence and causes us to be energy dependent on nations not friendly to us, while eliminating valuable US jobs. We must open the Keystone Pipeline and regain our energy independence for national security and economic reasons.

Using the U.S. military as political pawns with thousands of troops deployed around the U.S. Capitol Building, patrolling fences guarding against a non-existent threat, along with forcing Politically Correct policies like the divisive critical race theory into the military at the expense of the War Fighting Mission, seriously degrades readiness to fight and win our Nation’s wars, creating a major national security issue. We must support our Military and Vets; focus on war fighting, eliminate the corrosive infusion of Political Correctness into our military which damages morale and war fighting cohesion.

The “Rule of Law” is fundamental to our Republic and security. Anarchy as seen in certain cities cannot be tolerated. We must support our law enforcement personnel and insist that DAs, our courts, and the DOJ enforce the law equally, fairly, and consistently toward all.

The mental and physical condition of the Commander in Chief cannot be ignored. He must be able to quickly make accurate national security decisions involving life and limb anywhere, day or night. Recent Democrat leadership’s inquiries about nuclear code procedures sends a dangerous national security signal to nuclear armed adversaries, raising the question about who is in charge. We must always have an unquestionable chain of command.

Under a Democrat Congress and the Current Administration, our Country has taken a hard left turn toward Socialism and a Marxist form of tyrannical government which must be countered now by electing congressional and presidential candidates who will always act to defend our Constitutional Republic. The survival of our Nation and its cherished freedoms, liberty, and historic values are at stake.
We urge all citizens to get involved now at the local, state and/or national level to elect political representatives who will act to Save America, our Constitutional Republic, and hold those currently in office accountable. The “will of the people” must be heard and followed.

Signed by:

RADM Ernest B. Acklin, USCG, ret.
MG Richard D. Anderegg, USAF, ret
MG Joseph T. Anderson, USMC, ret.
RADM Philip Anselmo, USN, ret.
MG Joseph Arbuckle, USA, ret.
BG John Arick, USMC, ret.
BG Jim Balserak, USAF, ret.
RADM Jon W. Bayless, Jr. USN, ret.
RDML James Best, USN, ret.
BG Charles Bishop, USAF, ret.
BG William A. Bloomer, USMC, ret.
BG Donald Bolduc, USA, ret.
LTG William G. Boykin, USA, ret.
MG Edward R. Bracken, USAF, ret.
MG Patrick H. Brady, MOH, USA, ret.
VADM Edward S. Briggs, USN, ret.
BG Frank Bruno, USAF, ret.
VADM Toney M. Bucchi, USN, ret.
MG Bobby Gene Butcher, USMC, ret
RADM John T. Byrd, USN, ret.
MG Clifton C. Capp, USA, ret
BG Jimmy Cash, USAF, ret.
LTG Dennis D. Cavin, USA, ret.
LTG James E. Chambers, USAF, ret.
MG Carroll D. Childers, USA, ret.
BG Clifton C. “Tip” Clark, USAF, ret.
VADM Ed Clexton, USN, ret.
MG Jay Closner, USAF, ret
BG Michael J. Cole, USAF, ret.
VADM John G. Cotton, USN (ret)
MG Tommy F. Crawford, USAF, ret.
MG Robert E. Dempsey, USAF, ret.
BG James H. Doty, USA (ret)
BG Phillip Drew, USAF, ret.
MG Neil L. Eddins, USAF, ret.
RADM Ernest Elliot, USN, ret
BG Bob Floyd, USA, ret.
BG Jerome V. Foust, USA, ret.
BG Jimmy E. Fowler, USA, ret.
RADM J. Cameron Fraser, USN, ret.
MG John T. Furlow, USA, ret.
MG Timothy F. Ghormley, USMC, ret.
MG Francis C. Gideon, USAF, ret.
MG William A. Gorton, USAF, ret.
MG Lee V. Greer, USAF, ret.
RDML Michael R. Groothousen, Sr., USN, ret.
BG John Grueser, USAF, ret.
MG James A. Guest, USA, ret.
MG Ken Hagemann, USAF, ret.
RDML Dale N. Hagen, USN, ret.
BG Norman Ham, USAF, ret.
VADM William Hancock, USN, ret.
MG Gary L. Harrell, USA, (ret)
LTG Henry J. Hatch, USA, ret.
BG James M. Hesson, USA, ret.
MG Kent H. Hillhouse, USA (ret)
BG Robert Hipwell, USA, ret.
MG Bill Hobgood, USA, ret.
BG Stanislaus J. Hoey, USA, ret.
MG Bob Hollingsworth, USMC, ret.
MG Jerry D. Holmes, USAF, ret.
MG Clinton V. Horn, USAF, ret.
RDML Gregory C. Horn, USN, ret.
MG James P. Hunt, USAF, (ret)
LTG Joseph E. Hurd, USAF, ret.
BG Percy G. Hurtado II, USA, ret.
VADM Paul Ilg, USN, ret.
MG T. Irby, USA, ret.
LTG Ronald Iverson, USAF, ret.
RADM (L) Grady L. Jackson
MG William K. James, USAF, ret.
LTG James H. Johnson, Jr. USA, ret.
ADM. Jerome L. Johnson, USN, ret.
BG Charles Jones, USAF, ret.
BG Gary Lee Jones, USA, ret.
RADM Herbert C. Kaler, USN, ret
BG Jack H. Kotter, USA, ret.
MG Anthony R. Kropp, USA, ret
BG Charles Kruse, ARNG, ret.
RADM Chuck Kubic, USN, ret.
BG Leonard f. Kwiatkowski, USAF (ret)
BG Enrique J. Lanz, USAF, ret.
BG Jerry L. Laws, USA, ret.
BG Douglas E. Lee, USA, ret.
MG Kenneth Lewis, USAF, ret.
MG Vernon B. Lewis, USA, ret.
MG Thomas G. Lightner, USA, ret.
MG James E. Livingston, USMC, ret. MOH
MG John D. Logeman, USAF, ret.
BG Robert W. Lovell, USAF, ret
MG Jarvis Lynch, USMC, ret.
LTG Fred McCorkle, USMC, ret.
MG Don McGregor, USAF, ret.
LTG Thomas McInerney, USAF, ret.
RADM John H. McKinley, USN, ret.
BG Ronald S. Mangum, USA, ret.
BG James M. Mead, USMC, ret
BG Joe Mensching, USAF, ret.
RADM W. F. Merlin, USCG, ret.
RADM (L) Mark Milliken, USN, ret.
MG John F. Miller, USAF, ret.
RADM Ralph M. Mitchell, Jr. USN, ret.
MG Paul Mock, USA, ret.
BG Daniel I. Montgomery, USA, ret.,
RADM John A. Moriarty, USN, ret.,
RADM David R. Morris, USN, ret.
MG James H. Mukoyama, Jr. USA, ret
RADM Bill Newman, USN, ret.
BG Joe Oder, USA, ret.
MG Raymund O’Mara, USAF, ret.
MG Joe S. Owens, USA, ret.
VADM Jimmy Pappas, USN, ret.
LTG Garry L. Parks, USMC, ret.
RADM Russ Penniman, RADM, USN, ret.
RADM Leonard F. Picotte, ret.
VADM John Poindexter, USN, ret.
RADM Ronald Polant, USCG, ret.
MG Greg Power, USAF, ret.
RADM Brian Prindle, USN, ret.
RADM J.J. Quinn, USN, ret.
LTG Clifford H. Rees, Jr. USAF, ret.
RADM Edward T. Reidy, USN, ret.
RADM William J. Ryan, USN ret
RADM Norman T. Saunders, USCG, ret.
RADM William R. Schmidt, USN, ret.
MG Richard V. Secord, USAF, ret.
LTG Hubert Smith, USA, ret_
MG James N. Stewart, USAF, ret.
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BG Joseph S. Stringham, USA, ret.
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MG Paul M. Van Sickle, USAF, ret.
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MG John M. White, USAF, ret.
MG Geoffrey P. Wiedeman, JR. USAF, ret.
MG Richard O. Wightman, Jr., USA, ret.
RADM Denny Wisely, USN, ret.
RADM Ray Cowden Witter, USN, ret.
LTG John Woodward, USAF, ret.
A change in presidential administration always requires something of a reset in civil-military relations at the top of the government, just as changes in the makeup of Congress, particularly of the armed services and appropriations committees, can require the armed services to adjust to new civilian bosses and perhaps different policies and focuses. The changes in the wake of the 2020 election make for a significantly different civil-military relations environment: not only people, but policies, procedures, and priorities. This article compares and contrasts the Trump administration and the expectations as of January 1 of what the incoming Biden administration will look like. It might be helpful to make a list of what’s likely to change and what’s likely to remain the same, or similar. Using your own list, how should the armed forces adjust to the new administration?

https://warontherocks.com/2021/01/biden-inherits-a-challenging-civil-military-legacy/
Joseph Biden will be the most experienced first-time president in nearly 30 years when he enters office, but he and his team will inherit a civil-military relationship as tenuous as any in recent memory. Not only will they have to deal with the fallout of President Donald Trump's unusual legacy as commander-in-chief, they will need to try to avoid some of the unhealthy civil-military dynamics left over from the Obama administration. Biden and his team will grapple with all of this through a national security establishment that has changed in some important ways since Democrats last were at the helm. This would be a daunting assignment even in a stable time, but — given the potential threats on the horizon and the other crises Biden inherits — restoring a healthier civil-military balance will be especially challenging. Civilians may have the right to be wrong, but the margin for error in this environment is slim.

**Trump’s Civil-Military Legacy**

By any measure, Trump’s tenure was a difficult one for civil-military relations. This problematic legacy can be grouped into the "4 P's": the president, people, processes, and politicization. The problems started at the top, with the president suffering from a civil-military tin ear — one not attuned to, and perhaps openly disrespectful of, the norms and traditions that shore up best-practices in the making and implementation of national security policy. Trump was the least-prepared occupant of the Oval Office in American history, particularly with regard to his role at the top of the national security chain of command. He also is the president who grew the least while in office, ending
his four-year term with egregious examples of the same sort of deviant practices that marred his earliest days.

To be sure, Trump had some genuine avenues of appeal to the military. He obviously admired certain aspects of military tradition — the pomp and circumstance of parades and the macho appeal of battle cries. He earned some credit by insisting on reversing the projected defense cuts of the Obama era. Polls showed that, like previous Republican candidates, more veterans preferred him to the Democratic alternative, although here his advantage was markedly less than that enjoyed by his predecessors. During his first two years in office, Trump granted the military a somewhat freer hand to pursue counter-ISIL operations, openly contrasting this approach with perceptions of Obama-era micromanagement that chafed some in the military.

But these instrumental appeals were matched with a personal style that seemed to demand personal loyalty to him rather than to the Constitution. Time and again, Trump treated his senior military leaders as if they were courtiers, rather than the professional servants of the state that they consider themselves to be. Perhaps no single moment captures this gulf better than the televised first meeting of the full Cabinet on June 12, 2017. As the camera panned the room, secretary after secretary offered up cringe-worthy paeans of personal praise to Trump until it was the turn for Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, who reversed the tables by speaking of the honor of representing the “men and women of the Department of Defense.” The gulf remained large throughout Trump’s tenure and was reinforced in the final months when, in the midst of the president’s unprecedented efforts to overturn his electoral defeat, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley pointedly emphasized that the military “do[es] not take an oath to a king or a queen, a tyrant or a dictator. We do not take an oath to an individual. ... We take an oath to the Constitution.” That this boilerplate statement was deemed newsworthy and treated as an implicit rebuke of the president speaks volumes about the strain that Trump’s personalistic style has caused for civil-military relations.

Trump also struggled to recruit and retain experienced professionals, especially in the national security arena, in part because so many of the Republican civilian national security establishment had signed letters openly refusing to support his candidacy, even after he secured the party’s nomination. As a consequence, Trump created acute civil-military imbalances by over-relying on current and recently retired military officers to fill key political roles usually reserved for civilians. Though serving in civilian political roles, Trump referred to them as “my generals,” and he made it clear that he relied on them for military advice as much as, if not more than, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and other service chiefs — the ones identified by statute as the president’s key military advisers. The administration further hollowed out the civilian ranks by filling in lower-level positions with less-qualified or impossible-to-confirm appointees who were kept on in an “acting” status to make them function more like disposable errand boys than like fully empowered executive officers. Trump’s tumultuous personnel policies carried over into even the top political positions. After Mattis departed, the Department of Defense
endured a full six months of being led by a series of acting secretaries, unprecedented in the department’s history.

The combination of unfilled civilian positions and weakened oversight processes helped the Joint Staff and the combatant commands become even more powerful as bureaucratic actors, further eclipsing the civilian Office of the Secretary of Defense in the policymaking process within the Department of Defense. Again, the failure of the administration to evolve over time has been evident, with the problems bedeviling the administration in the first six months of Trump’s term becoming even more acute in its last six months. The Trump administration is ending with the weakest civilian staff of any modern president.

The uneven policy processes of the Trump administration exacerbated these difficult civil-military dynamics. On issues where the president did not personally engage, an orderly process emerged roughly akin to what previous administrations developed. But when the president did engage personally, that process was jettisoned and rendered irrelevant. In its stead was an approach of “policy-by-tweet” and “advised-by-cable TV-pundits” through which the president wrong-footed his own team over and over again.

For instance, the administration produced two major strategies — the National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy — that were well received and well integrated with each other, as intended by statute. But they were largely irrelevant to any issue on which the president himself personally engaged. Thus, the National Security Strategy emphasized the importance of allies and America’s treaty commitments, while Trump’s personal involvement entailed denouncing allies and calling into question America’s treaty commitments. It identified Russia as a principal geopolitical foe, while Trump expressed undisguised admiration for Putin and bent over backwards to excuse Russian meddling in American elections.

This dysfunction further weakened civilians vis-à-vis the military. Traditionally, civilians at lower levels in the national security policymaking process derive their influence from the extent to which they reflect the power of the president himself. But if the president rules by capricious tweet, the civilian policy adviser becomes mostly irrelevant and little of consequence stands between the commander-in-chief and the uniformed military officials who implement the orders.

These approaches fed into an overall politicization of civil-military relations, accelerating a trend that predated Trump but that became dramatically worse during his tenure. Trump spoke of the military as his natural political base — or what, in his mind, should be his base, if it had not been corrupted by “deep state” enemies determined to undermine his presidency. Thus, in a stroke, everyone in the establishment became partisan friend or foe.

If a friend — or, more accurately, while a friend, since, for Trump, loyalty down the chain of command was ephemeral — then no favor was too great. Trump gave the most extreme blanket pardon ever given by a president to retired three-star general Mike
Flynn, who had pled guilty to felony charges of lying to hide suspicious contacts with Russian interlocutors. Trump likewise overruled the chain of command and intervened in a precedent-breaking way to grant pardons and commutations to servicemembers charged with war crimes. These individuals repaid the president by attending campaign fundraisers for his reelection and by denouncing Trump’s political enemies as if they were enemies of the United States. But if deemed a partisan foe, then no slur was too great. When the president was stung by multiple reports that he had been heard denigrating dead and wounded American veterans as “suckers and losers,” Trump lashed out at senior generals and admirals as political opponents “because they want to do nothing but fight wars so that all of those wonderful companies that make the bombs and make the planes and make everything else stay happy.”

As the 2020 campaign season intensified, Trump fed concerns that he would reject any electoral outcome that did not result in him getting a second term, which, in turn, led otherwise responsible observers to speculate about a possible role for the military in enforcing the electoral results on a recalcitrant incumbent. Milley sought to distance the military from this kind of speculation by underscoring the military oath to the Constitution and by emphasizing that the Constitution identified no such role for the military. Trump’s stubborn refusal to allay doubts even led to the widely publicized transgression of a taboo: Senior former officials from Democratic and Republican administrations wargamed a previously impossible-to-imagine contingency: open partisan contestation after the election that escalated to armed conflict. That war game in turn led former senior Trump officials to call for pro-Trump “counter coup” planning. Some reports even suggest that Trump recently asked the pardoned Flynn about wild conspiracy theories the latter has been spreading in the media stating that Trump has the authority to deploy the military to seize voting machines in swing states and “basically rerun an election in each of those states.” The military will not follow illegal orders if Trump gives them. However even this speculation in the Oval Office is causing damage that may change expectations about the military’s role in politics after Trump departs.

This legacy is disturbing, but it remains to be seen how enduring the harm will be. The nomination of retired general Lloyd Austin, only four years after Trump ignored the norm against appointing a retired general as secretary of defense, suggests some of Trump’s actions may have fundamentally transformed the civil-military playing field. But it is worth distinguishing between a civil-military violation — which can range from minor to severe — and the lingering consequences of that violation — which can range from transient to enduring. To be sure, the more severe the violation, the more likely it is that the damage will take some time to undo. But not always. It is also worth noting that some parts of the civil-military system may recover from the same harm sooner than other parts.

Austin’s nomination may complicate the return to regular order in the Pentagon, especially if he is not attentive to the civil-military challenges he inherits. Even so, the effects of Trump’s norm-breaking behavior may be less likely to persist as long within the Defense Department and the civil-military processes that involve it as they are in the broader political and cultural milieus that feed into and underlay the policymaking
In breaking so many taboos for short-term political advantage, seemingly without paying an immediate price for doing so, Trump may have shaped the incentives for future presidents and other public officials to seek similar short-term political expediency. If so, the harm to civil-military relations could linger longer than a return to a semblance of regular order within the Department of Defense might suggest.

Lessons from the Obama Era

Biden’s team is surely lamenting the civil-military legacy it is inheriting from the Trump administration, but members of the team should also recall the flawed civil-military legacy the Obama administration left at the end of President Barack Obama’s term in 2016. Although these missteps pale in comparison to the legacy Trump leaves behind, mutual mistrust often colored interactions between civilian and military leaders well before Trump entered the scene.

The Obama team’s civil-military record was uneven, marred by high levels of friction and micromanagement, some real and some perceived. The Defense Department chafed against restrictions imposed by an inexperienced commander-in-chief and enforced by a National Security Council staff that had grown so large that even its own director admitted reform was necessary. Within the Department of Defense, successive changes also created challenges for the recruitment, retention, and management of the civilian professional staff with statutory responsibility for providing oversight on a daily basis. By the end of the Obama era, the secretary of defense already was starting to bypass his own civilian staff, turning instead to their military counterparts for policy advice and operational management.

Some of the responsibility for these problems also falls on senior uniformed leaders who pushed the boundaries of their policy influence by limiting options for civilian decision-makers and embracing the practice of offering what they called “best military advice.” These dual trends had the effect of creating political pressure for elected leaders to accept military recommendations. Even before Trump took office, the balance between the influence of members of the Joint Staff and the Office of the Secretary of Defense was beginning to lean heavily toward the Joint Staff — a pattern that intensified in the Trump years.

Moreover, while Biden has the great advantage of having campaigned as a unity candidate, he brings in other baggage by presiding over a divided party. It is notable that the first high-profile Cabinet post that progressives within his own party chose to contest on ideological grounds was the position of secretary of defense. The divisions within the Democratic Party on defense spending, nuclear modernization, counter-terrorism, China, and even how to respond to climate change are at least as big, and perhaps bigger, than those that separate Biden from many Republican leaders in the House and Senate. Biden may have compounded this problem by nominating a retired general to a post that will require strong political skills to work across a divided party and with a divided Congress while also trying to reestablish atrophied processes in a Defense Department that looks much different than it did four years ago.
Biden’s team may also suffer the negative consequences of the repeated appeals made by Democrats, Never Trump Republicans, and others during the Trump era for the military to function as “the adults in the room” by checking Trump as he sought to implement controversial policies. A military bureaucracy that has been praised for slow-rolling policies it does not like probably will not quickly unlearn those techniques. Indeed, many of these habits were evident even before Trump. It may be only a matter of time before the Biden team encounters some bureaucratic friction of its own. These unhelpful military tendencies may well be exacerbated by the gender and, perhaps, age dynamics that veterans of the Obama administration identified and lamented. It is highly likely that the Biden team will boast placing a record number of women national security professionals in key positions throughout the administration. Some may also be significantly younger than their military counterparts, even though most will have had significant Defense Department experience of their own. The Obama administration discovered that it took time for the military to adjust to these changing social realities: There were far too many episodes of gross unprofessionalism, many by military leaders who failed to show women political appointees the respect they deserved in the process.

To be sure, the new Biden team will not be a carbon copy of the Obama team and even those that return will do so with new perspective and their own lessons learned in the interval. However, they would be wise to recognize that a rapid shift in leadership styles now may create a sort of civil-military whiplash. The Biden team almost certainly will want to reestablish processes that provide greater civilian direction for war plans, budgeting, and global priorities. After four years of relative autonomy for the Joint Staff and combatant commands, combined with reduced daily civilian oversight due to under-filled political positions in the Pentagon, a micromanagement narrative could almost write itself. Biden and his team will need to be attuned to these dynamics and look for early opportunities to establish trust and clarify their expectations about the civil-military relationship while also providing senior military officers a real voice in the policy process that makes them feel respected and heard.

The Institutional Context

Biden’s team will have to manage these challenges with a toolbox that is under severe fiscal constraint and with military leaders who already believe they are strapped thin. Trump did manage to increase defense spending trends and slightly decrease the number of American military personnel deployed abroad, resulting in a meaningful reinvestment in defense capabilities and a moderate decrease in operational tempo. But future defense budgets will be under severe pressure, perhaps rivaling in the aggregate the kinds of cuts imposed by the Budget Control Act, though hopefully with more flexibility and predictability to manage them in more sensible ways than the threat of a sequester straitjacket permitted. Moreover, the decline in foreign deployments was matched, and in some cases exceeded, by a decline in “permanent” foreign basing. The result is that the strains of military deployments on military personnel and their families are as great as in earlier periods, when a larger number and a greater scale of deployments were supported by more robust foreign basing infrastructure. To pick just
one example: A shorter NATO rotation to Germany or Poland without family accompanying (and without combat pay as a sweetener) could impose more strain on morale than a longer rotation with family. There are few signs that civilian and military leaders fully understand these challenges or that they are willing to make difficult tradeoffs.

In the meantime, the last four years have seen a failure to make the needed investments in the other tools of statecraft, particularly diplomacy and development. While morale in the foreign policy and national security ranks will likely improve, at least initially, with the return of something resembling establishment values, the damage caused by deferred or dysfunctional approaches to human capital will hobble the Biden team for some time to come and will, in particular, make it hard to quickly rebuild the capacity of civilian services to match advances in the uniformed ranks — especially in the face of the prolonged resource fights to come. The Trump team was especially vigorous in burrowing in some of its most partisan and suspect appointments into civil service positions and on bipartisan boards within the national security establishment. An early challenge for the Biden team will be deciding — likely on a case-by-case basis — whether the restoration of the “above-partisan-politics” norm in these areas requires engaging in the seemingly partisan practice of cleaning house, or whether the norm would be made stronger through greater forbearance. None of these choices will be straightforward.

In terms of the institutional environment, legislative changes and four years of weak civilian control mean that Biden will face a much stronger chairman of the Joint Chiefs and associated Joint Staff than he faced barely four years ago. The 2017 National Defense Authorization Act granted the chairman additional responsibilities for global integration, technically expanding only his advisory role. In practice, these powers have become more expansive, with the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff taking on some roles that traditionally had fallen to the Office of the Secretary of Defense. Trump administration officials also changed some of the procedures for war plan reviews and political guidance, reducing the number of interactions between military leaders and mid-level political appointees that previously had provided the civilian Office of the Secretary of Defense more opportunities to play an active oversight role. Trump’s unorthodox and tumultuous personnel policies also shifted practical authority to the Joint Staff. Long nomination delays and unfilled civilian posts resulting from Trump administration infighting weakened that office further, leaving Mattis and his successors more beholden to the advice and influence of the better-staffed and more efficient Joint Staff. Trump’s first chairman, Gen. Joe Dunford, enjoyed an unusually close and trusting relationship with Mattis, whom Dunford had served under as a marine. A similar dynamic also existed between Milley and Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, who had led the Army as chief of staff and secretary, respectively, during the early days of the Trump administration.

The appointment of Austin risks exacerbating this unbalance, unless he takes pains to develop and empower a capable team of civilians in his immediate office and within the larger Office of the Secretary of Defense — a point that has already been emphasized.
The initial signs on this front are encouraging. The announcement that the Biden administration will nominate Kathleen Hicks as the first female deputy secretary of defense and Colin Kahl as the undersecretary of defense for policy ensure that strong, experienced civilian leaders who take civil-military issues seriously will hold key roles in the Pentagon assuming the Senate confirms their appointments, as we fully expect. The unofficial reports that Austin will pick Kelly Magsamen as his chief of staff, likewise puts a well-connected civilian with political experience in a key position. We both know all these individuals well, and one of us has worked for Hicks (who oversaw Golby's work on the “Thank You for Your Service” podcast) and Kahl (who was Golby’s direct supervisor on Vice President Biden’s national security staff).

Even with these capable selections, the civil-military dynamics awaiting the new secretary of defense and his team in the Pentagon will be daunting. Because of the policy and personnel dynamics during the Trump administration, the Joint Staff and the combatant commanders have become accustomed to a greater degree of autonomy and influence. Biden’s political appointees, sitting at the head of the table and asking detailed questions, will immediately cause some friction between these groups. They also will find themselves with smaller staffs, fewer resources, and a shorter institutional memory than their military counterparts. Some of the savviest members of the Biden team will recognize in these challenges echoes of the challenges political appointees faced late in the Obama years. But their intensity in combined form will stretch Biden and members of his team in new ways. They must not let their well-intentioned — and much needed — desire to reestablish processes of civilian oversight undermine the trust necessary for effective civil-military cooperation.

At the same time, senior military officers on the Joint Staff and at the combatant commands should prepare their staffs for increased expectations of public transparency, civilian interaction, and intrusive questioning than that to which they have become accustomed in recent years. A culture that pronounces micromanagement at the first sign of tough questioning can also undermine the trust required for effective civil-military communication. Iterative discussion and questioning are an essential part of the process of aligning military ways and means with political ends. More developed process and predictability can benefit the military, too, but there will be conflict and misunderstanding as these institutional muscles learn to flex again. However, the Biden team will bear the primary burden of demonstrating that its goal is not civilian control for the sake of control, but rather civil-military trust and cooperation geared toward the shared goal of effective national security policies.

**The Societal Setting**

Perhaps the aspect that will take the Biden team the longest to adjust to is the new societal context — the social milieu in which these civil-military dynamics take place. In a nutshell, the Biden administration must adjust to deeper political polarization and changing attitudes about the appropriate role of serving and retired military officers in foreign policy and national security debates.
Two survey comparisons underscore this challenge: a 2014 YouGov survey — the closest thing we have to a comparable survey from the time Biden was in the White House — and nationally-representative surveys of 4,500 Americans that the National Opinion Research Center conducted on our behalf in 2019 and 2020 (and that are proprietary until we finish a book on this topic) that reflect the environment today. We do not have enough active duty military in these samples to offer statistically meaningful descriptions of the attitudes of the actual personnel who will constitute the “military” in civil-military policymaking, but previous surveys have shown that the attitudes of veterans, particularly of recent veterans, is a satisfactory proxy that can guide our understanding. While some civil-military gaps we explored in both surveys are overstated because they are driven primarily by demographic differences, others have grown and will create sharper civil-military challenges for the Biden administration. We also have found several areas where civilian and veteran respondents largely agree, but in ways that undermine civilian control over policy processes.

Among the most striking findings from the 2014 snapshot was a “familiarity gap” tied to the lack of public knowledge about the military. Despite numerous ongoing American troop deployments, many civilian respondents — often as many as a quarter or a third — would not even venture to answer basic questions about the military. Civilian and veteran respondents also expressed very different views about whether and how to use military force. In general, veterans were more reluctant to express support for the use of military force than civilian respondents, but civilians were more likely to favor troop limits or other restrictions when troops were deployed. Both civilian and veteran respondents expressed growing support for various forms of military resistance to unwise civilian orders. With respect to traditional civil-military norms and best practices, these findings — including that majorities of nearly all subgroups supported the idea of military resignation in protest — were somewhat troubling. In part, these civil-military trends were likely the result of broader societal trends reflecting lost public confidence in elected officials. In 2014, nearly 80 percent of all respondents reported that political leaders do not share the public’s values. In contrast, nearly three-quarters of Americans expressed confidence in the military, with only small differences between civilian and veteran populations. These attitudes extended and intensified long-standing patterns seen in other surveys during the post-Cold War Era.

Today, this dynamic persists and is intensified still further. In 2020, approximately 69 percent of Americans express “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in the military, down slightly from 74 percent in 2019 and 2014. Even at 69 percent, esteem for the military is higher than it is for any other national institution, and indeed far higher than it is for Congress, the Supreme Court, or the presidency. The public’s confidence in the military is highly conditioned on partisanship, with 82 percent of Republicans expressing confidence in the military compared to just 60 percent of Democrats, reflecting a five-point larger difference between parties than in 2014. Biden’s slice of the electorate in 2020 also contains large groups that harbor serious concerns about the military. Only 53 percent of self-identified liberals express confidence in the military, with confidence dropping below 49 percent for both women liberals and non-white liberals. Our research suggests even these numbers may overstate the public’s true confidence in the military.
by as much as 20 percentage points due to social pressure, however. Yet, the fact that many Americans feel this pressure is itself a sign of the military's influence in American society and politics.

The five-point drop in confidence from 2019 to 2020 may, in part, be due to the military's involvement in a number of controversies related to the Black Lives Matter protests during the summer of 2020. Although Trump ultimately decided against invoking the Insurrection Act to use active duty troops in support of law enforcement on domestic soil, members of the National Guard did back up federal law enforcement in Washington, D.C. on June 1, when they cleared Lafayette Square prior to Trump's photo op at St. John's church. We did find differences between civilian and military attitudes about the use of the Insurrection Act, however. As many as 57 percent of veterans told us they would support the use of active duty troops if protests continued compared to only 41 percent of civilians. We also primed a subset of respondents with reports suggesting the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff opposed the use of active duty troops. The views of civilians who received this prompt did not change at all, but support among veterans who received this prompt dropped 8 points to 49 percent. While pundits and national journalists focused on the electoral implications of retired generals' comments, our survey suggests their statements were likely more influential in shaping the attitudes of veterans and service members on this narrow issue.

The Biden administration's commitment to restoring normal processes may give it an initial civil-military honeymoon, but it should not expect that to translate automatically into deference or an easy civil-military relationship. In our 2020 survey, 62 percent of all veterans and 66 percent of post-9/11 veterans agreed with the statement, "Civilians who have not been to war should not question those who have." In contrast, 42 percent of civilians agreed with the statement while only 30 percent disagreed, suggesting that pressure for civilian leaders to defer to military officers emanates from both groups. Post-9/11 veterans — who volunteered to serve in America's all-volunteer force during America's longest military conflicts with no full-time mobilization of society — also expressed some open contempt in our survey for those who did not volunteer. A full 60 percent of post-9/11 veterans "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that the eligible Americans who did not volunteer to serve during wartime should feel guilty compared to just 43 percent of older veterans and 22 percent of civilians. Given perceptions that the Biden team will be prone to micromanagement, members of the Joint Staff may find it easy to fall back into those familiar narratives when new political appointees enter the Defense Department prepared to reestablish oversight and processes that have laid somewhat dormant since the Obama years.

The Biden team should also expect some normal points of civil-military friction on policy and missions to emerge. In general, veteran and military respondents in our survey are more likely to believe the military's most important role is to compete with great powers like China and Russia, especially when compared to Democratic respondents. Veteran respondents are also more hawkish on Iran than civilian respondents. They also tend to be more optimistic, though only slightly so, on the success of military operations in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Although only 13 percent of all civilians and 10 percent of
Democrats agreed that these operations have been “very successful,” 24 percent of post-9/11 veterans said the same. Veterans were also particularly optimistic on progress in Afghanistan, though there are notable generational divides: 44 percent of post-9/11 veterans “agree” or “strongly agree” that the United States has accomplished its goals in Afghanistan while 39 percent “disagree” or “strongly disagree.” Older veterans and civilians break 30-47 and 21-39, respectively. Post-9/11 veterans are also particularly supportive of troop reductions in the context of the deal with the Taliban with 54 percent in support and only 29 percent against. While there is some civilian support among civilians for troop reductions as part of a deal with the Taliban, a 40 percent plurality of civilians chose “no opinion” when asked about both troop reductions and military success in Afghanistan. Most Americans simply are not paying much attention.

Conclusion

Civil-military relationships are not an end in themselves. These relationships exist only to provide effective national security policies in a given geopolitical environment in the context of democratic accountability. Unfortunately, the environment is not benign. As they sort through the civil-military and institutional baggage — the items they bring with them and the items they inherit — Biden’s team must also navigate intensified great-power conflict, persistent instability in the broader Middle East, strained ties with key allies, and little progress on all of the other stubborn problems that have bedeviled leaders in the post-Cold War era, including: the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, transnational networks of terrorism, failed states, and ethnic rivalries. And, of course, Biden must still lead the country out of the worst pandemic in a century while recovering from all of the associated economic upheaval. There will be no strategic holiday during which the Biden team can painstakingly sort through its civil-military affairs.

The new commander-in-chief starts with the enormous advantage of being “not Trump.” He will need all of that advantage — and will need to have learned from Obama-era missteps — in order to navigate through the tricky civil-military waters we have described above. Members of the Biden team come in as seasoned professionals, but we hope that leads them to caution and humility rather than unwariness and hubris as they conduct national security policy. If Lloyd Austin wins over the critics and proves himself to be both fully sensitive to these civil-military realities and savvy in how he seeks to overcome them, he may yet emerge as the successful and strong secretary of defense the Department of Defense so desperately needs. The early slate of civilian nominees named for key roles is a welcome sign. The initial weeks after the inauguration will be of particular importance in setting the tone, especially after the tumultuous and stressful transition. Even so, the norm of civilian management of the Defense Department will be more difficult to reestablish, like so many other civil-military norms that have weakened in recent years, if Congress does grant another recently-retired general legal permission to serve as secretary of defense. Biden, and Austin, will need all the top civilian defense talent they can get.
Notwithstanding all of the other urgent priorities vying for his attention, neglect of the civil-military file would likely impose intolerable costs on Biden down the road — a price that would be vividly evident, sooner or later, when an urgent national security crisis takes center stage. The only prudent course is for the Biden team to attend to both policy and process at the same time — to move out quickly on the pandemic and the economy, while also setting the national security establishment on the path to healthier civil-military relations. Problems in the civil-military foundations of an administration must be fixed before a crisis lays bare the rot that may lie just out of view.

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The Decision to Withdraw from Afghanistan with Background (as of August 24, 2021)

The recent withdrawal of Americans from Afghanistan has provoked enormous controversy over the decision to withdraw and just as great, of the timing and the way in which the U.S. undertook the withdrawal. In the series of articles below, we provide some background on the last two decades of American military effort in that country, on the public’s attitude toward the policy and campaign as of late 2020, recent reporting on how the decision was made by the Biden Administration, and the reaction by some senior military leaders. We believe the American experience in Afghanistan will overhang U.S. civil-military relations at all levels for years to come. What are your views of how we prosecuted the campaign, militarily and politically, and what in retrospect we can learn from the experience at this point in time?
In 2008, I interviewed the United Kingdom’s then outgoing military commander in Afghanistan, Brigadier Mark Carleton-Smith, in a dusty firebase in Helmand Province, where international troops had been battling the Taliban on a daily basis for territory that kept slipping away. The war in Afghanistan could not be won militarily, Carleton-Smith told me. He was the first senior coalition military officer to say so publicly, and the story made the front page of the British Sunday Times. U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates promptly denounced Carleton-Smith to the news media as “defeatist.”

Thirteen years on, U.S. President Joe Biden appears to have reached the same conclusion as the British brigadier. In April, Biden announced that the United States would pull all its remaining troops out of Afghanistan by the 20th anniversary of 9/11, ending what he referred to as “the forever war.” But by now, such a withdrawal was all but a foregone conclusion: the Taliban had proved a stubborn enemy that was not going anywhere and that indeed controlled close to half the country’s territory.

How the conflict once known as “the good war” (to distinguish it from the war in Iraq) went so wrong is the subject of a new book, The American War in Afghanistan, which claims to be the first comprehensive account of the United States’ longest war. Its author, Carter Malkasian, is a historian who has spent considerable time working in Afghanistan, first as a civilian official in Helmand and then as a senior adviser to the U.S. military commander in the country. A sprawling history of more than 500 pages, the work stands in stark contrast to Malkasian’s previous book, War Comes to Garmser, which tells the compelling story of one small district in Helmand. In his new book, Malkasian considers just how it could be that with as many as 140,000 soldiers in 2011 and some of the world’s most sophisticated equipment, the United States and its NATO allies failed to defeat the Taliban. Moreover, he asks why these Western powers stayed on, at a cost of more than $2 trillion and over 3,500 allied lives lost, plus many more soldiers badly injured, fighting what the British brigadier and others long knew was an unwinnable war.

FATAL BEGINNINGS

The Afghan intervention seemed, at the start, a success story. The United States entered Afghanistan in October 2001 with the backing of the United Nations and fueled by worldwide outrage over the 9/11 attacks. It dispatched B-52 bombers, laser-guided missiles, and Green Berets, who worked alongside local militias to topple the Taliban within 60 days, with the loss of only four U.S. soldiers (three a result of friendly fire) and one CIA agent. The operation seemed
a model of intervention and cost a total of $3.8 billion: President George W. Bush described it as one of the biggest “bargains” of all time. Observes Malkasian: “The ease of the 2001 success carried away sensibility.”

The Taliban fell, Osama bin Laden fled to Pakistan—and the Bush administration no longer seemed to know what it was trying to achieve in Afghanistan. Bush made much of women’s rights, declaring in his State of the Union address in January 2002 that “today women of Afghanistan are free,” after “years as captives in their own homes,” when the Taliban forbade girls from going to school and women from working, wearing lipstick, or laughing out loud. But Washington had no appetite for rebuilding Afghanistan and almost no understanding of the war-ravaged country, let alone of how much work would be needed to secure and reconstruct it.

Malkasian argues that the United States made mistakes between 2001 and 2006 that set the course for failure. The catalog of errors he recounts is by now familiar. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld did not want to invest in the Afghan army—and by the end of 2003, just 6,000 Afghan soldiers had been trained. Warlords, whom most Afghans blamed for the country’s descent into violence in the first place, roamed free and even became ministers and members of parliament. At the same time, the United States and its allies shut the Taliban out of talks on a political settlement, failing to appreciate that the group represented a point of view that many among the majority Pashtuns shared. The United States should have pressed its advantage, Malkasian suggests, at a time when the Afghan government had popular support and the Taliban were in disarray. Instead, it empowered militias and conducted overly aggressive counterterrorism operations that alienated ordinary Afghans and led the excluded Taliban to resort once more to violence.

Nonetheless, the Bush administration classed Afghanistan as a success and turned its attention to Iraq. The Taliban fled across the border to Pakistan, where they regrouped, raised funds, recruited in the madrasahs, and trained with the assistance of Pakistan’s security service, the Inter-Services Intelligence. Many ISI officers had worked with Taliban leaders for decades and shared their worldview. Moreover, Malkasian notes that Islamabad’s strategic thinking centered on its rivalry with India. Pakistan had fought four wars with its neighbor and feared that India would encircle it by gaining influence in Afghanistan. India had 24 consulates in Afghanistan, Pakistani officials complained; in fact, it had only four.

Pakistan’s role turned out to be fatal. Even as the United States prosecuted its war in Afghanistan, those it fought found refuge and training in the country next door. But the Bush administration not only turned a blind eye to Pakistan’s machinations; it provided Pakistan with $12 billion, more than half of which was a reimbursement for military operations, as American officials believed that Islamabad was helping in what they saw as the more important fight against al Qaeda.

**THE HEART OF AFGHANISTAN**

Afghan officials like to blame Pakistan for the deepening war. But the Taliban had something more in its favor—something Malkasian calls “the Taliban’s tie to what it meant to be Afghan.” The heart of Afghanistan, by Malkasian’s description, is the atraf, or countryside, with its mud-walled homes, hidden-away women, and barefoot children, a realm where “other than cell-phones, cars, and assault rifles, the 21st century was invisible.” Into this space came American soldiers with night-vision goggles and missiles the price of Porsches. The last foreigners the villagers had seen were the Russians who occupied their country in the 1980s. The Taliban were
able to use that memory as a powerful motivator in a country that prided itself on defeating superpowers and never having been colonized.

Malkasian believes that the Taliban profited from their posture as a force for Islam, against infidels. But my own reporting in Afghanistan suggests a somewhat more ambiguous dynamic. Mullahs in villages would rage against the foreign presence, but they collected their salaries from a government dependent on foreigners. Ordinary Afghans I spoke to suggested that religion was less important to them than pride in their history of defeating superpowers. The fact that the Taliban paid unemployed farmers further boosted the group’s advantage. Moreover, as Malkasian details, the Taliban exploited tribal rivalries that Western forces didn’t understand. Many powerful Pashtun tribes, such as the Ghilzais, the Ishaqzais, and the Noorzais, felt cut out. They resented foreign troops for disrespecting their culture (entering women’s quarters, bombing wedding parties) and attempting to eradicate their poppy crops.

The United States had created conditions that called for a more robust Afghan state than it had built. As Malkasian writes, “If a state faces a hostile safe haven on its border and mistreats various segments of its population, it had best have capable military forces of one form or another.” When the Taliban reemerged in earnest in 2006, their forces were estimated at only 10,000, which should have been containable. But the foreign forces in Afghanistan were unfamiliar with the terrain, both geographic and cultural; the U.S. leadership was distracted by Iraq, where a civil war was spinning out of control; and Afghanistan had not even a small, capable army.

As for Afghan President Hamid Karzai, he was furious about NATO airstrikes and what he saw as British meddling in Helmand, where he had been forced to remove a governor. Increasingly paranoid, rather than unite tribes that might have stepped in to fight the Taliban, he tried to divide them, lest they become a political threat. Later, the Afghan security forces were ramped up and gained numerical superiority over the Taliban and at least equivalent ammunition and supplies. Still, they threw in the towel at decisive moments. “The Taliban had an edge in inspiration,” writes Malkasian. “The average soldier and policeman simply wanted to fight less than his Taliban counterpart. Many could not reconcile fighting for Afghanistan alongside an infidel occupier and against a movement that represented Islam.”

In stressing the religious dimension, however, Malkasian overlooks more material conditions that sapped motivation from many Afghan fighters. Some were reluctant to fight for a government whose insatiable demand for bribes they felt was the bane of their lives. Others were well aware that there would be no medevacs for injured security forces and that corrupt commanders were siphoning off their fuel and supplies, as well as pocketing the pay for “ghost fighters,” who existed only on the books. They saw little utility in risking their lives for a predatory government when the Taliban seemed just as likely to return.

**THE CLOCKS AND THE TIME**

The United States, sucked in ever deeper, seemed to exhaust every strategy, from maintaining a light footprint to surging U.S. troops, increasing them almost threefold, to more than 80,000 by 2010. President Barack Obama, who was constitutionally wary of pouring troops and dollars into military interventions, and who had opposed the war in Iraq at its inception, found himself sending more and more Americans to prop up a government that had lost the trust of its people. But he never considered getting out altogether: the cost was just too high. “The United States was stuck,” writes Malkasian. And the Taliban expanded their influence with the support of Iran and Russia, both of which were interested in making life hard for the Americans.
So how did Washington come unstuck, and why now? U.S. President Donald Trump, with his “America first” policy, was never going to have much time for Afghanistan; indeed, one of his campaign promises was to end the war. By the autumn of 2018, with midterm elections approaching, Trump raged to his generals that their strategy had been “a total failure” and he wanted out. For the first time, talks with the Taliban took on real urgency. In February 2020, Washington signed a deal promising withdrawal by May 1, 2021. The Afghan government had been completely excluded from these negotiations. When Biden came into office, Kabul hoped the new president would not only delay the withdrawal but also leave a permanent force in place. In the end, it got only four months’ grace.

In announcing a September pullout, Biden argued that the United States should “be focused on the reason we went in the first place: to ensure Afghanistan would not be used as a base from which to attack our homeland again. We did that. We accomplished that objective.” But even this point is not entirely clear-cut. True, there hasn’t been an attack from Afghanistan since 9/11. But al Qaeda has not gone away. In fact, the situation is more complicated than before, as there is not only al Qaeda to contend with but also Islamic State Khorasan, or IS-K, which is small in numbers but has conducted deadly suicide attacks in Afghanistan, including on maternity hospitals and schools, particularly in Kabul.

The current U.S. plan is to contain terrorism from afar, using drones, intelligence networks, and special operations raids launched from bases somewhere in the region. William Burns, the CIA director, admitted that this plan involved “a significant risk.” It was “not the decision we hoped for,” said the British defense chief, Nick Carter.

“These are professional understatements,” William Hague, a former British foreign secretary, wrote recently in response. “Most western security officials I know are horrified.”

Even if the United States’ war is over, Afghanistan’s is not. In the last 15 years, more than 40,000 civilians have been killed. The Afghan government and the Taliban began peace talks in Qatar late last year—but since then, the fighting has intensified, causing even more casualties. When peace talks got underway between the Taliban and the United States in 2019, I asked young Afghans what peace would mean to them. “Being able to go for a picnic,” said one. “Not having to wonder if you will come back again when you leave for work or study,” said another. Most, however, could not answer at all. Fully 70 percent of the Afghan population is under the age of 25, and fighting has gone on since the Soviet invasion in 1979. These Afghans have only ever known war.

Malkasian’s book raises a disturbing question: In the end, did the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan do more harm than good? “The United States exposed Afghans to prolonged harm in order to defend America from another terrorist attack,” he writes. “Villages were destroyed. Families disappeared. . . . The intervention did noble work for women, education, and free speech. But that good has to be weighed against tens of thousands of men, women, and children who died.”

Those “noble” achievements are not negligible, however. There are now 3.5 million Afghan girls in school (although more than two million still do not go). Women are working in all sorts of fields: law enforcement, cinema, robotics. The health-care system has been transformed, and life expectancy for Afghan women has increased by almost ten years. Afghanistan has flourishing media. Even the presence of cell phones indicates a society connected with the rest of the world. Young Afghans will not easily give up these hard-won rights.
The fear is that these gains may now be threatened. Since the peace deal was signed, there have been dozens of assassinations of judges, journalists, and human rights activists, as well as the horrific bombing of a girls’ school. And however U.S. policymakers may seek to dress it up, to the Taliban, the American pullout is a victory. As the oft-quoted Taliban adage goes, “You have all the clocks, but we have all the time.”

The Afghans, after all, never believed that the Americans would stay. Back in 2005, in the remote village of Shkin, a place of intense fighting in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan, I watched local villagers happily accept health care and other help from U.S. soldiers in the day, then rocket their base at night. When I asked them why, they had a simple explanation: “In the end, they’ll be gone, and the bad guys will still be here.”

CHRISTINA LAMB is Chief Foreign Correspondent for The Sunday Times and the author of Farewell Kabul: From Afghanistan to a More Dangerous World.
The Ides of August
https://www.sarahchayes.org/post/the-ides-of-august

August 15, 2021

I’ve been silent for a while. I’ve been silent about Afghanistan for longer. But too many things are going unsaid.

I won’t try to evoke the emotions, somehow both swirling and yet leaden: the grief, the anger, the sense of futility. Instead, as so often before, I will use my mind to shield my heart. And in the process, perhaps help you make some sense of what has happened.

For those of you who don’t know me, here is my background — the perspective from which I write tonight.

I covered the fall of the Taliban for NPR, making my way into their former capital, Kandahar, in December 2001, a few days after the collapse of their regime. Descending the last great hill into the desert city, I saw a dusty ghost town. Pickup trucks with rocket-launchers strapped to the struts patrolled the streets. People pulled on my militia friends’ sleeves, telling them where to find a Taliban weapons cache, or a last hold-out. But most remained indoors.

It was Ramadan. A few days later, at the holiday ending the month-long fast, the pent-up joy erupted. Kites took to the air. Horsem in gorgeous, caparisoned chargers tore across a dusty common in sprint after sprint, with a festive audience cheering them on. This was Kandahar, the Taliban heartland. There was no panicked rush for the airport.

I reported for a month or so, then passed off to Steve Inskeep, now Morning Edition host. Within another couple of months, I was back, not as a reporter this time, but to try actually to do something. I stayed for a decade. I ran two non-profits in Kandahar, living in an ordinary house and speaking Pashto, and eventually went to work for two commanders of the international troops, and then the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. (You can read about that time, and its lessons, in my first two books, The Punishment of Virtue and Thieves of State.)

From that standpoint — speaking as an American, as an adoptive Kandahari, and as a former senior U.S. government official — here are the key factors I see in today’s climax of a two-decade long fiasco:

Afghan government corruption, and the U.S. role enabling and reinforcing it. The last speaker of the Afghan parliament, Rahman Rahmani, I recently learned, is a multimillionaire, thanks to monopoly contracts to provide fuel and security to U.S. forces at their main base, Bagram. Is this the type of government people are likely to risk their lives to defend?

Two decades ago, young people in Kandahar were telling me how the proxy militias American forces had armed and provided with U.S. fatigues were shaking them down at checkpoints. By
2007, delegations of elders would visit me — the only American whose door was open and who spoke Pashtu so there would be no intermediaries to distort or report their words. Over candied almonds and glasses of green tea, they would get to some version of this: “The Taliban hit us on this cheek, and the government hits us on that cheek.” The old man serving as the group’s spokesman would physically smack himself in the face.

I and too many other people to count spent years of our lives trying to convince U.S. decision-makers that Afghans could not be expected to take risks on behalf of a government that was as hostile to their interests as the Taliban were. Note: it took me a while, and plenty of my own mistakes, to come to that realization. But I did.

For two decades, American leadership on the ground and in Washington proved unable to take in this simple message. I finally stopped trying to get it across when, in 2011, an interagency process reached the decision that the U.S. would not address corruption in Afghanistan. It was now explicit policy to ignore one of the two factors that would determine the fate of all our efforts. That’s when I knew today was inevitable.

Americans like to think of ourselves as having valiantly tried to bring democracy to Afghanistan. Afghans, so the narrative goes, just weren’t ready for it, or didn’t care enough about democracy to bother defending it. Or we’ll repeat the cliche that Afghans have always rejected foreign intervention; we’re just the latest in a long line.

I was there. Afghans did not reject us. They looked to us as exemplars of democracy and the rule of law. They thought that’s what we stood for.

And what did we stand for? What flourished on our watch? Cronyism, rampant corruption, a Ponzi scheme disguised as a banking system, designed by U.S. finance specialists during the very years that other U.S. finance specialists were incubating the crash of 2008. A government system where billionaires get to write the rules.

Is that American democracy?

Well…?

Pakistan. The involvement of that country's government -- in particular its top military brass -- in its neighbor’s affairs is the second factor that would determine the fate of the U.S. mission.

You may have heard that the Taliban first emerged in the early 1990s, in Kandahar. That is incorrect. I conducted dozens of conversations and interviews over the course of years, both with actors in the drama and ordinary people who watched events unfold in Kandahar and in Quetta, Pakistan. All of them said the Taliban first emerged in Pakistan.

The Taliban were a strategic project of the Pakistani military intelligence agency, the ISI. It even conducted market surveys in the villages around Kandahar, to test the label and the messaging. “Taliban” worked well. The image evoked was of the young students who apprenticed themselves to village religious leaders. They were known as sober, studious, and gentle. These Taliban, according to the ISI messaging, had no interest in government. They just wanted to get the militiamen who infested the city to stop extorting people at every turn in the road.
Both label and message were lies.

Within a few years, Usama bin Laden found his home with the Taliban, in their de facto capital, Kandahar, hardly an hour’s drive from Quetta. Then he organized the 9/11 attacks. Then he fled to Pakistan, where we finally found him, living in a safe house in Abbottabad, practically on the grounds of the Pakistani military academy. Even knowing what I knew, I was shocked. I never expected the ISI to be that brazen.

Meanwhile, ever since 2002, the ISI had been re-configuring the Taliban: helping it regroup, training and equipping units, developing military strategy, saving key operatives when U.S. personnel identified and targeted them. That’s why the Pakistani government got no advance warning of the Bin Laden raid. U.S. officials feared the ISI would warn him.

By 2011, my boss, the outgoing chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Mike Mullen, testified to the Senate Armed Services Committee that the Taliban were a “virtual arm of the ISI.”

And now this.

Do we really suppose the Taliban, a rag-tag, disjointed militia hiding out in the hills, as we’ve so long been told, was able to execute such a sophisticated campaign plan with no international backing? Where do we suppose that campaign plan came from? Who gave the orders? Where did all those men, all that materiel, the endless supply of money to buy off local Afghan army and police commanders, come from? How is it that new officials were appointed in Kandahar within a day of the city’s fall? The new governor, mayor, director of education, and chief of police all speak with a Kandahari accent. But no one I know has ever heard of them. I speak with a Kandahari accent, too. Quetta is full of Pashtuns — the main ethnic group in Afghanistan — and people of Afghan descent and their children. Who are these new officials?

Over those same years, by the way, the Pakistani military also provided nuclear technology to Iran and North Korea. But for two decades, while all this was going on, the United States insisted on considering Pakistan an ally. We still do.

Hamid Karzai. During my conversations in the early 2000s about the Pakistani government’s role in the Taliban’s initial rise, I learned this breathtaking fact: Hamid Karzai, the U.S. choice to pilot Afghanistan after we ousted their regime, was in fact the go-between who negotiated those very Taliban’s initial entry into Afghanistan in 1994.

I spent months probing the stories. I spoke to servants in the Karzai household. I spoke to a former Mujahideen commander, Mullah Naqib, who admitted to being persuaded by the label and the message Karzai was peddling. The old commander also admitted he was at his wits’ end at the misbehavior of his own men. I spoke with his chief lieutenant, who disagreed with his tribal elder and commander, and took his own men off to neighboring Helmand Province to keep fighting. I heard that Karzai’s own father broke with him over his support for this ISI project. Members of Karzai’s household and Quetta neighbors told me about Karzai’s frequent meetings with armed Taliban at his house there, in the months leading up to their seizure of power.
And lo. Karzai abruptly emerges from this vortex, at the head of a “coordinating committee” that will negotiate the Taliban’s return to power? Again?

It was like a repeat of that morning of May, 2011, when I first glimpsed the pictures of the safe-house where Usama bin Laden had been sheltered. Once again — even knowing everything I knew — I was shocked. I was shocked for about four seconds. Then everything seemed clear.

It is my belief that Karzai was a key go-between negotiating this surrender, just as he did in 1994, this time enlisting other discredited figures from Afghanistan’s past, as they were useful to him. Former co-head of the Afghan government, Abdullah Abdullah, could speak to his old battle-buddies, the Mujahideen commanders of the north and west, and their comrades within the Afghan armed forces. You may have heard some of their names as they surrendered their cities in recent days: Ismail Khan, Dostum, Atta Muhammad Noor. The other person mentioned together with Karzai is Gulbuddin Hikmatyar -- a bona fide Taliban commander, who could take the lead in some conversations with them and with the ISI.

As Americans have witnessed in our own context — the #MeToo movement, for example, the uprising after the murder of George Floyd, or the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol — surprisingly abrupt events are often months or years in the quiet making. The abrupt collapse of 20 years’ effort in Afghanistan is, in my view, one of those cases.

Thinking this hypothesis through, I find myself wondering: what role did U.S. Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad play? And old friend of Karzai’s, he was the one who ran the negotiations with the Taliban for the Trump Administration, in which the Afghan government was forced to make concession after concession. Could President Biden truly have found no one else for that job, to replace an Afghan-American with obvious conflicts of interest, who was close to former Vice President Dick Cheney and who lobbied in favor of an oil pipeline through Afghanistan when the Taliban were last in power?

Self-Delusion. How many times did you read stories about the Afghan security forces’ steady progress? How often, over the past two decades, did you hear some U.S. official proclaim that the Taliban’s eye-catching attacks in urban settings were signs of their “desperation” and their “inability to control territory?” How many heart-warming accounts did you hear about all the good we were doing, especially for women and girls?

Who were we deluding? Ourselves?

What else are we deluding ourselves about?

One final point. I hold U.S. civilian leadership, across four administrations, largely responsible for today’s outcome. Military commanders certainly participated in the self-delusion. I can and did find fault with generals I worked for or observed. But the U.S. military is subject to civilian control. And the two primary problems identified above — corruption and Pakistan — are civilian issues. They are not problems men and women in uniform can solve. But faced with calls to do so, no top civilian decision-maker was willing to take either of these problems on. The political risk, for them, was too high.

Today, as many of those officials enjoy their retirement, who is suffering the cost?
Opinion | Why Afghan Forces So Quickly Laid Down Their Arms

Opposing Afghan factions have long negotiated arrangements to stop fighting — something the U.S. either failed to understand or chose to ignore.

Members of the Taliban move toward the front line on a tank captured outside of Kabul on Feb. 18, 1995.

Opinion by ANATOL LIEVEN

08/16/2021 04:30 AM EDT

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In the winter of 1989, as a journalist for the *Times* of London, I accompanied a group of mujahedeen fighters in Afghanistan’s Ghazni province. At one point, a fortified military post
became visible on the other side of a valley. As we got closer, the flag flying above it also became visible — the flag of the Afghan Communist state, which the mujahedeen were fighting to overthrow.

“Isn’t that a government post?” I asked my interpreter. “Yes,” he replied. “Can’t they see us?” I asked. “Yes,” he replied. “Shouldn’t we hide?” I squeaked. “No, no, don’t worry,” he replied reassuringly. “We have an arrangement.”

I remembered this episode three years later, when the Communist state eventually fell to the mujahedeen; six years later, as the Taliban swept across much of Afghanistan; and again this week, as the country collapses in the face of another Taliban assault. Such “arrangements” — in which opposing factions agree not to fight, or even to trade soldiers in exchange for safe passage — are critical to understanding why the Afghan army today has collapsed so quickly (and, for the most part, without violence). The same was true when the Communist state collapsed in 1992, and the practice persisted in many places as the Taliban advanced later in the 1990s.

This dense web of relationships and negotiated arrangements between forces on opposite sides is often opaque to outsiders. Over the past 20 years, U.S. military and intelligence services have generally either not understood or chosen to ignore this dynamic as they sought to paint an optimistic picture of American efforts to build a strong, loyal Afghan army. Hence the Biden administration’s expectation that there would be what during the Vietnam War was called a “decent interval” between U.S. departure and the state’s collapse.

While the coming months and years will reveal what the U.S. government did and didn’t know about the state of Afghan security forces prior to U.S. withdrawal, the speed of the collapse was predictable. That the U.S. government could not foresee — or, perhaps, refused to admit — that beleaguered Afghan forces would continue a long-standing practice of cutting deals with the Taliban illustrates precisely the same naivete with which America has prosecuted the Afghanistan war for years.

The central feature of the past several weeks in Afghanistan has not been fighting. It has been negotiations between the Taliban and Afghan forces, sometimes brokered by local elders. On Sunday, the Washington Post reported “a breathtaking series of negotiated surrenders by government forces” that resulted from more than a year of deal-making between the Taliban and rural leaders.
In Afghanistan, kinship and tribal connections often take precedence over formal political loyalties, or at least create neutral spaces where people from opposite sides can meet and talk. Over the years, I have spoken with tribal leaders from the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region who have regularly presided over meetings of tribal notables, including commanders on opposite sides.

One of the key things discussed at such meetings is business, and the business very often involves heroin. When I was traveling in Afghanistan in the late 1980s, it was an open secret that local mujahedeen groups and government units had deals to share the local heroin trade. By all accounts, the same has held between Taliban and government forces since 2001.

The power of kinship led to a common arrangement whereby extended families have protected themselves by sending one son to fight with the government army or police (for pay) and another son to fight with the Taliban. This has been a strategy in many civil wars, for example, among English noble families in the 15th-century Wars of the Roses. It means that at a given point, one of the sons can desert and return home without fearing persecution by the winning side.

These arrangements also serve practical purposes. It is often not possible for guerrilla forces to hold any significant number of prisoners of war. Small numbers might be held for ransom, but most ordinary soldiers are let go, enlisted in the guerrillas’ own ranks or killed.

Thus, as in medieval Europe, Afghanistan has a tradition to which the Taliban have adhered closely — and which helps explain the speed of their success. The Taliban will summon an enemy garrison to surrender, either at once or after the first assaults. If it does so, the men can either join the besiegers or return home with
their personal weapons. To kill them would be seen as shameful. On the other hand, a garrison that fought it out could expect no quarter, a very strong incentive to surrender in good time.

The Soviet-backed Afghan state survived for three years after the Soviet withdrawal, and in fact outlasted the USSR itself — a telling commentary on the comparative decrepitude of the “state” that the United States and its partners have attempted to create since 2001. During my travels with the mujahedeen, I was present at a hard-fought battle at Jalalabad in March 1989, in the immediate wake of the Soviet withdrawal, when Afghan government forces beat off a massive mujahedeen assault.

But after the USSR collapsed and Soviet aid ended in December 1991, there was very little fighting. Government commanders, starting with Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum (who since 2001 has been on the American side, illustrating the fluidity of Afghan allegiances), either took their men over to the mujahedeen, fled or went home — and were allowed to do so by the victors. Kabul was captured intact by the mujahedeen in 1992, as it is being captured by the Taliban now. In the later 1990s, while in some areas the Taliban faced strong resistance, elsewhere enemy garrisons also surrendered without a fight and in many cases joined the Taliban.

Deals between Afghan and Taliban forces during the U.S. war have been detailed in works like *War Comes to Garmser* by Carter Malkasian and *An Intimate War* by British soldier Mike Martin. A report by the Afghanistan Analysts Network describes such an agreement in Pakhtia province in 2018:

“Haji Ali Baz, a local tribal elder, told AAN that it was agreed that the government’s presence would be limited to the district centre, and neither side would venture into the areas controlled by the other. This agreement resulted in all of the government security posts outside the district centre being dismantled. In the words of Haji Ali Baz, this led to the end of the fighting, which had ‘caused a lot of trouble for the people.’”

Most recently, as described in the *Washington Post* Sunday, after the Biden administration declared in April that U.S. forces were withdrawing, “the capitulations began to snowball.”

Afghan society has been described to me as a “permanent conversation.” Alliances shift, and people, families and tribes make rational calculations based on the risk they face. This is not to suggest that Afghans who made such decisions are to blame for doing what they felt to be in their self-interest. The point is that America’s commanders and officials either completely failed
to understand these aspects of Afghan reality or failed to report them honestly to U.S. administrations, Congress and the general public.

A soldier (L) belonging to strict Moslem Taliban militia forces orders an elderly man to join the Friday noon prayer on October 25, 1996 at Kabul's main Pul-i-Khishti mosque. | SAEED KHAN/AFP via Getty Images

We can draw a clear line between this lack of understanding and the horrible degree of surprise at the events of the past several days. America didn’t predict this sudden collapse, but it could have and should have — an unfortunately fitting coda to a war effort that has been undermined from the start by a failure to study Afghan realities.
On Sunday, the Taliban officially took over the government of Afghanistan, the final nail in the coffin after 20 years of nation building by the U.S. and its allies. The next day, the Pentagon’s independent inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction issued his final report, with the details of how it all went wrong.

Simply put, according to the report, the U.S. tried to create a country nearly from whole cloth and in its own image, underestimating how long that would take, and continuously reinventing what success looked like when the reconstruction failed to meet the most recent metric.

“The U.S. government also clumsily forced Western technocratic models onto Afghan economic institutions; trained security forces in advanced weapon systems they could not
understand, much less maintain; imposed formal rule of law on a country that addressed 80 to 90 percent of its disputes through informal means; and often struggled to understand or mitigate the cultural and social barriers to supporting women and girls,” according to the SIGAR.

**Chaos at Kabul airport**

![Image of Kabul airport chaos](image)

Crowds swarmed the runway at Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul as people desperately tried to get flights out of the country in the hours after the Taliban took over the Afghanistan capital. US forces secured the military side of the airport amid tense scenes of Afghans doing anything they could to get on a plane, including rushing aircraft and clinging to landing gear.

The 140-page report boils the issues down to seven points:

- “The U.S. government continuously struggled to develop and implement a coherent strategy for what it hoped to achieve.”

- “The U.S. government consistently underestimated the amount of time required to rebuild Afghanistan and created unrealistic timelines and expectations that prioritized spending quickly. These choices increased corruption and reduced the effectiveness of programs.”

- “Many of the institutions and infrastructure projects the United States built were not sustainable.”

- “Counterproductive civilian and military personnel policies and practices thwarted the effort.”
“Persistent insecurity severely undermined reconstruction efforts.”

“The U.S. government did not understand the Afghan context and therefore failed to tailor its efforts accordingly.”

“U.S. government agencies rarely conducted sufficient monitoring and evaluation to understand the impact of their efforts.”

All told, 2,443 U.S. service members were killed and 20,666 were injured, in addition to 66,000 Afghan troop deaths and 48,000 Afghan civilian deaths, according to the report.

The bill totaled $145 billion spent on building military and government organizations, with another $837 billion on fighting insurgencies.

“The extraordinary costs were meant to serve a purpose — though the definition of that purpose evolved over time,” according to the report. “At various points, the U.S. government hoped to eliminate al-Qaeda, decimate the Taliban movement that hosted it, deny all terrorist groups a safe haven in Afghanistan, build Afghan security forces so they could deny terrorists a safe haven in the future, and help the civilian government become legitimate and capable enough to win the trust of Afghans.”

While progress was made, there was little faith that they could sustain without a U.S. presence.

A decade ago, the prevailing wisdom was that the invasion and subsequent counterinsurgency effort in Iraq had poached both resources and political will from Afghanistan. A surge early in the Obama administration was meant to rectify it.

“U.S. officials believed the solution to insecurity was pouring ever more resources into Afghan institutions — but the absence of progress after the surge of civilian and military assistance between 2009 and 2011 made it clear that the fundamental problems were unlikely to be addressed by changing resource levels,” according to the report.

It’s been said that the Afghanistan war wasn’t a 20-year conflict, but a one-year conflict fought 20 times. SIGAR uses the same framing for the reconstruction effort.

“U.S. officials often underestimated the time and resources needed to rebuild Afghanistan, leading to short-term solutions like the surge of troops, money, and resources from 2009–2011,” the report reads. “U.S. officials also prioritized their own political preferences for what they wanted reconstruction to look like, rather than what they could realistically achieve, given the constraints and conditions on the ground.”

Then there was the nature of overseas assignments. New teams constantly rotated in and out, without much continuity.

“U.S. personnel in Afghanistan were often unqualified and poorly trained, and those who were qualified were difficult to retain,” according to the report. “DoD police advisors watched American TV shows to learn about policing, civil affairs teams were mass-
produced via PowerPoint presentations, and every agency experienced annual lobotomies as staff constantly rotated out, leaving successors to start from scratch and make similar mistakes all over again.”

The report draws major parallels with the war in Vietnam, as a similar effort to tamp down an insurgency and train up local forces to sustain their own fight.

“Don’t believe what you’re told by the generals or the ambassadors or people in the administration saying we’re never going to do this again,” John Sopko, head of the SIGAR office, told reporters in July. “That’s exactly what we said after Vietnam: we’re never going to do this again. Lo and behold, we did Iraq. And we did Afghanistan. We will do this again.”

Despite the poor track record, the report encourages the U.S. to prepare for the inevitability that it will try something like this again.

“U.S. agencies should continue to explore how they can ensure they have the strategic planning capabilities, reconstruction doctrine, policies, best practices, standard operating procedures, institutional knowledge, and personnel structures necessary for both large and small reconstruction missions,” the report concludes.

About Meghann Myers

Meghann Myers is the Pentagon bureau chief at Military Times. She covers operations, policy, personnel, leadership and other issues affecting service members.
The Myth of ‘War Weary’ Americans

Our poll finds the public ambivalent about the war in Afghanistan, not in a hurry for withdrawal.

By Peter D. Feaver and Jim Golby
Dec. 1, 2020 5:58 pm ET

President Trump has made clear his determination to reduce America’s military footprint in Afghanistan, regardless of the consequences. The most recent version of Mr. Trump’s plan—a reduction to 2,500 troops by early January—may not satisfy those pushing for a complete withdrawal, but it will go further than most of Trump’s military advisers and the GOP leadership in Congress want to go. Only his most ardent supporters will be truly happy.

For all the talk of war-weariness, bring-them-home sentiment doesn’t appear to
be forcing Mr. Trump’s hand. The American public’s attitudes toward Afghanistan are nuanced, according to a National Opinion Research Center survey conducted on our behalf in September and October. After 19 years of fighting, the war in Afghanistan has been called America’s longest, but many American’s don’t seem to be paying attention. Forty-one percent of our respondents had no opinion on whether the U.S. has accomplished its goals in Afghanistan.

This lack of awareness feeds the withdrawal narrative: Why stay if we aren’t accomplishing anything? But it may also reflect the ambivalence of two successive U.S. presidents who wanted out of the Afghanistan conflict. Barack Obama spoke enthusiastically about the importance of the Afghan mission as a candidate in 2008. But since December 2009, when he announced a temporary surge of troops coupled with a fixed and arbitrary timeline for their withdrawal, White House messaging in support of the war has been rare.

There is support for withdrawing some troops, especially among Mr. Trump’s base: 53% of Trump supporters in our poll favor troop reductions and 16% oppose them. But support is limited among the broader public: 34% of respondents support troop withdrawals, while 25% oppose them. Even this tepid support may be conditional. Our survey asked about troop reductions in exchange for counterterrorism assurances the Taliban made as part of the deal, but so far they have failed to live up to their commitments.

The results of our survey suggest some interesting civil-military divides. Veterans (44%) expressed greater support for troop reductions than the general public (33%). Opposition to reductions was also higher among veterans (31%) than civilians (24%). A plurality of civilian respondents (43%) expressed no opinion. There was also a notable generational divide among veterans. Forty percent of veterans who served before 9/11 support troop reductions, while 32% oppose them. Among post-9/11 veterans, support is higher; 54% of post-9/11 veterans in our sample favor troop drawdowns in the context of the Taliban agreement and 29% don’t.

Few Americans believe that 19 years of war in Afghanistan have been successful.
Overall, only 22% of respondents told us they believed the U.S. had achieved its goals in Afghanistan, with post-9/11 veterans roughly twice as likely to say so at 44%. And again, no opinion (39%) was the most common answer among civilian respondents.

Whom do Americans hold responsible for the situation in Afghanistan? Veterans assessed the performance of civilian and military leaders roughly the same. Approximately 60% of veterans thought civilian political leaders had a good plan, listened to military advice as much as they should have, and integrated military and nonmilitary tools effectively. Roughly the same number of veterans thought military leaders did the same things effectively.

Civilian respondents were less likely to credit military leaders on their performance, again because many civilians didn’t even offer an opinion. Civilian respondents also were more critical of civilian political leaders than veterans were, largely because partisanship shaped their answers. Democrats credited Democratic civilian political leaders for their role in planning and execution of war plans in Afghanistan, but blamed Republican political leaders for theirs. The opposite was true for Republicans. Independents, on the other hand, blamed civilian political leaders from both parties.

Which brings us back to President Trump’s current Afghanistan endgame. By splitting the baby, Mr. Trump probably has avoided the full-blown civil-military crisis with his commanders that a more draconian “all the troops home by Christmas” order would have generated. Mr. Trump will own the decision, but he’ll probably be gone before the negative consequences materialize. His national-security team—the newcomers and the veterans of previous Afghan policy fights—has united behind him, however grudgingly. The military units left behind in Afghanistan may face acute vulnerabilities reminiscent of Dien Bien Phu and even Benghazi, but the incoming Biden team at least will have some remaining options.

The fight over Afghanistan policy will go another round—and in the next round, the civil-military questions and partisan blame games that have been mostly suppressed until now could become the main action.

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Taliban Sweep in Afghanistan Follows Years of U.S. Miscalculations

An Afghan military that did not believe in itself and a U.S. effort that Mr. Biden, and most Americans, no longer believed in brought an ignoble end to America’s longest war.

American soldiers overseeing training of their Afghan counterparts in Helmand Province in 2016. Adam Ferguson for The New York Times
WASHINGTON — President Biden’s top advisers concede they were stunned by the rapid collapse of the Afghan army in the face of an aggressive, well-planned offensive by the Taliban that now threatens Kabul, Afghanistan’s capital.

The past 20 years show they should not have been.

If there is a consistent theme over two decades of war in Afghanistan, it is the overestimation of the results of the $83 billion the United States has spent since 2001 training and equipping the Afghan security forces and an underestimation of the brutal, wily strategy of the Taliban. The Pentagon had issued dire warnings to Mr. Biden even before he took office about the potential for the Taliban to overrun the Afghan army, but intelligence estimates, now shown to have badly missed the mark, assessed it might happen in 18 months, not weeks.

Commanders did know that the afflictions of the Afghan forces had never been cured: the deep corruption, the failure by the government to pay many Afghan soldiers and police officers for months, the defections, the soldiers sent to the front without adequate food and water, let alone arms. In the past several days, the Afghan forces have steadily collapsed as they battled to defend ever shrinking territory, losing Mazar-i-Sharif, the country’s economic engine, to the Taliban on Saturday.

Mr. Biden’s aides say that the persistence of those problems reinforced his belief that the United States could not prop up the Afghan government and military in perpetuity. In Oval Office meetings this spring, he told aides that staying another year, or even five, would not make a substantial difference and was not worth the risks.

In the end, an Afghan force that did not believe in itself and a U.S. effort that Mr. Biden, and most Americans, no longer believed would alter the course of events combined to bring an ignoble close to America’s longest war. The United States kept forces in Afghanistan far longer than the British did in the 19th century, and twice as long as the Soviets — with roughly the same results.
For Mr. Biden, the last of four American presidents to face painful choices in Afghanistan but the first to get out, the debate about a final withdrawal and the miscalculations over how to execute it began the moment he took office.

“Under Trump, we were one tweet away from complete, precipitous withdrawal,” said Douglas E. Lute, a retired general who directed Afghan strategy at the National Security Council for Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama. “Under Biden, it was clear to everyone who knew him, who saw him pressing for a vastly reduced force more than a decade ago, that he was determined to end U.S. military involvement,” he added, “but the Pentagon believed its own narrative that we would stay forever.”

“The puzzle for me is the absence of contingency planning: If everyone knew we were headed for the exits, why did we not have a plan over the past two years for making this work?”

A Skeptical President

From the moment that news outlets called Pennsylvania for Mr. Biden on Nov. 7, making him the next commander in chief for 1.4 million active-duty troops, Pentagon officials knew they would face an uphill battle to stop a withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan. Defense Department leaders had already been fending off Mr. Biden’s predecessor, Donald J. Trump, who wanted a rapid drawdown. In one Twitter post last year, he declared all American troops would be out by that Christmas.

And while they had publicly voiced support for the agreement Mr. Trump reached with the Taliban in February 2020 for a complete withdrawal this May, Pentagon officials said they wanted to talk Mr. Biden out of it.

After Mr. Biden took office, top Defense Department officials began a lobbying campaign to keep a small counterterrorism force in Afghanistan for a few more years. They told the president that the Taliban had grown stronger under Mr. Trump than at any point in the past two decades and pointed to intelligence estimates predicting that in two or three years, Al Qaeda could find a new foothold in Afghanistan.

Shortly after Lloyd J. Austin III was sworn in as defense secretary on Jan. 22, he and Gen. Mark A. Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recommended to Mr. Biden that 3,000 to 4,500 troops stay in Afghanistan, nearly double the 2,500 troops there. On Feb. 3, a congressionally appointed panel led by a retired four-star Marine general, Joseph F. Dunford Jr., publicly recommended that Mr. Biden abandon the exit deadline of May 1 and further reduce American forces only as security conditions improved.

A report by the panel assessed that withdrawing troops on a strict timeline rather than how well the Taliban adhered to the agreement heightened the risk of a potential civil war once international forces left.

But Mr. Biden, who had become deeply skeptical of American efforts to remake foreign countries in his years on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and as vice president,
asked what a few thousand American troops could do if Kabul was attacked. Aides said he
told them that the presence of the American troops would further the Afghan government’s
reliance on the United States and delay the day it would take responsibility for its own
defense.

The president told his national security team, including Secretary of State Antony J.
Blinken and his national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, that he was convinced that no
matter what the United States did, Afghanistan was almost certainly headed into another
civil war — one Washington could not prevent, but also, in his view, one it could not be
drawn into.

By March, Pentagon officials said they realized they were not getting anywhere with Mr.
Biden. Although he listened to their arguments and asked extensive questions, they said
they had a sense that his mind was made up.

In late March, Mr. Austin and General Milley made a last-ditch effort with the president
by forecasting dire outcomes in which the Afghan military folded in an aggressive advance
by the Taliban. They drew comparisons to how the Iraqi military was overrun by the
Islamic State in 2014 after American combat troops left Iraq, prompting Mr. Obama to
send American forces back.

“We’ve seen this movie before,” Mr. Austin told Mr. Biden, according to officials with
knowledge of the meetings.

But the president was unmoved. If the Afghan government could not hold off the Taliban
now, aides said he asked, when would they be able to? None of the Pentagon officials
could answer the question.

On the morning of April 6, Mr. Biden told Mr. Austin and General Milley he wanted all
American troops out by Sept. 11.

The intelligence assessments in Mr. Biden’s briefing books gave him some assurance that
if a bloody debacle resulted in Afghanistan, it would at least be delayed. As recently as late
June, the intelligence agencies estimated that even if the Taliban continued to gain power,
it would be at least a year and a half before Kabul would be threatened; the Afghan forces
had the advantages of greater numbers and air power, if they could keep their helicopters
and planes flying.

Even so, the Pentagon moved swiftly to get its troops out, fearful of the risks of leaving a
dwindling number of Americans in Afghanistan and of service members dying in a war the
United States had given up for lost. Before the July 4 weekend, the United States had
handed over Bagram Air Base, the military hub of the war, to the Afghans, effectively
ending all major U.S. military operations in the country.

“Afghans are going to have to be able to do it themselves with the air force they have,
which we’re helping them maintain,” Mr. Biden said at the time. A week later, he argued
that the Afghans “have the capacity” to defend themselves.
“The question is,” he said, “will they do it?”

**The Will Is Gone**

To critics of the decision, the president underestimated the importance of even a modest presence, and the execution of the withdrawal made the problem far worse.

“We set them up for failure,” said David H. Petraeus, the retired general who commanded the international forces in Afghanistan from 2010 until he was appointed C.I.A. director the next year. Mr. Biden’s team, he argued, “did not recognize the risk incurred by the swift withdrawal” of intelligence and reconnaissance drones and close air support, as well as the withdrawal of thousands of contractors who kept the Afghan air force flying — all in the middle of a particularly intense fighting season.

The result was that Afghan forces on the ground would “fight for a few days, and then realize there are no reinforcements” on the way, he said. The “psychological impact was devastating.”

But administration officials, responding to such critiques, counter that the Afghan military dwarfs the Taliban, some 300,000 troops to 75,000.

“They have an air force, a capable air force,” something the Taliban does not have, John F. Kirby, the Pentagon press secretary, said on Friday. “They have modern equipment. They have the benefit of the training that we have provided for the last 20 years. It’s time now to use those advantages.”

But by the time Mr. Kirby noted those advantages, none of them seemed to be making a difference. Feeling abandoned by the United States and commanded by rudderless leaders meant that Afghan troops on the ground “looked at what was in front of them, and what was behind them, and decided it’s easier to go off on their own,” said retired Gen. Joseph L. Votel, the former commander of United States Central Command who oversaw the war in Afghanistan from 2016 to 2019.

Mr. Biden, one administration official said, expressed frustration that President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan had not managed to effectively plan and execute what was supposed to be the latest strategy: consolidating forces to protect key cities. On Wednesday, Mr. Ghani fired his army chief, Lt. General Wali Mohammad Ahmadzai, who had only been in place for two months, replacing him with Maj. Gen. Haibatullah Alizai, a special operations commander. The commandos under General Alizai are the only troops who have consistently fought the Taliban these past weeks.

Richard Fontaine, the chief executive of the Center for a New American Security, an influential Washington think tank that specializes in national security, wrote that in the end, the 20-year symbiosis between the United States and the Afghan government it stood up, supported and ushered through elections had broken down.

“Those highlighting the Afghan government’s military superiority — in numbers, training, equipment, air power — miss the larger point,” he wrote recently. “Everything depends on
the will to fight for the government. And that, it turns out, depended on U.S. presence and support. We’re exhorting the Afghans to show political will when theirs depends on ours. And ours is gone.”

On Saturday, as the last major city in northern Afghanistan fell to the Taliban, Mr. Biden accelerated the deployment of 1,000 additional troops to the country to help ensure the safe evacuation of U.S. citizens and Afghans who worked for the U.S. government from Kabul.

Mr. Biden released a lengthy statement in which he blamed Mr. Trump for at least part of the unfolding disaster. He said, “I inherited a deal cut by my predecessor” which “left the Taliban in the strongest position militarily since 2001 and imposed a May 1, 2021, deadline on U.S. forces.”

He said when he took office, he had a choice: abide by the deal or “ramp up our presence and send more American troops to fight once again in another country’s civil conflict.”

“I was the fourth president to preside over an American troop presence in Afghanistan — two Republicans, two Democrats,” Mr. Biden said. “I would not, and will not, pass this war onto a fifth.”
President Biden promised an orderly withdrawal. That pledge, compounded by missed signals and miscalculations, proved impossible.

By Michael D. Shear, David E. Sanger, Helene Cooper, Eric Schmitt, Julian E. Barnes and Lara Jakes

WASHINGTON — The nation’s top national security officials assembled at the Pentagon early on April 24 for a secret meeting to plan the final withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan. It was two weeks after President Biden had announced the exit over the objection of his generals, but now they were carrying out his orders.

In a secure room in the building’s “extreme basement,” two floors below ground level, Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III and Gen. Mark A. Milley, the chairman of the Joint
Chiefs of Staff, met with top White House and intelligence officials. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken joined by video conference. After four hours, two things were clear.

First, Pentagon officials said they could pull out the remaining 3,500 American troops, almost all deployed at Bagram Air Base, by July 4 — two months earlier than the Sept. 11 deadline Mr. Biden had set. The plan would mean closing the airfield that was the American military hub in Afghanistan, but Defense Department officials did not want a dwindling, vulnerable force and the risks of service members dying in a war declared lost.

Second, State Department officials said they would keep the American Embassy open, with more than 1,400 remaining Americans protected by 650 Marines and soldiers. An intelligence assessment presented at the meeting estimated that Afghan forces could hold off the Taliban for one to two years. There was brief talk of an emergency evacuation plan — helicopters would ferry Americans to the civilian airport in Kabul, the capital — but no one raised, let alone imagined, what the United States would do if the Taliban gained control of access to that airport, the only safe way in and out of the country once Bagram closed.

The plan was a good one, the group concluded.

Four months later, the plan is in shambles as Mr. Biden struggles to explain how a withdrawal most Americans supported went so badly wrong in its execution. On Friday, as scenes of continuing chaos and suffering at the airport were broadcast around the world, Mr. Biden went so far as to say that “I cannot promise what the final outcome will be, or what it will be that it will be without risk of loss.”
Interviews with key participants in the last days of the war show a series of misjudgments and the failure of Mr. Biden’s calculation that pulling out American troops — prioritizing their safety before evacuating American citizens and Afghan allies — would result in an orderly withdrawal.

Biden administration officials consistently believed they had the luxury of time. Military commanders overestimated the will of the Afghan forces to fight for their own country and underestimated how much the American withdrawal would destroy their confidence. The administration put too much faith in President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan, who fled Kabul as it fell.

And although Biden White House officials say that they held more than 50 meetings on embassy security and evacuations, and that so far no Americans have died in the operation, all the planning failed to prevent the mayhem when the Taliban took over Kabul in a matter of days.

Only in recent weeks did the administration change course from its original plan. By then it was too late.
A protest in front of the White House on Sunday. President Biden’s top intelligence officers privately offered concerns about the Afghan abilities but predicted that a complete Taliban takeover was not likely for at least 18 months. Tom Brenner for The New York Times

A Sinking Feeling

Five days after the April meeting at the Pentagon, General Milley told reporters on a flight back to Washington from Hawaii that the Afghan government’s troops were “reasonably well equipped, reasonably well trained, reasonably well led.” He declined to say whether they could stand on their own without support from the United States.

“We frankly don’t know yet,” he said. “We have to wait and see how things develop over the summer.”

The president’s top intelligence officers echoed that uncertainty, privately offering concerns about the Afghan abilities. But they still predicted that a complete Taliban takeover was not likely for at least 18 months.

One senior administration official, discussing classified intelligence information that had been presented to Mr. Biden, said there was no sense that the Taliban were on the march.

In fact, they were. Across Afghanistan the Taliban were methodically gathering strength by threatening tribal leaders in every community they entered with warnings to surrender or die. They collected weapons, ammunition, volunteers and money as they stormed from town to town, province to province.

In May, they launched a major offensive in Helmand Province in the south and six other areas of Afghanistan, including Ghazni and Kandahar. Back in Washington, refugee groups grew increasingly alarmed by what was happening on the ground and feared Taliban retribution against thousands of translators, interpreters and others who had helped the American war effort.

Leaders of the groups estimated that as many as 100,000 Afghans and family members were now targets for Taliban revenge. On May 6, representatives from several of the United States’ largest refugee groups, including Human Rights First, the International Refugee Assistance Project, No One Left Behind, and the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service logged onto Zoom for a call with National Security Council staff members.
Displaced families in Kandahar early this month. Refugee groups estimated that as many as 100,000 Afghans and family members were now targets for Taliban revenge. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Long lines in July for the passport department in Kabul. Members of advocacy groups pleaded with White House officials for a mass evacuation of Afghans. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

The groups pleaded with the White House officials for a mass evacuation of Afghans and urged them not to rely on a backlogged special visa program that could keep Afghans waiting for months or years.

There was no time for visas, they said, and Afghans had to be removed quickly to stay alive. The response was cordial but noncommittal, according to one participant, who recalled a sinking feeling afterward that the White House had no plan.

Representative Seth Moulton, a Massachusetts Democrat, veteran and ally of Mr. Biden, echoed those concerns in his own discussions with the administration. Mr. Moulton said he told anyone who would listen at the White House, the State Department and the Pentagon that “they need to stop processing visas in Afghanistan and just get people to safety.”

But doing what Mr. Moulton and the refugee groups wanted would have meant launching a dangerous new military mission that would probably require a surge of troops just at the moment that Mr. Biden had announced the opposite. It also ran counter to what the Afghan government wanted, because a high-profile evacuation would amount to a vote of no confidence in the government and its forces.

Instead, the State Department sped up its efforts to process visas and clear the backlog. Officials overhauled the lengthy screening and vetting process and reduced processing time
— but only to under a year. Eventually, they issued more than 5,600 special visas from April to July, the largest number in the program’s history but still a small fraction of the demand.

The Taliban continued their advance as the embassy in Kabul urged Americans to leave. On April 27, the embassy had ordered nearly 3,000 members of its staff to depart, and on May 15, officials there sent the latest in a series of warnings to Americans in the country: “U.S. Embassy strongly suggests that U.S. citizens make plans to leave Afghanistan as soon as possible.”

President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan meeting with Mr. Biden in Washington in June. They expressed mutual admiration even though Mr. Ghani was fuming about the decision to pull out American troops. Pete Marovich for The New York Times

A Tense Meeting With Ghani

On June 25, Mr. Ghani met with Mr. Biden at the White House for what would become for the foreseeable future the last meeting between an American president and the Afghan leaders they had coaxed, cajoled and argued with over 20 years.

When the cameras were on at the beginning of the meeting, Mr. Ghani and Mr. Biden expressed mutual admiration even though Mr. Ghani was fuming about the decision to pull out American troops. As soon as reporters were shooed out of the room, the tension was clear.

Mr. Ghani, a former World Bank official whom Mr. Biden regarded as stubborn and arrogant, had three requests, according to an official familiar with the conversation. He wanted the United States to be “conservative” in granting exit visas to the interpreters and others, and “low key” about their leaving the country so it would not look as if America lacked faith in his government.

He also wanted to speed up security assistance and secure an agreement for the U.S. military to continue to conduct airstrikes and provide overwatch from its planes and helicopters for his troops fighting the Taliban. American officials feared that the more they were drawn into direct combat with the militant group, the more its fighters would treat American diplomats as targets.

Mr. Biden agreed to provide the air support and to not make a public show of the Afghan evacuations.

Mr. Biden had his own request for Mr. Ghani. The Afghan forces were stretched too thin, Mr. Biden told him, and should not try to fight everywhere. He repeated American advice that Mr. Ghani consolidate Afghan forces around key locations, but Mr. Ghani never took it.
Afghan commandos in July in Kunduz, a provincial capital in northern Afghanistan that Taliban insurgents have cut off on all sides. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Afghan Air Force providing air support during the offensive in May in Helmand Province. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Militia members and Afghan National Army soldiers in the Dehdadi district of Balkh Province, near the front line with the Taliban, in July. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

A week later, on July 2, Mr. Biden, in an ebullient mood, gathered a small group of reporters to celebrate new jobs numbers that he said showed that his economic recovery plan was working. But all the questions he received were about news from Afghanistan that the United States had abandoned Bagram Air Base, with little to no notice to the Afghans.

“It’s a rational drawdown with our allies,” he insisted, “so there’s nothing unusual about it.”

But as the questions persisted, on Afghanistan rather than the economy, he grew visibly annoyed. He recalled Mr. Ghani’s visit and said, “I think they have the capacity to be able to
sustain the government,” though he added that there would have to be negotiations with the Taliban.

Then, for the first time, he was pressed on what the administration would do to save Kabul if it came under direct attack. “I want to talk about happy things, man,” he said. He insisted there was a plan.

“We have worked out an over-the-horizon capacity,” he said, meaning the administration had contingency plans should things go badly. “But the Afghans are going to have to be able to do it themselves with the Air Force they have, which we’re helping them maintain,” he said. But by then, most of the U.S. contractors who helped keep the Afghan planes flying had been withdrawn from Bagram along with the troops. Military and intelligence officials acknowledge they were worried that the Afghans would not be able to stay in the air.

By July 8, nearly all American forces were out of Afghanistan as the Taliban continued their surge across the country. In a speech that day from the White House defending his decision to leave, Mr. Biden was in a bind trying to express skepticism about the abilities of the Afghan forces while being careful not to undermine their government. Afterward, he angrily responded to a reporter’s comparison to Vietnam by insisting that “there’s going to be no circumstance where you see people being lifted off the roof of an embassy of the United States from Afghanistan. It is not at all comparable.”

But five days later, nearly two dozen American diplomats, all in the Kabul embassy, sent a memo directly to Mr. Blinken through the State Department’s “dissent” channel. The cable, first reported by The Wall Street Journal, urged that evacuation flights for Afghans begin in two weeks and that the administration move faster to register them for visas.

The next day, in a move already underway, the White House named a stepped-up effort “Operation Allies Refuge.”

By late July, Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., the head of U.S. Central Command who oversees all military operations in the region, received permission from Mr. Austin to extend the deployment of the amphibious assault ship Iwo Jima in the Gulf of Oman, so that the Marines on board could be close enough to get to Afghanistan to evacuate Americans. A week later, Mr. Austin was concerned enough to order the expeditionary unit on the ship — some 2,000 Marines — to disembark and wait in Kuwait so that they could reach Afghanistan quickly.

By Aug. 3, top national security officials met in Washington and heard an updated intelligence assessment: District capitals across Afghanistan were falling rapidly to the Taliban and the Afghan government could collapse in “days or weeks.” It was not the most likely outcome, but it was an increasingly plausible one.

“We’re assisting the government so that the Talibs do not think this is going to be a cakewalk, that they can conquer and take over the country,” the chief American envoy to Afghan peace talks, Zalmay Khalilzad, told the Aspen Security Forum on Aug. 3. Days later, however, that is exactly what happened.
The End Game

By Aug. 6, the maps in the Pentagon showed a spreading stain of areas under Taliban control. In some places, the Afghans had put up a fight, but in many others, there was just surrender.

That same day in Washington, the Pentagon reviewed worst-case scenarios. If security further deteriorated, planning — begun days after Mr. Biden’s withdrawal announcement in April — led by Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall, the president’s homeland security adviser, called for flying most of the embassy personnel out of the compound, and many out of the country, while a small core group of diplomats operated from a backup site at the airport.

On its face, the Kabul airport made sense as an evacuation point. Close to the center of the city, it could be as little as a 12-minute drive and a three-minute helicopter flight from the embassy — logistics that had helped reassure planners after the closure of Bagram, which was more than 50 miles and a far longer drive from Kabul.

By Wednesday, Aug. 11, the Taliban advances were so alarming that Mr. Biden asked his top national security advisers in the White House Situation Room if it was time to send the Marines to Kabul and to evacuate the embassy. He asked for an updated assessment of the situation and authorized the use of military planes for evacuating Afghan allies.
Overnight in Washington, Kandahar and Ghazni were falling. National security officials were awakened as early as 4 a.m. on Aug. 12 and told to gather for an urgent meeting a few hours later to provide options to the president. Once assembled, Avril D. Haines, the director of national intelligence, told the group that the intelligence agencies could no longer assure that they could provide sufficient warning if the capital was about to be under siege.

Everyone looked at one another, one participant said, and came to the same conclusion: It was time to get out. An hour later, Jake Sullivan, Mr. Biden’s national security adviser, walked into the Oval Office to deliver the group’s unanimous consensus to start an evacuation and deploy 3,000 Marines and Army soldiers to the airport.

By Saturday, Aug. 14, Mr. Biden was at Camp David for what he hoped would be the start of a 10-day vacation. Instead, he spent much of the day on dire video conference calls with his top aides.

On one of the calls, Mr. Austin urged all remaining personnel at the Kabul embassy be moved immediately to the airport. It was a stunning turnaround from what Ned Price, the State Department spokesman, had said two days earlier: “The embassy remains open, and we plan to continue our diplomatic work in Afghanistan.” Ross Wilson, the acting U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan who was on the call, said the staff still needed 72 hours to leave.

“You have to move now,” Mr. Austin replied.

Mr. Blinken spoke by phone to Mr. Ghani the same day. The Afghan president was defiant, according to one official familiar with the conversation, and insisted that he would defend Afghanistan until the end. He did not tell Mr. Blinken that he was already planning to flee his country, which American officials first learned by reading news reports.

Later that day, the U.S. embassy in Afghanistan sent a message saying it would pay for American citizens to get out of the country, but warned that although there were reports that international commercial flights were still operating from Kabul, “seats may not be available.”
Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken went on Sunday talk shows this week to manage the diplomatic fallout from the deepening crisis. Pool photo by Brendan Smialowski

When Mr. Biden made plans on Sunday to return to Washington to address Americans the next day, the American flag was lowered over the abandoned embassy. Stefani Reynolds for The New York Times

On Sunday, Mr. Ghani was gone. His departure — he would eventually turn up days later in the United Arab Emirates — and scenes of the Taliban celebrating at his presidential palace documented the collapse of the government. By the end of the day, the Taliban addressed the news media, declaring their intention to restore the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

The evacuation of the Kabul embassy staff was by that point underway as diplomats rushed to board military helicopters for the short trip to the airport bunker.

Others stayed behind long enough to burn sensitive documents. Another official said embassy helicopters were blown up or otherwise destroyed, which sent a cloud of smoke over the compound.

Many Americans and Afghans could not reach the airport as Taliban fighters set up checkpoints on roads throughout the city and beat some people, leaving top F.B.I. officials concerned about the possibility that the Taliban or criminal gangs might kidnap Americans, a nightmare outcome with the U.S. military no longer in the country.

As Mr. Biden made plans Sunday evening to address Americans the next day about the situation, the American flag was lowered over the abandoned embassy. The Green Zone, once the heart of the American effort to remake the country, was again Taliban territory.
Outside the U.S. Embassy in Kabul on Sunday night after the Taliban seized the capital. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

*Mark Mazzetti, Adam Goldman and Michael Crowley contributed reporting.*
For US military leaders, Afghan news strikes personal chord

By Lolita Baldor

WASHINGTON (AP) — For senior military and Pentagon leaders, this week’s news was profoundly personal.

The photos and videos pouring out of Afghanistan hit a nerve, and triggered searingly vivid flashbacks to battles fought, troops lost and tears shed during their own deployments there. And in a response shaped by their memories and experiences in the war, they urged troops to check in on their buddies, talk to each other and seek help and solace if they need it.

The top two Pentagon leaders made it clear that the scenes unfolding in Afghanistan, as citizens frantically tried to get out of the country and escape the new Taliban rule, were tough for them to watch. And they knew that the visions of Afghans struggling to get on flights — so desperate that some clung to an aircraft as it lifted off — were painful for troops to see.

“All of this is very personal for me. This is a war that I fought in and led. I know the country, I know the people, and I know those who fought alongside me,” said Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, a retired four-star Army general who served as a commander in Afghanistan in the early
years and then led U.S. Central Command overseeing the Middle East wars as his final post from 2013-16. “We have a moral obligation to help those who helped us. And I feel the urgency deeply.”

Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, commanded troops in Afghanistan and has talked often about how deeply he felt the loss of each soldier under his watch.

“For more than 20 years, we have prevented an attack on the U.S. homeland. 2,448 lost our lives, 20,722 were wounded in action, and many others suffered the unseen wounds of war. To each of them, I want you to know, personally, that your service matters,” said Milley. “As the Secretary said, for both he and I, this is personal. And I know it’s personal for each and every one of you.”

Austin said troops have a wide range of views on the issue and he urged them to work through it in their own way. “We need to respect that and we need to give one another the time and space to help do it,” he said.

Across the military, many senior officers have done tours in Afghanistan. They led troops in battle. They trained Afghan forces. And they relied heavily on the Afghan interpreters now at risk of violence from the Taliban, and begging for help to leave the country.

In recent days, those leaders have talked privately with their staffs and sent heartfelt public messages to their forces who they know are struggling with a range of emotions: frustration with
the Taliban takeover after two decades of blood and loss; fears that Afghans they worked with won’t get out safely; and questions about whether their time in the country mattered.

On Friday morning, Gen. Richard Clarke, head of U.S. Special Operations Command, addressed his entire headquarters staff about the situation in Afghanistan. Clarke, who has deployed to Afghanistan several times, has commandos who have done multiple tours in the last two decades and he noted this is an emotional time for them. Speaking over the intercom, he pressed them to reach out to their battle buddies and seek other resources if they need someone to talk to.
In a blunt letter to his force this week, Gen. David Berger, the Marine Corps commandant, said now is the time to come together. “You should take pride in your service — it gives meaning to the sacrifice of all Marines who served, including those whose sacrifice was ultimate,” said the letter, co-signed by Marine Sgt. Maj. Troy Black.

Berger, who deployed to Afghanistan in 2012 as commander of the 1st Marine Division, has also made sure his Marines have information to give interpreters they worked with in Afghanistan who are asking for help evacuating.

And he noted in his message that Marines may be struggling with a simple question: “Was it all worth it?” The answer, he and Black said, is yes.
Lt. Gen. Jim Slife, commander of Air Force Special Operations Command, went to his Facebook page to post a note to his commando forces who have gone in and out of Afghanistan for the past 20 years. And he recalled the first troops he lost in battle.

“From the very beginning to the very present, I have been responsible for sending countless Airmen into harm’s way there, not all of whom returned to their families,” said Slife. “In November 2003, I sent home the remains of my teammates and friends in the aftermath of the first fatalities I experienced as a commander. In May of 2011, we killed Osama bin Laden. Highs and lows ... lows and highs ... I’ve felt it all.”

He warned of many hard days and years ahead as troops reflect on their Afghanistan experiences while dealing with physical, psychological and moral wounds.

“If, like me, you find yourself trying to put your own experiences into some context which will allow you to move forward positively and productively, I urge you to talk about it,” and seek out a wide range of resources for help, he said.
Gen. James C. McConville, chief of staff of the Army, penned a letter to his personnel offering solace. Their sacrifices, he said, will be a lasting legacy of honor. And he also plead with troops to seek help and reach out to their comrades.

“I’d ask that you check in on your teammates as well as our Soldiers for Life, who may be struggling with the unfolding events,” said McConville, who commanded troops in Afghanistan. At the bottom of the letter he scrawled in marker, “Proud to serve with you!”
Adm. Mike Gilday, chief of naval operations, sent a message to sailors with a similar request.

“Reach out to those who may be struggling, and remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice in service to a grateful nation,” he said. “I want to be very clear, your service was not in vain, and it made a difference.”

More than 50 organizations signed a letter offering help to those in need, and said people can call the Veterans Crisis Line and Military Crisis Line at 1-800-273-8255.
Civil-Military Behaviors

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 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.

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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