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## Strategy and Policy: Civilian and Military Leadership in the 21st Century

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### Introduction

The United States is at war.

In recent months, foreign affairs headlines have revolved around such topics as an American rebalance toward the Pacific theater, renewed unrest in key states in the Middle East and Africa and the implications abroad of America's elections. All of these issues demand significant attention, strong leadership and the full commitment of the entire national security apparatus—civilian and military. It is sometimes easy to forget that nearly 60,000 Soldiers are fighting a very intense war in Afghanistan today. The need for capable leadership and visionary strategy for this campaign, as well as future ones, is not a distant goal; there is a pressing, immediate requirement right now.

More broadly, the global security environment today is as ambiguous and complex as ever and growing more unstable by the day. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey calls attention to the security paradox of our time—that despite arguments from some that peace and stability are spreading, greater numbers of adversaries are simultaneously becoming more capable of harming the United States in new and unpredictable ways.<sup>1</sup> Partly for this reason, American Soldiers are deployed or forward stationed in nearly 160 countries. For the same reason, there is urgent need for visionary leadership at the broadest strategic level as well.

Therefore, it is worth reviewing how the United States creates its security strategy and executes its security policy. Civil control of America's military is ingrained in the Constitution (statutory) and in strategic policy guidance (regulatory); what is a significant issue in the current environment is the relationship between civilian masters and military subordinates and the integral roles played by both in the decisionmaking process. This issue is an operational and strategic one. Decisions with operational effect are essentially civil–military decisions: campaigns, sequence, force size policies, mobilization policies, deployment policies, resources and others. If one side of this relationship is cut out—for whatever reason—the probability rises that the resultant decision will be less than effective. For example, the World War II campaigns for North Africa, Sicily, Italy and France were not just military decisions; these campaigns and their sequence were primarily civilian leadership decisions informed by, but not always guided by, military leaders' advice. These actual examples demonstrate that Huntington's model of semi-autonomy to the military is not entirely accurate—nor should it be.<sup>2</sup> Where the civil–military relationship is open and candid, there is an increased likelihood that good policies will be enacted; the inverse is also true. In sum, two aspects of the civil–military relationship are significant: one—civilian control of the military—is a given in the United States; the other—an open and trustful *relationship* between civil and military leaders in the discourse that leads to solid strategic, operational and policy decisions—has fluctuated throughout America's history.<sup>3</sup>

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## Roles Rooted in Tradition

The relationships that guide the American national security apparatus are themselves guided by several principles of long standing. Some of these are as old as the Republic itself. Others are the direct results of historical incidents or precedents that have arisen over time.

Many Americans are aware of the skepticism held by the founding generation for large standing armies. There were several reasons for this fear, based soundly on experience the founders observed, especially in contemporary Europe. Chief among these reasons was the one summed up best by James Madison at the Constitutional Convention: “The means of defence against foreign danger, have always been the instruments of tyranny at home.”<sup>4</sup>

Probably, however, fewer are aware that the founding generation was concerned too about creating a more nuanced civil–military relationship from the start. Madison and Alexander Hamilton—authors, along with John Jay, of the *Federalist Papers*—worried (for example) that excessively strict constitutional limits on a federal legislature could inadvertently permit a strong executive to seize excessive power and start a war. *Federalist Papers* 26, 47 and 51—best known for their defense of the separation of powers and the concept of institutional checks and balances—have much to do with balanced control of the military as an outcome of suitably balanced branches of government. Thus while it is true that the founders were apprehensive of too large or too powerful a military, they were also apprehensive of any one branch of government—executive or legislative—seizing the ability to dominate the civilian role of military supervision even as they ensured (by making the President commander-in-chief) that the military could be mobilized rapidly in time of emergency. In other words, shared national security responsibilities and strategic-level decisionmaking were envisioned from the birth of the Republic as a joint endeavor among the branches of government.

Precedent created by such incidents as George Washington’s quelling in 1783 of the Newburgh Conspiracy—in which disgruntled Army officers flirted with challenging the authority of the young Congress and made public policy demands with overt political overtones—reinforced the founders’ emerging philosophy and firmly entrenched the cultural and social understanding of the same. Military personnel are first and foremost servants to the nation—the American idea. The American Soldier is loyal to the Constitution—i.e., to civilian control over the military.

General Washington’s action in the Newburgh matter clarified other principles that complemented the founders’ skepticism of standing military power and their explicit balance of responsibility for it. Uniformed military personnel are not to challenge civilian authority because the authority of both parties is ultimately derived from the same source. Professional disagreements about the course of policy are not for the public sphere, and final decisions on issues of important operational activities and national-level policy are ultimately the responsibilities of elected civilian leaders, though informed by candid discussions with senior military leaders. The military is not to be the arm of any political party; neither are civilian leaders to wield the military for purely political gain. Military officers are commissioned by civilian leaders to uphold the Constitution and to execute a public duty necessary for the American idea to survive and prosper.

## The MacArthur Case: An Exception Proves the Rule

The controversial figure of General of the Army Douglas MacArthur is the case that proves the rule. The case also illustrates both aspects of civil–military relations in the United States and how they are related.

As highly accomplished as proud, as iconic as tragic, as popular as provocative even in his own time, MacArthur enjoyed celebrity status on a scale rivaled by few other American heroes. His clash with President Harry Truman was a seminal moment in civil–military affairs; military historian Russell Weigley calls it the “first major public resistance to civilian policy and strategy in the history of American professional military command.”<sup>5</sup> Much has already been written about the events that led to MacArthur’s dismissal from the Army. Among the transgressions that led to his disgrace were his repeated public criticism of the administration’s national security strategy; his personal refusal to support the concept of limited objectives within a limited war; and his disobedience of explicit orders to operate within a clearly defined chain of command. MacArthur directly and publicly challenged precedents that have governed civil–military relations from the founding of America. His failures in these areas were intolerable. That said, other aspects of the civil–military relationship also contributed to the development of the confrontation.

The MacArthur example is not simply a textbook case of insubordination. Significantly, in several of his assignments, MacArthur was more than a general in the traditional sense. In the years before the United States entered World War II, he served as American Military Advisor to the Commonwealth Government of the Philippines, where he assumed responsibility for numerous administrative functions. After the war, as Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers in Japan, his mission was to fill the political and economic vacuum left by the end of an American-led victory and develop a thriving, democratic replacement. His staff authored the country's new constitution. He had the power to dissolve the Japanese legislature, disqualify individuals from public office and ban political parties—power that he did not hesitate to employ. He instituted nationwide land reform; he demanded and won major social reforms such as racial equality and women's rights. MacArthur was, in effect, responsible for the entire reconstruction of Japan, with more power and responsibility to create and sustain a new democratic order than many heads of state could ever imagine.

Long before he was appointed commander of United Nations military forces in South Korea in 1950, MacArthur had become, according to James Reston, “a sovereign power in his own right.”<sup>6</sup> But a relationship has two sides, and in some ways, the inability of the civilian and senior military leadership to exercise proper control over MacArthur created a situation of uncertain responsibilities and a lack of accountability that played no small role in the eventual conflict with Truman that led to MacArthur's downfall. He crossed the line and, as General Matthew Ridgway said, “If the President had failed . . . to relieve MacArthur from duty, he would have been derelict in his own duty.”<sup>7</sup>

General Ridgway himself described what a healthy civil–military relationship needs during wartime: “[The military man] must be more than ever free to speak up frankly and boldly in the highest councils of our country concerning the policies our civilian leaders are considering. Once a policy is set, however, it is the military man, in keeping with the oath he takes . . . who should either execute that policy, or resign from the service.”<sup>8</sup> General Bruce Palmer, Jr. came to a similar conclusion: “In the great emergencies bound to arise in the future, it is imperative that our highest civilian and military heads be in close, even if not cordial, contact with each other, maintaining a continuous and candid discussion of the purpose of the undertaking, the risks involved, and the probable costs, human and material.”<sup>9</sup> This kind of relationship is especially important in irregular war scenarios or other uses of military force in which military success is necessary but insufficient to achieve America's strategic goals.<sup>10</sup>

## **21st Century Roles**

For countless reasons, the sunset of World War II and the dawn of the Cold War comprised a watershed moment in American foreign policy and military history and culture. For example, as the Korean conflict unfolded, American elected officials determined to keep a standing, ready Army sized in accordance with the expectation of long-term military competition with the Soviet Union. In addition, this moment marked something of a paradoxical period. The potential for nuclear war, total in a sense that surpassed even World War II, stood shoulder to shoulder with the potential for non-nuclear conventional war and limited-objective war as well as with actual wars of national liberation, counterinsurgencies and the emergence of terrorism as a form of war.

Over time, the U.S. military has been shaped to accommodate this reality. The United States makes war in joint fashion, employing the capabilities of all its armed services in strategic maneuver, and almost always as a leading member of an international coalition. Such operations are highly complicated, but a system is in place to make sure that high-level military and political decisions are streamlined as much as possible.

The U.S. military has established several combatant commands (COCOMs) that each have broad, continuing missions. In 1986, the Goldwater–Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act reinforced the responsibilities of the military described in Titles 10 and 32 of the U.S. Code by creating clear lines of authority. Commanders of COCOMs (such as U.S. Pacific Command, U.S. Central Command, etc.) receive orders and missions from the President through the Secretary of Defense. COCOM commanders then give direction to and employ the forces provided to them by the Army and the other services. For example, U.S. Pacific Command is headed today by a U.S. Navy admiral who receives orders from his civilian bosses—the President and the Secretary of Defense. Subordinate to him are many thousands of Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine servicemembers who execute the instructions he derives from the civilian leadership. It is important to note that to use these forces well—i.e., to wage

war successfully—these military means must be complemented by non-military means and be guided by policies that result from a proper civil–military relationship.

Today’s strategic environment is even more complex than that of the Cold War. For example, when the U.S. Army secures a foreign state and drives an enemy regime out of power (as it did in Iraq in 2003), generals—and their subordinates—assume a great deal of temporary responsibility for local governance, local administration, delivery of aid, economic rebuilding and much more as critical components of their ultimate goal of restoring security. The development of long-term security has become irreversibly intertwined among military and civilian professionals. Their successes—or failures—are similarly intertwined. Fully functional strategic and operational policies require the strongest civil–military relationships.

For the Army, this means providing a predictable and sustainable supply of scalable forces to each of the COCOM commanders as well as maintaining a surge capacity for unexpected contingencies. It also means developing senior leaders who can be successful in the civil–military sphere of operations and policy—because this sphere is essential to the Army’s role of preventing conflict, shaping the environment and winning when necessary. In particular, the Army’s unique role is to provide forces with expeditionary and campaign capabilities for the conduct of prompt and sustained combat operations on land. To do this, the Army prepares for and conducts a wide range of specific functions.

To **prevent** conflict, the Army:

- recruits, trains, equips and postures forces;
- provides defense support to civil authorities;
- counters weapons of mass destruction;
- provides theater missile defense; and
- modernizes to meet future operational requirements.

To **shape** the operational environment, the Army:

- builds and maintains relationships to gain access and set conditions for operations;
- conducts sustained engagement to build partner capacity, prevent conflict and prepare for contingencies;
- supports theater security cooperation activities under the leadership of combatant commanders; and
- conducts integrated special operations and conventional force operations.

To **win** when combatant commanders demand it, the Army:

- conducts unified land operations to dominate in conflict and overcome crises;
- conducts combined-arms maneuver to win decisively;
- conducts wide-area security to retain the initiative and protect populations;
- counters terrorism;
- maintains reserve forces and generates forces necessary to mitigate strategic risks; and
- scales itself to counter unexpected crises.

## **Conclusion**

National security strategy and policy are difficult for democracies to design and execute in a visionary way. Skepticism of great power and reluctance to become entangled in foreign wars lie in the deepest part of the American psyche. Loyalty to Americanism and the love of duty to the enduring laws that underpin the Republic—as well as the patriotism that subordinates self-gain to the good of the nation—lie at the heart of American military culture. America instinctively abhors the totalitarian and employs numerous systemic means to prevent the emergence of such.

Within civil–military interaction, there is little debate regarding who has ultimate responsibility—the civilian leadership. What is at issue is the practical application at the civil–military interface. Each element has a distinct

and important role to play. The nurturing of that relationship is paramount—it must foster candid dialogue at all times. The past eleven years of war have highlighted the importance of the practical results of a proper civil–military relationship. Considering a future security environment that is more ambiguous and complex and the likelihood that American forces will be smaller, this relationship and the decisions that emerge from it will only grow in importance.

America’s wars since 9/11 have demonstrated once again that when a democracy wages war, no one person or institution is a Caesar—credited solely for victory or blamed solely for defeat. Congress authorizes and raises the military as well as declaring war; it can endorse full American commitment to a cause by declaring war or withhold American commitment via its power of the purse. The President is commander-in-chief and the effective policymaker-in-chief, but he can employ only the resources given to him by the people. Senior military leaders also bear immense responsibility. They must participate in the civil–military dialogue concerning strategy, operations and policy. They have major responsibility for war’s beginning, middle and end—waging war involves more than combat. Creating and executing security strategy and policy in modern times is a complex business. Getting it right requires the committed effort of the entire national security apparatus, a whole-of-government approach and a healthy civil–military relationship.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> General Martin E. Dempsey, remarks delivered at the John F. Kennedy, Jr. Forum, Harvard University, 12 April 2012, <http://www.jcs.mil/speech.aspx?id=1690>.
- <sup>2</sup> Eliot Cohen, “The Unequal Dialogue: The Theory and Reality of Civil–Military Relations and the Use of Force,” in Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, eds., *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil–Military Gap and American National Security* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).
- <sup>3</sup> Russell F. Weigley, “The American Civil–Military Gap: A Historical Perspective, Colonial Times to the Present,” in Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, eds., *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil–Military Gap and American National Security* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).
- <sup>4</sup> James Madison, “The Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787,” 29 June 1787, [http://constitution.org/dfc/dfc\\_0629.htm](http://constitution.org/dfc/dfc_0629.htm).
- <sup>5</sup> Weigley, “The American Civil–Military Gap,” p. 226.
- <sup>6</sup> James Reston, as quoted by General Matthew Ridgway in *The Korean War* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1967), p. 235.
- <sup>7</sup> General Matthew Ridgway, *The Korean War* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1967), p. 236.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 232–233.
- <sup>9</sup> General Bruce Palmer, Jr., *The 25 Year War: America’s Military Role in Vietnam* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1984), pp. 201–202.
- <sup>10</sup> See General Gordon R. Sullivan, USA Ret., “Thinking About the 21st Century Security Environment: The Need for a Whole-of-Government Approach” (AUSA National Security Watch 12-1W, January 2012), [http://www.ausa.org/publications/ilw/Documents/NSW%2012-1W\\_web%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.ausa.org/publications/ilw/Documents/NSW%2012-1W_web%20(2).pdf).

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