

Civil-Military Relations In the U.S: What Needs to be Done?

Written by Douglas Stuart

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DOUGLAS STUART, SEP 13 2013

Americans can take great pride in their nation's history of military subordination to civilian authority. However, the subject of civilian-military relations must be constantly monitored in a democracy with a large and powerful army. There are also aspects of the current situation which have created new problems for the individuals and institutions on both sides of this relationship. Our military and civilian leaders are certainly aware of these problems. Consider the following quotes:

"We will maintain the trust and confidence of our elected leaders.... civilian control of the military remains a core principle of our Republic and we will preserve it. We will remain an apolitical institution and sustain this position at all costs."

"I'm neither intimidated by our military, nor am I thinking that they're somehow trying to undermine my role as commander in chief."

The first quote is from the 2011 *National Military Strategy*, published by the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff. The second quote was volunteered by President Obama at the end of an interview with Bob Woodward in 2010.

What is going on here? Why do both the Joint Chiefs and the Commander in Chief feel compelled to reassure the American people about constitutional principles that have been in place since 1787? I would argue that both Obama and the Joint Chiefs were responding to the convergence of three trends. The first has its roots in the U.S. response to the Pearl Harbor attack of 1941. John Gaddis has argued that "surprise attacks tend to sweep away old conceptions of national security and what it takes to achieve it." [2] This had never been truer than in the case of Pearl Harbor, which transformed American thinking about the standards against which all future U.S. foreign policies would be judged. Overnight the concept of national interest, which had guided American policy making for 150 years, was abandoned in favor of the concept of national security. Six years later this change was institutionalized by the 1947 National Security Act which created a network of agencies to serve the concept of national security. The practical result of this change was the elevation of the armed services and military perspectives to the "top of policy hill" and the marginalization of the State Department within the Washington policy community.[3]

The second trend that has had implications for civil-military relations is the blurring of traditional distinctions between peace and war, between nations and non-state actors, and between domestic and international issues. As international relations have become more complex, there has been a dramatic expansion of the number of issues that are now categorized as national security challenges. The U.S. military has responded to this increasingly messy situation by taking on more roles that were traditionally within the purview of civilian agencies. Eliot Cohen has argued that this situation will continue to be manageable as long as America's military leaders accept the principle of an "unequal dialogue" between military servants and their constitutionally designated civilian masters.[4] The problem is that there are really two unequal dialogues at work here: on the one hand, as the above quote by the Joint Chiefs makes clear, our military leaders do not question the constitutional principle of civilian control of the military, but on the other hand, representatives of the armed services are so much more influential than their civilian counterparts in the day-to-day formulation of U.S. foreign policy that it is almost impossible for Washington to interpret or respond to

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events in ways that are not militarized.

The military's dominance of the foreign policy community would be less of a problem if there was an atmosphere of trust and familiarity between civilian and military policy makers. But four decades after the creation of the All-Volunteer Force, the American military has taken on many of the characteristics of a military class that is relatively isolated from, and in some cases alienated from, the 99% of the U.S. population that it is sworn to serve. Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates communicated his concern about this third trend in civil-military relations when he warned the cadets at West Point about a situation that "risks fostering a closed culture of superiority and aloofness." [5]

Problems associated with the civil-military "gap" surface at three levels: At the level of American society, where fewer and fewer citizens have any real connection with members of the armed services, at the level of the "strategy-policy nexus" where military leaders dominate the decision making process, and at the level of policy implementation, where too many tasks that should be handled by civilian agencies are instead turned over to the military. Most of the extensive literature dealing with the "gap" has focused on the intermediate level, where foreign policy decision making is overly dependent on, and overly influenced by, the military. Since 1957 Samuel Huntington's groundbreaking book, *The Soldier and the State*, has served as the starting point for much of the debate relating to the proper role of the military in the policy making process. At the core of Huntington's study was a concern for how the U.S. could continue to "maximize security at the least sacrifice of other social values" including the democratic value of military subordination to civilian authority. [6] The concepts that Huntington introduced – in particular the concept of objective control – were all built around the goal of preserving the military and political realms as two distinct and autonomous spheres of responsibility and expertise. His model could have been summarized by Robert Frost's assertion that "good fences make good neighbors."

Huntington's arguments were valuable at the time that he was writing – a time when Eisenhower, who was unchallengeable on matters of civil-military relations, was attempting to establish clear guidelines for civilian-military cooperation. By the end of the Cold War, however, the division between the two spheres had become so fluid and contingent that Huntington's model was no longer helpful as a guide to appropriate behavior by either military or civilian policy makers. The fences had come down, and the property lines were no longer distinguishable. This situation has gotten even more problematic since September 11, 2001; the start of a probably permanent struggle against a largely invisible enemy who must be fought both within and beyond America's borders.

Many commentators have argued that the problems associated with the civil-military gap require fundamental reform of the U.S. policy making system. [7] However, the institutions that favor military advice and military perspectives are too well entrenched in Washington. Furthermore, the State Department, which is the obvious candidate for a leading role in an alternative policy making system, has almost no political support in Congress. As Nicholas Kravetz notes in a recent article, "Many in Congress simply do not see Diplomacy as a vital component of U.S. national security." [8]

The Mellon Project on Civilian-Military Educational Cooperation

If architectonic reform is not likely, then efforts to improve civil-military relations at the societal level are the best fallback option. Some efforts are, in fact, already taking place as a result of a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. This project, which began with a two-year planning grant and recently received a new three-year implementation grant through Mellon's Liberal Arts College program is designed to assist thirteen of the U.S.'s leading civilian and military education institutions in the development of new forms of academic and social interaction. The ultimate goal of this initiative is to help reduce the gap between civilian and military worlds by providing academic and social opportunities for positive interaction between the two communities. The list of participating institutions is impressive. On the civilian side – Bard; Brown; Colorado College; Connecticut College; Dickinson; Vassar; and Washington and Lee. On the military side – the Air Force Academy; the Army War College; the Naval Academy; the Naval War College; Virginia Military Institute; and West Point. Dickinson College is the lead institution in the administration of this ambitious initiative.

Over the last two years, the participating institutions have engaged in a number of interesting forms of collaboration.

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Here are a few examples:

- Thirteen faculty members from the participating institutions met at Dickinson to develop a model syllabus for a course on U.S. Grand Strategy that will highlight tests of civil-military relations. The syllabus was then presented at a conference sponsored by the American Political Science Association and the International Studies Association.
- Students and faculty at Colorado College and the Air Force Academy have come together for various academic and social events, including a group discussion of Machiavelli's *The Prince*, and group attendance at a play and at a public lecture by a visiting writer. Students and faculty from the two institutions also worked together on a physics course entitled "Physics and the Meaning of Flight."
- Vassar College and West Point also organized a series of group events and classes. Students from each institution have done overnights at the other institution, and a documentary video was produced to give students an opportunity to comment on how their opinions of the other community changed as a result of their collaboration.
- Bard College also worked with students and faculty from West Point to organize a three day conference on the theme "Can War Be Just?" The program involved presentations by professors of religious studies from Bard and professors of philosophy from West Point. The papers that were presented at the conference will be published in a forthcoming edited volume.
- Virginia Military Institute and Washington and Lee University brought students together for a two day conference on "Building and Strengthening Honor Codes."

These are just a few of the collaborative activities that have taken place under the auspices of the Mellon Foundation grant. As the project enters its third year all of the participating institutions are developing plans for new forms of collaboration. Many of the upcoming projects will involve students and faculty from the arts and humanities.

The Mellon initiative is an imaginative attempt to cultivate greater trust and familiarity between civilian and military communities. While some graduate-level institutions are involved in the project, the primary focus is on undergraduates. By providing opportunities for intellectual and social interaction among college-age students, the Mellon participants hope to cultivate mutual understanding that will facilitate civilian-military policy making in the future. At minimum, the Mellon initiative will help to address the societal problem identified by former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Admiral Mike Mullen: "America doesn't know its military and the United States military doesn't know America."^[9]

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[1] Portions of this article were presented in a speech at the 2011 Annual Strategy Conference of the U.S. Army War College.

[2] *Surprise, Security and the American Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004) p. 37. The impact of Pearl Harbor is discussed by the author in *Creating the National Security State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

[3] Robert Cutler, who served as Eisenhower's first National Security Advisor, coined this phrase in "The Development of the National Security Council" reprinted in Karl Inderfurth and Loch

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Johnson, eds. *Decisions of the Highest Order* (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing, 1988) pp. 55-65.

[4] "The Unequal Dialogue: The Theory and Reality of Civil-Military Relations and the Use of Force," in Peter Feaver and Richard Kohn, eds, *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and National Security* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 429-58.

[5] 2011 Thayer Lecture, available at <http://www.westpointaog.org/page.aspx?pid=4843>

[6] *The Soldier and the State: Theory and Politics of Civil Military Relations*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 2.

[7] See, for example, *Organizing for National Security*, Douglas Stuart, ed. (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, November 2000).

[8] "The Diplomatic Doldrums" Available at: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/08/01/the_diplomatic_doldrums_congress_state_department_budget

[9] Greg Jaffe, "Adm. Mike Mullen Observes Disconnect between U.S. Military and Broader Public," *The Washington Post*, January 11, 2011, available at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/11/AR2011011104458.html?wprss=rss_world

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