
Defense Report

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Generals Aren't Muzzled—They Just Know When to Shut Up

The Bible has a few guiding words to suit almost any situation. Take Ecclesiastes 3:7 for instance. There is, according to this scripture, "A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak. . ."

If we consider all the recent hullabaloo about the things generals say this bit of scripture may well be their guiding light, for there *is* a time for them to be silent and a time for them to speak.

Under our concept of civilian control of the military every member of the armed forces is ultimately answerable to the Commander-in-Chief—the President. He in turn must answer to Congress and to the people for any failures deriving from his policies. As the Army Chief of Staff, General Bernard W. Rogers said recently in a letter to all his generals, "Traditionally, military officers have not only the right but the responsibility to give their honest and candid opinions and recommendations during the planning and discussion phases leading to a decision, whether it be a lieutenant advising his company commander, or the Chief of Staff advising his Commander-in-Chief." That is the time to speak.

The time to be silent is after the decision has been made and all that is left is to execute it. That's where things stood when General MacArthur could not tolerate the restrictions placed on his forces in Korea by President Truman and said so, publicly.

Coincidentally it was at a similar point in a debate over Korea that Major General Singlaub voiced his displeasure with a Presidential decision. The similarities end there, though. Unlike MacArthur's repeated public statements countering Truman's decision, Singlaub's bad timing took the form of a single interview, conducted under circumstances that left some doubt whether the general expected to be quoted at all. MacArthur was a major commander, a nationally prominent figure who harbored personal political aspirations. Singlaub was virtually unknown outside the Army until quoted by the Washington POST.

Acquiescence to higher authority is just one of many concessions a military professional must make if he or she is to live up to the Constitutional expectations of our system. If, after expressing disagreement with a pending decision and making the best possible argument against it, the professional soldier cannot reconcile the decision with his own intellectual honesty there is always the extreme alternative of resignation.

There are many channels open for public expression within "the system". The soldier who has an informed, well thought-out point of view will be heard.