
Defense Report

AUSA



Should the Military Chiefs Speak Their Minds?

If we agree that United States military personnel should not be unionized—and most people apparently do think that way—then who should speak for them?

At first blush the answer seems quite obvious. Their Commander-in-Chief, the President of the United States, should be the one to whom a serviceman or woman could turn when in need of special support. But, realistically, the President has lots of other things to think about in a Nation beset by problems.

Congress? There are few returning members of the House or Senate, regardless of seniority, who feel sufficiently secure in their constituencies to become full-time champions of the military. And Congress, too, must share in the solution of problems in economics, health care, the environment, energy—as well as those of the one percent of the population who wear military uniforms.

The Defense Manpower Commission concluded that the military chiefs of the armed services should be designated *ombudsmen* for the personnel they lead. Certainly they know what the problems are and by playing an unfettered role as spokesmen for all who serve under them they would emphasize, over and over again, the two-way street of loyalty—downward through the ranks as well as upward.

But are the chiefs free to speak their minds, to act as the senior spokesman for their services without fear of reprisal if they run counter to the position taken by the elected political leadership? The President can hold a press conference to explain why he wants to withdraw support for military commissaries and a member of Congress can issue a press release saying that commissaries are just another unnecessary fringe benefit enjoyed by military people to the disadvantage of every other citizen—but what would happen if the Army Chief of Staff assembled the Pentagon press contingent and told them the President and the Congressman were both wrong? Under today's conditions the general would be at least censured, perhaps even fired. In any case his future effectiveness would be nil.

There will always be high policy areas of statecraft that a service chief should stay out of but it is foolish to censure a military leader at the peak of his professional competency for making professionally-oriented utterances. What he says should be judged first on its merit, not just on its propriety.

Let's let the senior generals and admirals represent the men and women they lead. Theirs is a special kind of loyalty that should transcend jealousies of prerogative.