



POLICY ROUNDTABLE:

Civil-Military Relations Now and Tomorrow

March 27, 2018

Table of Contents

1. "Introduction: Civil-Military Relations in the Age of Trump" By Celeste Ward Gventer
2. "Trump's Generals: Mattis, McMaster, and Kelly," by Jessica Blankshain
3. "An Effect Rather Than a Cause for Concern: The State of Civil-Military Relations in the Trump Administration," by Raphael S. Cohen
4. "Civil-Military Relations One Year In," by Lindsay P. Cohn
5. "Trump and His Generals: An Unfolding Crisis in Civil-Military Relations," by Paul Eaton
6. "The Lack of Diverse Viewpoints on Trump's National Security Team and its Long-Term Consequences," by Lauren Fish

Summary

Given the number of current and former generals who have been appointed to the Trump administration, TNSR asked a group of experts to share their thoughts on the impact this is having on civil-military relations in America.

1. Introduction: Civil-Military Relations in the Age of Trump

Celeste Ward Gventer

Intellectual absorption in what is immediately before us, even among historians, is nearly unavoidable. This is not just an American or even a twenty-first century phenomenon. As Adam Gopnik explains in a recent *New Yorker* piece about the surprising decline of crime in America's big cities over the last few decades, "in 1858, the pundits and politicians in Britain were obsessing over the British government's takeover of India from the East India Company and the intentions of Napoleon III, yet the really big thing was the construction ... of a sewer system to protect London from its own waste ... making cholera epidemics ... a thing of the distant past."¹ As he explains, "Big events go by unseen while we sweat the smaller stuff; things happen underground while we watch the boulevard parades."²

And so it is, one suspects, with civil-military relations in America. Snapshots in time are just that — and surface-level events can change quickly. The Trump Administration certainly offers numerous targets of this kind that clamor for one's immediate attention. The 45th president appointed a recently retired Marine general — James Mattis — as his Secretary of Defense, so close to his removal of the uniform that the legal seven-year "cooling off" period had to be waived by Congress. Another retired marine, John Kelly, became Secretary of Homeland Security, and then White House Chief of Staff. Retired Army general Michael Flynn was appointed national security advisor, only to be quickly replaced by active duty Army general, H.R. McMaster. The president, with no record of

¹ Adam Gopnik, "The Great Crime Decline," *The New Yorker*, Feb. 12, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/02/12/the-great-crime-decline>.

² Gopnik, "Great Crime."

foreign policy or public service, seems to thrill at being flanked by “his” generals. Meanwhile, inside the Pentagon, senior civilian positions long went unfilled, while the community rumor held that the uniformed Joint Staff was doing most of the work in “the Building.” These all seemed to be worrying signs that “civilian control” was or is being maintained by the thinnest of margins.³

Meanwhile, as of this writing, McMaster has left the White House and will reportedly be replaced by a civilian, former Ambassador to the United Nations, John Bolton. Despite the fact that we are now down one general, it is safe to say that the Trump Administration has given civil-military relations scholars (among others) plenty to worry about.

Beyond the staffing issues, there is the unsettling way that Trump talks about his senior military appointees like a gunslinger would the glinting revolvers in his belt holsters. He refers to “my generals” in the same way he does his wife, Melania, as “my supermodel,”

³ While the jobs have slowly been filled, some vacancies persist, including about ten that require Senate confirmation, such as the Assistant Secretary for Strategy, Plans, and Capabilities, and numerous other senior jobs that do not require confirmation. See: “Presidential Appointee Tracker,” Partnership for Public Service, accessed Mar. 24, 2018, <https://ourpublicservice.org/issues/presidential-transition/political-appointee-tracker.php>. Observers noted as early as last November, however, “The unusually long absence of Senate-approved Pentagon officials has led Mattis to rely more heavily on uniformed members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, rather than civilians temporarily filling high-level positions. That has caused some concern over the civilian-military balance in an administration already stocked with current and former generals inside the White House and other agencies.” Paul McLeary, “Here Comes Trump’s Pentagon – Finally.” *Foreign Policy*, Nov. 2, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/11/02/here-comes-the-trump-pentagon-finally/>.

as Suzanne Garment pointed out a few months ago.⁴ One gets the troubling impression that “the generals” are serving as ornaments, walking symbols of the president’s newfound status as Master of All He Surveys — and reminders that he controls the world’s most potent military and nuclear arsenal. Garment points out that, “Trump regularly asserts that he hired the generals partly because they look the part... nobody is more indubitably alpha male than a general.”⁵ Indeed, the president is going to put the trappings of American military might on full display in the nation’s capital this fall, giving the American people a literal “boulevard parade” to watch.⁶ If Trump’s firm-handshake adversary, President Emmanuel Macron of France, can roll out the heavy armor onto the streets of Paris on Bastille Day, wait till the world gets a load of America’s equipment.⁷

Yet, despite the administration’s seemingly limitless disregard for established norms, making every day Christmas for the cable news channels, it is unclear how lasting are the dynamics associated with Trump’s civil-military arrangements, such as they are. As Suzanne Nielsen and Don Snider point out, “... understanding of U.S. civil-military relations might be distorted by the often narrow focus of the mass media. Rumors of disagreements within the Pentagon, or between the Pentagon and the White House or the Congress, are too often presented as if they were the whole substance of civil-military

⁴ Suzanne Garment, “Trump surrounds himself with generals who are masculine — but also obedient.” NBCNews.com, Dec. 10, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/trump-surrounds-himself-generals-who-are-masculine-also-obedient-ncna827476>.

⁵ Garment, “Trump surrounds.”

⁶ Michael D. Shear, “Trump Envisions a Parade Showing Off America’s Military Might,” *New York Times*, Sept. 18, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/18/us/politics/trump-4th-of-july-military-parade.html>.

⁷ “Macron: Awkward Trump handshake a ‘moment of truth’,” BBC News, May 28’ 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-40077241>.

relations.”⁸ They argue that one must look instead at the core “interdependent relationships,” lest we neglect “other dynamics that are more significant or that have long-term ramifications.”⁹ In other words, it would be easy to get distracted by the day-to-day, the public brawls, personal takedowns, and court gossip — particularly in this administration — and draw broad conclusions about civil-military relations based on them. But what captures our focus today may not, in fact, be the trends that matter most over the long term.

Identifying the Long-Term Effects

Texas National Security Review has assembled an outstanding group of civil-military relations experts — Jessica Blankshain, Raphael Cohen, Lindsay Cohn, Maj. Gen. (ret.) Paul Eaton, and Lauren Fish — to illuminate the civil-military issues presented by the Trump Administration and to consider the long-term effects they could have. All of our contributors concede that, only one year into the Trump administration, it is only possible to conclude so much. Yet they also note that, over the last several decades, broader pathologies in American society have developed that may well be leading the

⁸ Suzanne C. Nielsen and Don M. Snider, “Introduction,” in *American Civil-Military Relations: The Soldier and the State in a New Era*, ed. Suzanne C. Nielsen and Don M. Snider (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 2.

⁹ Those five relationships are those between civilian elites and military leaders; military institutions and American society; military leaders and their professions; among civilian elites; and between civilian elites and American society. Nielsen and Snider, 3.

nation down the very paths feared by some of the architects of “the national security state” created after the second world war.¹⁰

As Cohen and Blankshain point out, although military officers (active and retired) serving in senior positions is not a new phenomenon, it does tend to be the exception. Even when military officers have served, for example, as national security advisors — Colin Powell and John Poindexter, for example — they were the rare uniform amongst a mostly civilian cabinet and staff.

Both Eaton and Fish express concern about the apparent lack of diversity of opinion in the administration. Eaton questions whether three decades of a military career is, in fact, adequate preparation for the full range of foreign policy questions a national security advisor, a White House chief of staff, and even a secretary of defense, may confront. And not only are civilian experts rarer in this administration than is typically the case, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Joseph Dunford, is also a marine, enjoying decades of association with both Mattis and Kelly. Eaton notes that the Marines are a “small family,” and that having three men (four if you include the Commandant of the Marine Corps, one of the Joint Chiefs) with such similar backgrounds may not offer the president a full range of perspectives on policy choices. The appointment of so many marines also raises questions about service parochialism, or at least the appearance thereof, in the Pentagon. Gone are the days, to say the least, when the Marine Corps feared for its very existence.¹¹

¹⁰ In his influential article, “The Garrison State,” Harold Lasswell warned of “a world in which the specialists on violence are the most powerful group in society.” Harold D. Lasswell, “The Garrison State,” *American Journal of Sociology* 46, No. 4 (January 1941): 455-468.

¹¹ Alan Rems, “Semper Fidelis: Defending the Marine Corps,” *Naval History Magazine* 31, No. 3 (June 2017), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/navalhistory/2017-06/semper-fidelis-defending-marine-corps>.

Civil-military relations experts and observers have noted these issues with concern. Yet, despite all this bending of generally accepted practices, many of them felt some relief that the individuals in question — especially Mattis and McMaster — are true professionals who know what they are doing. If we are going to have a recently retired officer in the E-Ring of the Pentagon, and an active duty one at the White House, the logic went (at least before McMaster exited stage left), the nation could do a lot worse than these two.

But, as Cohn points out, perhaps it is precisely that feeling of relief that should give us pause. Shouldn't it trouble us that we are collectively relying on the nation's military officers to "save" us from an unpredictable commander in chief? Mehdi Hasan expressed a similar concern last September when he wrote:

This feels like the birth of a militarised presidency. The Associated Press revealed in August that Mattis and Kelly have privately agreed "that one of them should remain in the United States at all times to keep tabs on the orders rapidly emerging from the White House". Neither Mattis nor Kelly were elected. So what gives them the right to "keep tabs" on an elected president in this way? And what kind of precedent does this set?¹²

For Cohn and Cohen, the apparent willingness of Americans to put their fate in the hands of the military is the heart of the problem. Both authors note the catastrophic decline in confidence in most U.S. institutions in recent years. The military stands alone in its

¹² Mehdi Hasan, "Why we should worry that the only restraint on Trump is three unelected generals," *The New Statesman*, Sept. 8, 2017, <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/observations/2017/09/why-we-should-worry-only-restraint-trump-three-unelected-generals>.

command of the public's trust — whether compared to the president, the Congress, the Supreme Court, or even business. Cohn and Cohen also see politicians exploiting the public veneration of the military to avoid debating tough issues. More insidious, Cohn notes that some of the nation's elected leaders seem to imply that only military members deserve respect, health care, and a living wage. Fish, Cohn, and Cohen all recall with chagrin the suggestion by the president's spokesperson, Sarah Sanders, that arguing with a four-star general (referring to Kelly) would be “inappropriate.”¹³

In Whom Do the People Trust?

Indeed, what unites the essays in this roundtable and should be the real source of scholarly and public concern is less the constant spectacle that is the Trump Administration (including the presence of so many generals in his government — good, bad, or otherwise) than the simultaneous loss of public confidence in other institutions and the seemingly mindless reverence for the military. Scholars Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk demonstrated in a dispiriting 2016 article that, “(i)n the past three decades, the share of U.S. citizens who think that it would be a ‘good’ or ‘very good’ thing for the ‘army to rule’...has steadily risen. In 1995, just one in sixteen respondents agreed with that position; today, one in six agree.”¹⁴

¹³ John Wagner, “White House press secretary: It’s ‘highly inappropriate’ to question a 4-star Marine general,” *The Washington Post*, Oct. 20, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/10/20/white-house-press-secretary-its-highly-inappropriate-to-question-a-4-star-marine-general/?utm_term=.176845f1e4c6.

¹⁴ Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mouk, “The Danger of Deconsolidation: The Democratic Disconnect.” *Journal of Democracy* 27, No. 3 (July 2016): 12.

In some ways, then, the Trump Administration’s lineup makes all the sense in the world. The president is simply doing with “his” generals what he does with so many other issues — playing to the crowd and exploiting the worst instincts of certain segments of the American public.

In one of his Letters from America, the famed British journalist and documentarian Alistair Cooke wrote in 1969 about the state of the country, not least the crime and violence problem, and how the American middle class was beginning to respond:

In desperate times, the meekest people show alarming symptoms of defiance. And, in the early races for the autumn elections, I notice that policemen are being elected as the mayors of cities. It should not yet give us cause to splutter ... However, it doesn’t seem to me a good thing that the middle class, weary of violence and mockery as it may be, should turn to policemen as rulers, any more than that we should turn the government of the military over to the military ...¹⁵

Are these desperate times?

No one really knows why crime declined so precipitously in American cities over the course of a few decades. Most of the attributed causes of the problem went unsolved, yet crime went down anyway. For all of the social science theorizing about the pathologies that led to rampant lawlessness, and the corresponding prescriptions for treating that disease, “the lesson of wise public works,” Gopnik concludes, “is not, truth be told,

¹⁵ Alistair Cooke, “‘Eternal Vigilance’ – by Whom? 19 October 1969,” in *Letter from America, 1946-2004* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 186.

always about the benefits of foundational analysis or fundamental change.” Instead, it is a “story ... about the wisdom of single steps and small sanities.”

If that prescription holds here, it is not clear which single steps or small sanities might right the state of American civil-military relations. We have gotten where we are over a long period of time and there do not appear to be deep wells of wisdom on this issue among the nation’s leaders, in the White House, on Capitol Hill, or anywhere else.

In any case, like the construction of the London sewer system in the 19th century, the future of our civil-military relations may well be determined by events that are flying below the news cycle radar. Nevertheless, as our authors suggest, even if it is not yet time to splutter, some unhealthy trends are becoming increasingly visible to those who are looking.¹⁶

Celeste Ward Gventer is an Associate Editor of the Texas National Security Review, a National Security Fellow at the Clements Center for National Security at the University of Texas, and an adjunct analyst for the RAND Corporation. She currently consults widely with governments in Europe and the Middle East on defense organization and reform and is based in Amberg, Germany. As a Ph.D. student in history at the University of Texas, she is writing a dissertation on Eisenhower’s 1953 and 1958 Department of Defense reforms, inter-service rivalry, and the New Look strategy. She was a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense in the George W. Bush Administration and served two tours in Iraq as a civilian. In

¹⁶ Andrew Bacevich pointed out some of these same trends some five years ago. See: Andrew J. Bacevich, *Breach of Trust: How Americans Failed Their Soldiers and Their Country* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2013).

mid-April 2018 she will launch a new entrepreneurial venture, Grant Patton (www.grantpatton.com), which will produce and sell elegant, military-themed accessories, beginning with men's ties.



2. Trump's Generals: Mattis, McMaster, and Kelly

Civil-Military Relations in the Age of Trump

Jessica Blankshain

In the weeks and months leading up to President Donald Trump's inauguration, many national security analysts — both academics and practitioners — expressed concern over the number of retired general officers the new president planned to appoint to senior positions.¹⁷ Trump's original appointees included retired Marine four-star James Mattis as secretary of defense, retired Marine four-star John Kelly as secretary of homeland security, and retired Army three-star Michael Flynn as national security advisor. Of primary concern was that having so many senior individuals with close ties to the military would undermine civilian control (or at the very least, perceptions of civilian control). More specifically, many feared that the prominence of military voices around a president inexperienced in foreign affairs and the armed forces would lead to a further militarization of U.S. foreign policy.¹⁸ These concerns were revived when, a month into the new administration, Trump appointed Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, an active-duty Army

¹⁷ See, for example, Mark Landler and Helene Cooper, "Trump's Focus on Generals for Top Jobs Stirs Worries Over Military's Sway," *New York Times*, Nov. 21, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/21/us/politics/donald-trump-national-security-military.html> ; Carol Giacomo, "Why Donald Trump Shouldn't Fill the Cabinet with Generals," *New York Times*, Nov. 30, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/30/opinion/why-donald-trump-shouldnt-fill-the-cabinet-with-generals.html> ; David A. Graham, "All the President Elect's Generals," *The Atlantic*, Dec. 8, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/12/all-the-president-elects-generals/509873/>

¹⁸ See, for example, Bryan Bender, "Is Trump hiring too many generals?" *Politico*, Dec. 2, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/12/trump-transition-generals-232148>

officer, to replace Flynn as national security advisor.¹⁹ In July 2017, when the president moved Kelly from the Department of Homeland Security to a traditionally more political role as White House chief of staff, the conversation broadened to more explicitly include the risks of politicizing the military.²⁰ These fears, however, were balanced by hope that seasoned national security professionals like Mattis, McMaster, and Kelly would be the “grown-ups in the room,” steering the new, inexperienced president toward better decisions and bringing stability to an erratic and impulsive administration.²¹

These appointment-related concerns about civil-military relations in the era of Trump can be grouped into two broad categories: concerns related to policymaking within government, and those about the relationship between the military and the society it serves. The perceived risk to policymaking is that Trump’s appointment of, and deference to, senior officials with strong, recent ties to the military would give the military too much influence in foreign policy, harming perceptions of civilian control. This strand of concerns has both a relational component — the prospect of normalizing the privileging of military over civilian views — and a policy content component — a further “militarization” of American foreign policy. Militarization, in this context, does not necessarily mean starting more wars, or using military force more often. Evidence suggests that in general, those with military experience are less likely to want to initiate

¹⁹ David Barno and Nora Bensahel, “An Active-Duty National Security Advisor: Myths and Concerns,” *War on the Rocks*, Feb. 28, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/02/an-active-duty-national-security-advisor-myths-and-concerns/>

²⁰ Elliot Kaufman, “Against John Kelly as White House Chief of Staff,” *National Review*, Aug. 1, 2017, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2017/08/john-kelly-wrong-man-white-house-chief-staff-civilian-control-military/>

²¹ Jonathan Stevenson, “The Generals Can’t Save Us From Trump,” *New York Times*, July 28, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/28/opinion/sunday/mattis-mcmaster-foreign-policy-trump.html>

conflict, but are more likely to use overwhelming force once a conflict has started.²²

Rather, it reflects a concern that the military perspective will dominate a wide range of foreign policy decisions to the exclusion of alternative perspectives, or that every issue will become a problem for the military to solve, whether that is through traditional use of force or not.²³

The other area of apprehension — the relationship between the military and society — centers on the risk that Trump’s use of the military as a political prop would drag it into the political arena, harming its respected status with the American public. Normalizing the use of those connected to the military as political actors risks creating an environment where criticism of the military is completely off limits for some segments of society, while trust in the military is equally as unthinkable in others.²⁴

Just over one year into the Trump administration, what evidence have observers seen to support or refute these concerns?

It is too early for definitive answers, but the evidence thus far suggests that the disquiet over both sets of issues was well-founded. Trump’s generals, as he likes to call them, do seem to be extremely influential in policymaking, and the administration has done little to distance these senior officials from their military backgrounds. Some observers have

²² Gelpi, Christopher, and Peter D. Feaver. “Speak softly and carry a big stick? Veterans in the political elite and the American use of force.” *American Political Science Review* 96, no. 4 (December 2002): 779–793.

²³ See, for example, Rosa Brooks, *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017).

²⁴ For evidence of the effect of partisanship and ideology on confidence in the military, see David T. Burbach. “Partisan Dimensions of Confidence in the US Military, 1973–2016,” *Armed Forces & Society* (January 2018), <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0095327X17747205?journalCode=afsa>.

suggested that the generals have been a moderating influence on the president, steering Trump toward better foreign policy decisions.²⁵ In a previous *Texas National Security Review* roundtable, Emma Ashford and Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrinson argue that the Trump administration's first year, including its first *National Security Strategy* (NSS), was far more in keeping with status-quo American foreign policy than the president's rhetoric would have suggested.²⁶ But if this is true, it suggests that civilian control may in fact be eroding, at least insofar as enacted policy and strategic documents have been inconsistent with the stated political preferences of the president. Since active or former military officers were so instrumental in policymaking, including the drafting of the NSS, it appears that it is their preferred policies that won the day. Meanwhile, evidence of politicization of the military abounds, although it is difficult to measure how enduring an erosion of social and political norms might be in such a short time span.

While the active and retired military officers in the administration are often discussed as a whole, when it comes to considering the implications for civil-military relations discussed above, it will be helpful to consider each of the most prominent players separately. The three most important generals throughout the full first year of the administration have been Mattis, McMaster, and Kelly. Despite their similarities, these three individuals hold three very different positions that one would expect to have different impacts on civil-military relations. It is useful to examine how each of these individuals has either confirmed or refuted the early anxieties about their appointments.

²⁵ See, for example, James Kitfield, "Trump's Generals Are Trying to Save the World. Starting with the White House," *Politico*, Aug. 4, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/08/04/donald-trump-generals-mattis-mcmaster-kelly-flynn-215455>.

²⁶ Emma Ashford and Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrinson, "Trump's National Security Strategy: A Critic's Dream," *Texas National Security Review*, Dec. 21, 2017, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-make-trumps-national-security-strategy/#essay2>.

While all three concerns apply to each appointment, each of their positions underscores a different one in particular. In the case of the secretary of defense, the question of civilian political preferences prevailing over military ones, “relational control,” is most at play. Militarization of foreign policy is more of a factor in the case of the national security advisor, while politicization of the military, or at least of one particular former general, is most strongly visible in the case of the White House chief of staff. While McMaster is set to depart the administration in early April, it is still important to consider the impact of his time as national security advisor, and what it might mean for the future of American civil-military relations.

Mattis: Ceding Civilian Control

James Mattis’ appointment as secretary of defense was one of the first nominations announced by the new administration. The decision was much discussed in particular because the 1947 legislation that created the modern national security establishment, as well as the position of secretary of defense, included a provision that the person filling that position must not have been a member of the military within the previous ten years.²⁷ America has a long tradition of fearing a large standing Army.²⁸ When the post-WWII drawdown was limited by the onset of the Cold War, the prospect of maintaining a substantial, permanent force for the foreseeable future raised hackles on the Hill and beyond. Congress viewed a civilian secretary of defense — without recent, close ties to the military — as one of the keys to maintaining civilian control in such an environment.

²⁷ National Security Act of 1947, p. 500 <http://legisworks.org/congress/80/publaw-253.pdf>.

²⁸ See the Federalist Papers, especially 8 and 24–29, available at <https://www.congress.gov/resources/display/content/The+Federalist+Papers> and Anti-Federalist Papers, especially 23–25, available at

<http://resources.utulsa.edu/law/classes/rice/Constitutional/AntiFederalist/antifed.htm>.

Congress passed a one-time exception to the ten-year rule for George Marshall in 1950, and changed the limit to seven years in 2008.²⁹ Congress similarly granted a waiver to allow Mattis, who had been retired for fewer than five years, to serve as secretary of defense.

Most analysts who worry about a secretary of defense who is too closely tied to the military focus on the question of civilian control. As Peter Feaver points out, this is partially about symbolism: “The secretary of defense is the person in government who embodies civilian control 24-7 ... That it is a civilian face, wearing civilian clothes, receiving salutes and courtesies from uniformed personnel, is a powerful visible symbol of civilian control.”³⁰ But there are also concerns about what such an appointment would mean for the military’s influence over policy. As a Cabinet-level political appointee, the secretary is supposed to be the president’s representative, overseeing the Department of Defense and the military, working to further administration policy objectives, and ensuring compliance with administration directives. A defense secretary who is too closely linked to the military might be susceptible to serving the military’s interests more than the president’s interests.

One can already see indications that the president is happy to defer to Mattis’s military expertise. To begin with, Trump backed down from his campaign-trail support for

²⁹ Peter Feaver, “Mattis’ Appointment Would Require Special Approval from Congress,” interview by Michel Martin, *All Things Considered*, NPR, Dec. 3, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/2016/12/03/504274577/mattis-appointment-would-require-special-approval-from-congress>

³⁰ Peter Feaver, “A General to Be Secretary of Defense? A Good Choice for Civil-Military Relations,” *Foreign Policy*, Dec. 2, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/12/02/a-general-to-be-secretary-of-defense-a-good-choice-for-civil-military-relations/>.

“enhanced interrogation” after learning that Mattis didn’t support it.³¹ By most accounts, Mattis (with support from McMaster) convinced the president to support an increased troop presence in Afghanistan, despite the president’s campaigning against protracted military interventions around the world.³² The answer from the Pentagon, populated by many senior officers who have enormous personal and professional investment in that conflict, was to keep American troops there.

Feaver raises an additional concern:

[I]f recently retired as a four-star, that means the individual has reached the pinnacle of their individual service and so has developed exceptionally strong service loyalties and ties. It will be harder for such a person to then move into an honest broker position that is supposed to be above service rivalry.³³

In Mattis’ case, there is some early evidence that this phenomenon has not, in fact, occurred. The public version of the 2018 *National Defense Strategy* represented Mattis’ first chance to make a public statement of his priorities for the Department of Defense. In it, he emphasizes preparing for a future of great power rivalry — a priority that has been pushed by the Air Force and the Navy in recent years — over counterinsurgency and

³¹ Sheri Fink and Helene Cooper, “Inside Trump Defense Secretary Pick’s Efforts to Halt Torture,” *New York Times*, Jan 2, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/02/us/politics/james-mattis-defense-secretary-trump.html>.

³² Michael R. Gordon, Eric Schmitt, and Maggie Haberman, “Trump Settles on Afghan Strategy Expected to Raise Troop Levels,” *New York Times*, Aug. 20, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/20/world/asia/trump-afghanistan-strategy-mattis.html>.

³³ Feaver, “A General to Be Secretary of Defense?”

counterterrorism missions in the Middle East, both of which have been led primarily by the Army and the Marine Corps.

Of course, Mattis' appointment did not only rouse concerns. In the current administration, the possibility that he would stand up to the president and prevent him from enacting some of his more radical policies seemed to be precisely why many outside observers critical of the new president were optimistic about Mattis' appointment. Conservative columnist Jennifer Rubin recently wrote a column celebrating Mattis's service in this respect:

The country should be immensely grateful that Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis is there—not only because he is a steady hand and speed bump on President Trump's rash decisions, but because every week he demonstrates how one can serve without degrading one's self in this administration.³⁴

Perceptions of Mattis' pushback on presidential directives may be more important than the actual substance of his influence. It has been suggested that Mattis has explicitly resisted some of the president's policy changes, such as the proposed ban on transgender troops. But these tales of pushback have, at times, been exaggerated or misleading. For example, some claimed that Mattis went against the president's order on the transgender ban, when Mattis was in fact drafting a memo implementing the policy.³⁵ Other reports

³⁴ Jennifer Rubin, "Distinguished Person of the Week: He Deftly Defies Trump," *Washington Post*, Feb. 11, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/right-turn/wp/2018/02/11/distinguished-person-of-the-week-he-deftly-defies-trump/>.

³⁵ Fred Barbash and Derek Hawkins, "Mattis Hailed as 'Hero' for 'Defying' Trump on Transgender Policy. But Did He?" *Washington Post*, Aug. 30, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/08/30/mattis-hailed-as-hero-for-defying-trump-on-transgender-policy-but-did-he/>.

suggested that the Department of Defense was refusing to enact a presidential order when it was, in fact, simply complying with court orders.³⁶ Still others have asserted that Mattis' close relationship with the current service chiefs, and especially with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Marine general Joseph Dunford, have allowed them to take liberties in resisting the president's agenda that they wouldn't otherwise take.

Philip Carter names this new stance "respectful disobedience," and uses the label to describe what he sees as senior military pushback with respect to the transgender troop ban and the president's statements after the deadly rally and counter-protest in Charlottesville, VA. Carter argues:

It's clear that military leaders have found a formula for saluting their commander in chief while keeping his worst excesses at bay. In this, they are probably aided by a secretary of defense and White House chief of staff who have literally worn their shoes ... [Mattis and Kelly] 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.³⁷

An interesting question is what this "disobedience" will mean for long-term civil-military norms if Mattis' pushback on the administration is seen as military insubordination in a way that it wouldn't be with a truly civilian secretary of defense.

³⁶ Dan Lamothe and Ann Marimow, "In Defiance of Trump Ban, Pentagon Releases Detailed Policy for Recruiting Transgender Troops," *Chicago Tribune*, Dec. 20, 2017, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/politics/ct-pentagon-recruiting-transgender-policy-20171220-story.html>.

On the surface, Mattis' performance thus far would seem to be reassuring for those concerned about his appointment. He has proven more capable of separating himself from the politics of the administration than perhaps any other official serving in it. Mattis also appears to have been a moderating force on a range of policy issues, from torture to openly transgender service members. But the idea that the president's deference to senior military leaders, even recently retired ones, is saving the country is precisely what concerns many scholars of civil-military relations. Through no fault of his own — simply by doing the job he was asked to do — Mattis may subtly undermine long-standing civil-military norms, precisely as feared.

McMaster: Militarization of Foreign Policy

H.R. McMaster presented a different set of concerns. Much of the discussion in civil-military relations circles surrounding his appointment as national security advisor centered on the fact that he was still an active-duty Army officer. While he was certainly not the first active-duty officer to hold the position — he joins John Poindexter and Colin Powell — these individuals have been the exception, not the rule.³⁸ There are many reasons to regard this kind of appointment with caution. First, being national security advisor requires a military officer to stray “outside their lane,” advising the president on issues far afield from their core military expertise. The national security advisor is supposed to help the president integrate all levers of American power — economics, information, diplomacy, and law enforcement — most of which are well outside the core experience and education of a senior military officer.

³⁸ David Barno and Nora Bensahel, “An Active-Duty National Security Advisor: Myths and Concerns,” *War on the Rocks*, Feb. 28, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/02/an-active-duty-national-security-advisor-myths-and-concerns/>.

Second, making an active-duty officer a visible representative of administration policy potentially turns that officer from a defender of the constitution to a defender of a political administration. This phenomenon was underscored when McMaster authored (with Gary Cohn, now-former Director of the National Economic Council) a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed in support of Trump's America First foreign policy.³⁹ This would be an unremarkable thing for a national security advisor to do, but it is quite uncommon for an active-duty military officer to publicly argue in support of a broad administration policy of this nature. Moreover, the symbolism to the rest of the world matters — the primary source of advice to the president on overall national security is coming from someone wearing a uniform.

In many analyses of the administration's 2017 *National Security Strategy*, observers have noted that they could see a tension between Trump's "America First" approach and the more traditional approach of McMaster and the National Security Council senior director for strategy, Nadia Schadlow. Kori Schake, writing of the strategy, applauded Schadlow and McMaster "for pulling the president's well-known views that far into reasonable territory."⁴⁰ McMaster also reportedly clashed with then-White House strategist Steve Bannon over Afghanistan policy, siding with Mattis on keeping troops in that country. One wonders whether the president would have been inclined to listen to civilians in either position arguing for a 16-year war that shows no signs of ending, particularly when

³⁹ H.R. McMaster and Gary D. Cohn, "America First Doesn't Mean America Alone," *Wall Street Journal*, May 30, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/america-first-doesnt-mean-america-alone-1496187426>; discussed in Carter "U.S. Military Chiefs Respond to Trump's Decisions with Respectful Disobedience."

⁴⁰ See, for example, Kori Schake, "How to Grade Trump's National Security Strategy on a Curve," *Foreign Policy*, Dec. 19, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/12/19/how-to-grade-trumps-national-security-strategy-on-a-curve/>.

the president campaigned against it, as Bannon and even Attorney General Jeff Sessions were eager to remind him.⁴¹ Whatever the content of McMaster's views, it seems clear that he was working an agenda that was not wholly consistent with the stated aims of the president.

It is very difficult to judge whether H.R. McMaster contributed to the militarization of foreign policy, as it isn't always clear what the "military" view of a policy would be. But he does seem to have been instrumental in pushing the president to send additional troops to Afghanistan, and in keeping the administration on high alert with respect to North Korea. While some level of politicization is inherent in the position, it isn't clear that this has bled over to the military more generally in McMaster's case. McMaster's imminent replacement by John Bolton will remove this visible source of military influence from the White House (although it should be noted that the current deputy national security advisor is Ricky Waddell, an Army Reserve two-star general). But McMaster's tenure as national security advisor may yet have long-lasting impacts on civil-military norms. Much will depend on what McMaster chooses to do in retirement — whether he speaks publicly about his time in the White House, and whether he remains a political figure.

John Kelly: Politicization of the Military

Whatever concerns may exist about Mattis and McMaster, they are modest compared to those surrounding White House Chief of Staff John Kelly. When he was appointed as

⁴¹ Philip Rucker and Robert Costa, "It's a Hard Problem': Inside Trump's Decision to Send More Troops to Afghanistan," *Washington Post*, Aug. 21, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/its-a-hard-problem-inside-trumps-decision-to-send-more-troops-to-afghanistan/2017/08/21/14dcb126-868b-11e7-a94f-3139abce39f5_story.html?utm_term=.a9ebe72f93ad.

secretary of homeland security, the most significant issue from a civil-military relations point of view was not the appointment itself but that Kelly would be the third recently-retired general, two of them Marines, serving at high levels in the administration. This risked limiting the views the president was exposed to and creating the perception that a military junta was running the show.

When he was appointed chief of staff, however, the potential for politicization of the military seemed a far greater danger. In his new role, it would be difficult for Gen. Kelly (as most would continue to call him) to avoid identification with the administration's policy agenda and political actions. Furthermore, the justification for putting Kelly in such a position was less clear than the rationale for putting him, a recent commander of Southern Command, in charge of the Department of Homeland Security. The chief of staff is an explicitly political position with no clear need for military expertise. While many hoped Kelly's military background would allow him to bring order to a chaotic White House, chiefs of staff are more often selected for their political acumen.

Kelly has entered the political arena to a far greater degree than the other two generals discussed above have, thus raising much greater concerns about civil-military relations. Since becoming chief of staff, he has made multiple statements that effectively widened the civil-military divide, further separating the military from, and elevating it over, the civilian public it is intended to serve. For example, when Kelly took the podium in the White House briefing room to defend the president's handling of a phone call to the wife of an American soldier killed in Niger he said,

We don't look down upon those of you who that haven't served. In fact, in a way we're a little bit sorry because you'll have never have experienced the wonderful joy you get in your heart when you do the kinds of things our

service men and women do — not for any other reason than they love this country. So just think of that.⁴²

At the same press conference, Kelly only took questions from reporters with a connection to a gold star family. The next day, when a reporter asked press secretary Sarah Sanders about Kelly's accusations against a member of Congress, Sanders responded, "If you want to go after Gen. Kelly, that's up to you, but I think that if you want to get into a debate with a four-star Marine general, I think that that's something highly inappropriate."⁴³ This is precisely the type of statement that worries scholars of American civil-military relations — the assertion that as a recently retired four-star general, the president's chief of staff, is above reproach. This is particularly worrisome when that military credibility is attached to a particular administration.

Kelly has also made controversial comments on topics unrelated to the military. When asked about the debate over Confederate monuments, Kelly argued that "the lack of an ability to compromise led to the Civil War."⁴⁴ This led many to ask what, exactly, Kelly believed the two sides should have compromised about. Kelly also drew criticism based on a discussion of why the number of registered Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (known as DACA) participants was lower than the number eligible: "The difference

⁴² Transcript, John F. Kelly remarks in the White House briefing room, *New York Times*, Oct. 19, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/19/us/politics/statement-kelly-gold-star.html>.

⁴³ Callum Borchers, "The White House's 'Highly Inappropriate' Response to a Fact-Check Reveals an Authoritarian Mindset," *Washington Post*, Oct. 20 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/10/20/white-house-to-media-its-highly-inappropriate-to-question-john-kelly-because-hes-a-4-star-general/>.

⁴⁴ Maggie Astor, "John Kelly Pins Civil War on a 'Lack of Ability to Compromise,'" *Washington Post*, Oct. 31, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/31/us/john-kelly-civil-war.html>.

between 690 and 1.8 million were the people that some would say were too afraid to sign up, others would say were too lazy to get off their asses, but they didn't sign up."⁴⁵ Kelly had already established himself as an immigration hard-liner during his time at the Department of Homeland Security, but this indelicate statement certainly underscored those views.⁴⁶

Most recently, Kelly was criticized for protecting White House staff secretary Rob Porter when credible allegations that Porter had abused two ex-wives prevented him from obtaining a security clearance. Kelly reportedly offered to resign over the incident, but, as of the writing of this piece, had not been asked to do so.⁴⁷ The incident rekindled discussions of the Marine Corps' handling of domestic violence, sexual assault, and harassment cases, with some arguing that Kelly was a product and perpetuator of a Marine Corps culture that protects abusers.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Miriam Valverde, "In Context: John Kelly's Remarks on 'Lazy' Immigrants and DACA," *Politifact*, Feb. 7, 2018, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2018/feb/07/context-john-kellys-remarks-lazy-immigrants-daca/>.

⁴⁶ Jonathan Blitzer, "Evaluating John Kelly's Record at Homeland Security," *The New Yorker*, Aug. 1, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/evaluating-john-kellys-record-at-homeland-security>.

⁴⁷ Maggie Haberman, Julie Hirschfeld Davis, and Michael S. Schmidt. "Kelly Says He's Willing To Resign as Abuse Scandal Roils the White House," *New York Times*, Feb. 9, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/09/us/politics/trump-porter-abuse.html>.

⁴⁸ Don Christensen, "John Kelly and the 'Good Soldier' Defense," *The Atlantic*, Feb. 26, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/02/john-kelly-rob-porter/554177/>; Joanne Lipman, "Surprised John Kelly Would Overlook Abuse? The Military that Bred Him is Rife with It," *USA Today*, Feb. 13, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2018/02/13/john-kelly-rob-porter-donald-trump-overlooking-abuse-military-culture-column/328994002/>.

In these ways, Kelly seems to have gone above and beyond the initial concerns about his role as chief of staff. It was always going to be a difficult role for a retired military officer, but Kelly has become more involved in White House politics and scandals than anyone initially predicted. If he, and the administration, continue to use his military service as a political shield, the broader military may eventually find itself dragged into the fray as well.

Conclusion

It seems clear that “Trump’s Generals” — Mattis, McMaster, and Kelly—have had a significant influence on this administration’s policymaking, as one would expect from any secretary of defense, national security advisor, and chief of staff. But what role do their positions as retired or active military officers play in that influence? The picture is unclear. All three seem to have held considerable sway in the administration, in large part due to their military credentials. Mattis and McMaster have clearly been able to pursue policy preferences in a way that civilians may not have, although we cannot know for certain what policies civilians in these roles would have advocated. In that sense, concerns about military influence over policy, if not fully realized, are not to be fully dismissed either. Both McMaster and Kelly have entered the political arena, the latter to a much greater degree. Has this politicized the military? It has certainly politicized those two individuals. What larger effect this might have is not yet clear.

Kori Schake has suggested a potential upside to the politicization, and public failings of, military officers. In a tweet about Mike Flynn, Schake argued that Flynn was “making fast progress getting Americans to take military leaders off pedestals and treat as regular

citizens when politically active.”⁴⁹ The military, like any other large group, contains individuals of all types, some of who will act dishonestly, commit crimes, or hold controversial political views. While this may decrease public respect for the military from its recent lofty heights, if accompanied by a decrease in unquestioning deference, the change might not be all bad.

The first year of the Trump administration does not seem to have changed the public’s generally high regard for the U.S. military. In October 2016, a Pew Research Center survey found that 79 percent of U.S. adults reported having “a great deal” or “a fair amount” of confidence in the military “to act in the best interests of the public.” This was compared to 27% having similar confidence in elected officials.⁵⁰ A January 2018 poll by NPR/PBS News Hour/Marist found that “The only institution that Americans have overwhelming faith in is the military — 87 percent say they have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the military.” This was compared to 51 percent reporting the same levels of confidence in the courts, 43 percent in the presidency, and 25 percent in Congress.⁵¹ The polls are not directly comparable, but they do suggest that confidence in the military has not declined in the first year of the Trump administration, and may even have increased.

⁴⁹ Kori Schake (@Kori Schake) “Flynn making fast progress getting Americans to take military leaders off pedestals and treat as regular citizens when politically active,” Twitter, Dec. 5, 2016, <https://twitter.com/KoriSchake/status/8059494223050059780>.

⁵⁰ Brian Kennedy, “Most Americans Trust the Military and Scientists to Act in the Public’s Interest,” Pew Research Center, Oct. 18 2016 <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/10/18/most-americans-trust-the-military-and-scientists-to-act-in-the-publics-interest/>.

⁵¹ Domenico Montanaro, “Here’s Just How Little Confidence Americans Have in Political Institutions.” *All Things Considered*, NPR, Jan. 17, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/01/17/578422668/heres-just-how-little-confidence-americans-have-in-political-institutions>.

While a first-year assessment is useful, two of the primary concerns associated with these appointments — the normalization of civilian policymakers deferring to military experts and the increased politicization of the military — are about trust relationships and societal norms, things that change slowly over time. We have certainly seen evidence of shifts and cracks, but it is too soon to tell whether these will lead to seismic changes. With respect to the concern about militarization, policy can shift more quickly than norms, but it is difficult to determine what “militarization” really means. We will need more studies on how military policy preferences and world views differ from those of civilians, and how much these differences remain when a military officer retires.

The somewhat peculiar character of this administration, which has already challenged American political norms of all varieties, makes judging the impact of any short-term trends in civil-military relations especially difficult. After all, concerns about the health of the civil-military relationship were alive and well in other recent administrations, from Clinton to Obama, but never resulted in catastrophe. Still, it is important that scholars and observers continue to keep a close eye on the role men and women in (or recently out of) uniform play in policymaking, and on their relationship with society more broadly. The effects of the president’s approach to staffing his administration, and relating to the military, may last long beyond the tenure of any particular appointee. A true crisis in civil-military relations may be slow to develop. But if it arrives, it will be extremely difficult to reverse.

All views are the author’s own and do not represent the views of the United States Government, Department of Defense, Department of the Navy, or U.S. Naval War College.

Jessica Blankshain is an Assistant Professor of National Security Affairs at the U.S. Naval War College.



3. An Effect Rather than a Cause for Concern: The State of Civil-Military Relations in the Trump Administration

Raphael S. Cohen

Generals in American politics are nothing new.⁵² George Washington, Andrew Jackson, Ulysses Grant, and Dwight Eisenhower all rode successful military careers to the White House. Others, most recently Wesley Clark in 2004, tried and failed to capture the office. All recent administrations have, to varying degrees, turned to former generals to serve in senior civilian positions. President George W. Bush chose Colin Powell as his Secretary of State and Michael Hayden as his Director of Central Intelligence. President Barak Obama similarly picked James Jones as his National Security Advisor, David Petraeus as his Director of Central Intelligence, and James Clapper as his Director of National Intelligence. Retired general officers have routinely endorsed presidential candidates since at least Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign.⁵³

Given the established history of military or former military serving in senior positions in government, President Donald Trump's choice of current and former generals as his cabinet secretaries, his chief of staff, his first two national security advisors, and a host of subcabinet positions is a change in degree, although perhaps not a change in kind, from the past. And yet, the Trump administration's decision to fill its senior ranks with military

⁵² This essay draws from an earlier article on a similar topic. See Raphael S. Cohen, "Minding the Gap: The Military, Politics and American Democracy," *Lawfare*, Dec. 17, 2017, <https://lawfareblog.com/minding-gap-military-politics-and-american-democracy>.

⁵³ Edwin Chen, "Clinton Backed by 21 Former Military Leaders," *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 13, 1992, http://articles.latimes.com/1992-10-13/news/mn-92_1_military-leaders.

officers is nevertheless troubling, for reasons that have little to do with the individuals themselves. One year into the administration, these personnel choices are not the cause of any particular problems (if anything, probably the opposite is true), but reflect a deeper, growing ill within American society. The American public's increased isolation from and romanticization of the military, combined with an increased skepticism of other American institutions, has left the broader civil-military balance off-kilter.

Not the Cause (at Least So Far) of Any Particular Problem...

Although many observers eventually concluded that, given the unique present circumstances, they could support the appointment of many general officers to their present posts, civil-military relations scholars gave a host of reasons why presidential administrations should avoid drawing senior political leadership from the ranks of the general officer corps. And yet, a year into the Trump administration, most of these problems have either not materialized, or the evidence supporting them remains inconclusive.

Perhaps, the chief concern is the militarization of foreign policy. This seems to lie at the center of Daniel Drezner's objections to these appointments.⁵⁴ Even before the Trump administration, scholars worried about the expanding role of the Department of Defense in U.S. foreign policy.⁵⁵ To its critics, the Trump administration exacerbated these concerns when, shortly after taking office, it proposed a so-called "hard power budget"

⁵⁴ Daniel Drezner, "My Concern with Trump's Team of Generals," *Washington Post*, Dec. 5, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/12/05/my-concern-with-trumps-team-of-generals/?utm_term=.039055228e89.

⁵⁵ For example, see Rosa Brooks, *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster 2016).

with increases to the Defense Department paid for, in part, by civilian agencies like the State Department.⁵⁶

While the Trump administration has emphasized the Department of Defense over the “softer” side of foreign policy, the former generals in the room do not seem to be driving this policy preference. To the contrary, when the administration announced the budget, 121 former flag officers took the unusual step of writing an open letter to congressional leadership advocating for the State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Millennium Challenge Corporation, the Peace Corps, and other diplomatic and development agencies’ budgets.⁵⁷ Similarly, Secretary of Defense James Mattis often emphasized his relationship with former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and highlighted how the two departments work in lockstep.⁵⁸

Yet another commonly cited concern is the politicization of the military’s senior ranks. As David Barno and Nora Bensahel argue,

If politicians begin to see generals as political figures (or even future political opponents), the vital trust that exists between the nation’s elected

⁵⁶ Hael A. Memoli and Noah Bierman, “Trump’s ‘Hard Power’ Budget Makes Sweeping Cuts to EPA and State Department, Boosts Defense Spending,” *Los Angeles Times*, Mar. 16, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-pol-trump-budget-20170316-story.html>.

⁵⁷ *U.S. Global Leadership Coalition*, “Over 120 Retired Generals, Admirals on State and USAID Budget: ‘Now is not the time to retreat,’” Feb. 17, 2017, <http://www.usglc.org/newsroom/over-120-retired-generals-admirals-on-state-and-usaid-budget-now-is-not-the-time-to-retreat/>

⁵⁸ For example, see Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis, “Remarks by Secretary Mattis on the National Defense Strategy,” Department of Defense, Jan. 19, 2018, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1420042/remarks-by-secretary-mattis-on-the-national-defense-strategy/>.

leadership and its uniformed military will be lost. As a result, future presidents and other elected leaders may well keep suspect military leaders out of the room when major decisions are made, even on military issues.⁵⁹

The authors argue these dangers are particularly acute if former general officers serve in “unremittingly political” senior positions like a chief of staff (but presumably there are others as well), rather than in national security-related positions.⁶⁰

Barno and Bensahel are certainly correct that if currently serving military officers are painted with a partisan brush, it could jeopardize the civil-military dialogue. That said, it is less clear what effects, if any, *former* military officers serving political positions today will have on politicians’ perceptions of the military in the future. Moreover, the authors’ argument is more applicable in the context of generals running for political office — directly challenging politicians for their jobs — than serving as senior political appointees, even in highly partisan roles like chief of staff. Even this latter phenomenon has occurred occasionally in American history, without catastrophic results. For example, Gen. George McClellan challenged his former commander-in-chief, Abraham Lincoln, for the presidency, but still, the civil-military balance did not break. And so, while generals serving as political appointees likely does not help promote continued trust between generals and politicians, it may not sound its death knell either.

A third objection examines the practical considerations of appointing former flag officers to senior civilian posts. Eliot Cohen warned that selecting the Secretary of Defense from

⁵⁹ David Barno and Nora Bensahel, “Why No General Should Serve as White House Chief of Staff,” *War on the Rocks*, Sept. 12, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/09/why-no-general-should-serve-as-white-house-chief-of-staff/>.

⁶⁰ Barno and Bensahel, “No General Should Serve.”

among its uniformed ranks comes with a host of potential management challenges — from a perceived bias towards their own services to risk of favoritism among the general officer corps. He notes, “Even the appearance of such biases, let alone their reality, would make effective leadership of the Department of Defense difficult or impossible.”⁶¹

Not until the archives open decades from now will future historians be able to fully assess the inner workings of Mattis’ Pentagon. It is similarly too early to judge whether the prominence of Marine officers in the political ranks of the administration will translate into service bias in resource decisions or in determining plumb general officer assignments. Still, at least from press accounts so far, the Department of Defense is relatively absent from the headlines. Indeed, multiple news accounts refer to Mattis’ “low profile” and the comparative lack of infighting within the Department.⁶² And while we still need a few more budget cycles to see how Mattis balances competing service resource needs, it is interesting to note that the only defense investment priority called out by name in the State of the Union address was nuclear modernization — a focus that primarily favors Air Force and Navy budget equities, rather than Marine ones.⁶³

⁶¹ Eliot A. Cohen, “Civilian Control of the Armed Forces,” *Senate Armed Services Committee*, Jan. 10, 2017, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Cohen_01-10-17.pdf.

⁶² For example, Jacqueline Klimas and Wesley Morgan, “Mattis Delegates Down and Manages Up in Tricky Trump Relationship,” *Politico*, Dec. 30, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/12/30/new-documents-reveal-mattis-influence-on-trump-white-house-247743>; and David Welna, “Defense Secretary James Mattis Keeps Low Profile amid White House Controversy,” *All Things Considered*, NPR, June 15, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/06/15/533102578/defense-secretary-james-mattis-keeps-low-profile-amid-white-house-controversy>.

⁶³ “President Donald J. Trump’s State of the Union Address,” *The White House*, Jan. 30, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trumps-state-union-address/>.

A fourth objection relates to ensuring that a full range of expertise informs decisions. As Kathleen Hicks has concisely argued, people naturally turn to those with similar backgrounds for counsel — academics to academics, business leaders to fellow business leaders, and military officers to fellow military officers. Sound decision-making, however, requires

guarding against an over-reliance on military viewpoints, just as it relies on ensuring those coming from civilian backgrounds act as respectful and knowledgeable counterparts, with expertise and responsibilities typically distinct from those of their military colleagues and subordinates.⁶⁴

Ultimately, placing former military officers at the head of an already military-dominated national security space may encourage groupthink.

Like the aforementioned objections, Hicks' concern over the loss of diversity of opinion is valid, but only to a point. As noted earlier, the Trump administration chose former flag officers to fill some cabinet-level posts, but also some of the subcabinet ranks and below. The slow pace of filling other civilian political positions in the national security establishment — leaving only the uniformed side of the Pentagon in place — did not help the balance.⁶⁵ Still, to their credit, all the former general officers have civilians as their deputies and the Pentagon's senior leadership today, while including former generals, also

⁶⁴ Kathleen H. Hicks, "Civilian Control of the Armed Forces," *Senate Armed Services Committee*, Jan. 10, 2017, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Hicks_01-10-17.pdf.

⁶⁵ Joe Gould, "Top Pentagon Posts 74 Percent Vacant as Congress Returns," *Defense News*, Aug. 20, 2017, <https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2017/08/20/top-pentagon-posts-74-percent-vacant-as-congress-returns/>.

features former business executives, Capitol Hill staffers, and appointees with similarly diverse backgrounds.

Finally, there are other potential long-term problems with turning to former general officers to fill senior civilian posts — from eroding the American ability to advocate for civilian control of the military abroad,⁶⁶ to undermining the very ideals that led to the Declaration of Independence in the first place.⁶⁷

The fact that most civil-military relations scholars' objections have — at least so far — not materialized does not necessarily invalidate their apprehensions. A year is likely an insufficient amount of time to judge the wisdom of these appointments. Moreover, the fact that selecting these particular general officers has not yet yielded the negative consequences does not necessarily invalidate the general rule of balancing civilian and military appointments. Still, whatever the reason, a fair assessment must conclude that the United States has so far avoided most of the pitfalls of drawing leadership from former military ranks.

...But Rather the Effect of a Deeper Societal Ill

Perhaps, the real lesson of the last year is that overrepresentation of general officers within the civilian political ranks is less a cause for concern and more of an effect of a deeper problem. Politicians place military officers in prominent positions on campaigns and in government because the military remains one of the few institutions that most

⁶⁶ Hicks, "Civilian Control of the Armed Forces."

⁶⁷ Cohen, "Civilian Control of the Armed Forces."

Americans still respect. And that is a far greater problem than any specific policy issue stemming from who is in what position.

According to annual Gallup polling, confidence in the military has grown steadily since Gallup began asking the question — from 58 percent expressing “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in 1975 to 72 percent in 2017. Moreover, those expressing “a great deal” of confidence in the military (the highest rating possible) has risen even more sharply, from 27 percent to 44 percent over the same period.⁶⁸

As striking as the actual numbers, however, is the durability of the trend. While there have been some spikes, particularly during key victories, for example, the Gulf War or the start of the 2003 Iraq War, and dips during perceived failures, like during the height of the Iraq War, the trend line for the most part ticks steadily upwards. Americans’ confidence in the military has not been shaken, despite the number of high-profile general officers who have pled guilty to felony crimes or the major scandals that have afflicted the services over the years — from the handling of the nuclear arsenal, to accusations of fraud and corruption, to allegations of widespread sexual harassment.⁶⁹ At the end of the day, roughly three-quarters of Americans still place their confidence in the military.

⁶⁸ *Gallup News*, “Confidence in Institutions,” 2017, <http://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>.

⁶⁹ For example, see Craigh Whitlock and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “More High-Ranking Officers Being Charged with Sex Crimes Against Subordinates,” *Washington Post*, Mar. 19, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/more-high-ranking-officers-being-charged-with-sex-crimes-against-subordinates/2016/03/19/3910352a-e616-11e5-a6f3-21ccdbc5f74e_story.html?utm_term=.8dcb434cf961; and Ann Scott Tyson and Josh White, “Top Two Air Force Officials Ousted,” *Washington Post*, June 6, 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/06/05/AR2008060501908.html> on March 10.

Such staunch confidence would not be concerning — and might even be a positive development — if it were not for the erosion of Americans’ trust in the civilian institutions of democracy over the same period. The same Gallup polls that show the growth in confidence in the military also show that Americans’ confidence in the other American institutions — be it Congress, the presidency or the Supreme Court — has declined sharply. In 2017, only 40 percent of Americans expressed “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in the Supreme Court, 32 percent in the presidency and a mere 12 percent in Congress.⁷⁰

A recent RAND Corporation report on “truth decay” reached a similar conclusion. Comparing today with previous periods in American history, it found a “lack of trust across the board — in government, media, and financial institutions — and a far lower absolute level of trust in these institutions than in previous eras.”⁷¹ This decline in trust, in turn, contributed to a variety of other problems in American society, from “political paralysis,” to “the erosion of civil discourse,” and ultimately to the “alienation and disengagement of individuals from political and civic institutions.”⁷²

Indeed, a series of surveys suggest that substantial numbers of Americans are questioning democracy itself. An October 2017, a Pew study found that 17 percent of Americans would consider rule by the military “a good way to the govern the country,” 22 percent said the

⁷⁰ *Gallup News*, “Confidence in Institutions.”

⁷¹ Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich, *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2018), xiii.

⁷² Kavanagh and Rich, *Truth Decay*, xvi.

same of “a strong leader,” and 40 percent believed that of “experts.”⁷³ A separate *Washington Post* and University of Maryland study, also published in October of 2017, found a steep decline in Americans’ pride in how democracy functions in the United States compared to similar surveys taken over the last two decades. The same study also found that 71 percent of Americans believe that politics has reached a “dangerous low point.”⁷⁴

Why then in this era of cynicism has the confidence in the military remained so high? Perhaps, it is because, thanks to the end of the draft in 1973 and the decline in the overall end-strength after the Cold War, fewer Americans have any direct connection to the military. In 1980, about 18 percent of the American adult population were veterans, but by 2016, the proportion stood at less than half that number — roughly 7 percent.⁷⁵ The percentage of American men who have served has declined even more dramatically, from around 37 percent of the population in 1980 to 16 percent in 2014.⁷⁶ Finally, the decline of veterans among American political elites has been the most precipitous of all. At its peak between the late 1960s and early 1970s, some three-quarters of the House of

⁷³ Richard Wike, Katie Simmons, Bruce Stokes and Janell Fetterolf, “Globally, Broad Support for Representative and Direct Democracy: But Many Also Endorse Nondemocratic Alternatives,” *Pew Foundation*, Oct. 16, 2017, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/10/16/globally-broad-support-for-representative-and-direct-democracy/>.

⁷⁴ John Wagner and Scott Clement, “‘It’s Just Messed Up’: Most Think Political Divisions as Bad as Vietnam Era, New Poll Shows,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 28, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/national/democracy-poll/?utm_term=.ee38300d3f5b.

⁷⁵ Kristen Bialik, “The Changing Face of America’s Veteran Population,” *Pew Foundation*, Nov. 10, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/10/the-changing-face-of-americas-veteran-population/>.

⁷⁶ Gretchen Livingston, “Profile of U.S. Veterans is Changing Dramatically as Their Ranks Decline,” *Pew Foundation*, Nov. 11, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/11/profile-of-u-s-veterans-is-changing-dramatically-as-their-ranks-decline/>.

Representatives and 80 percent of the Senate had military experience. By 2017, the number for both chambers of Congress stood at about one in five.⁷⁷

This isolation has led to a romanticization of the military. Without direct experience, for many Americans, military service becomes a caricature, the subject more of Hollywood than reality. Americans paint the military as a paragon of patriotism, selflessness, and efficiency, even if in reality the military attracts all types of individuals for a range of motives — good, bad, and otherwise.

This overly romanticized vision of military service creates a host of perverse incentives. It incentivizes politicians to hide behind the uniforms, by placing them in front of key policy decisions. As one political figure recently quipped, “If you want to get into a debate with a four-star Marine general, I think that that’s something highly inappropriate.”⁷⁸ Such adulation also inhibits a clear-eyed valuation of military pay and benefits, a crucial component of any fiscally sound defense policy, and promotes the idea that servicemembers are somehow superior to the citizens they serve. Above all, it encourages Americans to turn to the military for solutions, rather than fixing the problems in the civilian institutions of their democracy.

The American public’s continued isolation from and idealization of military service combined with increased skepticism about its other institutions, arguably, should be the real focus of civil-military relations concerns today. The prominence of current and

⁷⁷ Bialik, “America’s Veteran Population.”

⁷⁸ John Wagner, “White House Press Secretary: It’s ‘Highly Inappropriate’ to Question a 4-star Marine General,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 20, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/10/20/white-house-press-secretary-its-highly-inappropriate-to-question-a-4-star-marine-general/?utm_term=.35ff816b6ce1.

former military officers in senior civilian positions is symptomatic of this more general societal ill and could profoundly impact American democracy. After all, this trend extends beyond any particular policy decision or policymaker and will continue long after the present administration leaves office. It is not a problem that's easily fixed.

What is to Be Done

If the root cause of the United States' civil-military problem were simply a matter of how the Pentagon is run or who serves in what position, it would be relatively easy to fix. Indeed, many of the concerns about military appointments may dissipate now that the national security advisor position will soon be filled by John Bolton, a civilian. The problem will be further mitigated if other high profile general officers leave the administration, as is rumored, for example, about John Kelly.⁷⁹ Not so for broader societal problems.

Restoring the balance between Americans' trust in the military versus their trust in civilian institutions runs headlong into a fundamental endogeneity problem. Americans may not trust the media because they perceive it as biased, but they look for news that caters to their own ideological preferences. They may not trust Washington because of its political gridlock, but then back politicians who cater to the far ends of the political spectrum. In sum, Americans do not trust their institutions because they are dysfunctional, but those institutions are dysfunctional in part because Americans do not trust them.

⁷⁹ Samuel Chamberlain, "McMaster, Shulkin and Kelly Could be Next to Go in White House, Sources Say," *Fox News*, Mar. 14, 2017, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2018/03/14/mcmaster-shulkin-and-kelly-could-be-next-to-go-in-white-house-bloodbath-sources-say.html>.

The answer here is not simply to increase public skepticism of the military. While excessive admiration of the military is an unhealthy dynamic, a situation where Americans lack confidence in any of their institutions — military or civilian — is just as bad. And there is much to admire about the military, even if servicemembers and their leaders are not always the heroes Americans tend to typecast them as.

If there is a solution, it lies with civic education — teaching Americans to see civilian institutions for what they are, with all their strengths and weaknesses. After all, American democracy has never run with military-like efficiency, nor did the founders intend for it to function that way. And while it is easy to lose faith in American institutions by focusing in on the problems of the moment, if Americans could take the longer view, they would see this system — with all its inherent ugliness — can still produce remarkable accomplishments.

At the same time, Americans also need to better understand their military. Absent a catastrophe on par with another world war, ever smaller percentages of the American population will serve in uniform. Even if there was the political will to return to conscription (which there is not), modern warfare — with its emphasis on high technology rather than manpower — simply does not require vast numbers of soldiers. The assiduous study of strategic issues and of the military as an institution can partially compensate for this lack of firsthand knowledge.

The key then is for Americans to regain a sense of historical perspective on their government and their institutions. And in a small way, this starts by recognizing the number of current and former military officers at the senior rung of civilian office for

what they are: less as a cause for concern, and more the effect of a deeply troubling trend. But perhaps not an insurmountable one.

*A former active Army officer and Iraq veteran, **Raphael S. Cohen** is a political scientist at the nonprofit, nonpartisan RAND Corporation, an adjunct professor of Security Studies in Georgetown University's Security Studies Program.*



4. Civil-Military Relations One Year On

Lindsay P. Cohn

“The perpetual menacings of danger oblige [a] government to be always prepared to repel it; its armies must be numerous enough for instant defense. The continual necessity for their services enhances the importance of the soldier ... The military state becomes elevated above the civil ... by degrees the people are brought to consider the soldiery not only as their protectors, but as their superiors. The transition from this disposition to that of considering them masters, is neither remote nor difficult ...”

– Alexander Hamilton, Federalist 8

Civil-military relations scholars were aflutter after the national conventions of the two major parties in 2016, in which each side deployed a recently-retired general officer to demonstrate ... Credibility? Expertise? Patriotism? It was not entirely clear. The buzz picked up again concerning the number of recently-retired or still active senior general officers/flag officers (GOFs) that Donald Trump had tapped for his administration — retired general James Mattis for defense secretary, retired general John Kelly for secretary of homeland security and then White House chief of staff, and first retired general Michael Flynn and then active-duty three-star general, H.R. McMaster, for national security advisor (who will soon leave his position). There has been further chatter about Trump’s own avoidance of military service, juxtaposed with an almost excessive admiration of all things military (Could he have tanks for his inaugural parade? Can we have a military parade for Veterans’ Day?). Others have reacted with concern about his administration’s military personnel initiatives — including how to deal with transgender servicemembers and whether the Marine Corps will be allowed to keep the

combat ban on women — as well as about Trump’s own tendency to push both decision-making and ultimate responsibility down to field-level commanders. Take, for example, when he said that “the generals ... lost [the Navy SEAL killed in Yemen].”⁸⁰ More recently, the apparent ramping-up of the U.S. military presence in Syria, Afghanistan, and parts of Africa has continued apace, while lacking a clear and consistent strategic narrative about what this is supposed to accomplish. There is no shortage of things for observers and scholars to worry about when it comes to civil-military relations.

While these concerns are legitimate and bear keeping an eye on, they are not the most pernicious issue. Instead, it is the development of almost unthinking veneration of service members by the public as well as many elites and politicians. This is a two-tiered problem: At the highest levels of national decision making, there is a pervasive narrative that the current and former military officers serving this administration are the “adults in the room”,⁸¹ and that they will “save” us from the erratic and potentially dangerous behavior of the president through their wisdom, prudence, and, if necessary, disobedience. More broadly, the reverence for the military has come to distort and manipulate public discourse. The military enjoys an outsized level of public trust, confidence, and approval — significantly higher than all other public institutions.⁸² It is the one institution that most Americans feel united in supporting (unlike, say, the police, the church, schools, or the court system). But the elevation of “the troops” to a level of

⁸⁰ See Cynthia McFadden, William M. Arkin, and Tim Uehlinger, “How the Trump Team’s First Raid in Yemen Went Wrong,” *NBC News*, Oct. 2, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/how-trump-team-s-first-military-raid-went-wrong-n806246>.

⁸¹ For a good round-up of this trope, see James Mann, “The Adults in the Room,” *New York Review of Books*, Oct. 26, 2017, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2017/10/26/trump-adult-supervision/>.

⁸² Pew Research Center, “The Military-Civilian Gap: War and Sacrifice in the Post-9/11 Era” (2011), especially p. 61., <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/10/05/chapter-5-the-public-and-the-military/>.

sacrosanctity in public discourse is unhealthy for servicemembers,⁸³ the general public, and the practice of governance in this country.

Save Us, Adults

It is undeniable that someone with over 30 years of military experience has great insight into national security matters. The views of such individuals are critical to developing the full range of perspectives and options for a president. That said, such expertise is not necessarily the most relevant to the broadest questions of national security, and especially not to questions of trade, international law, or other forms of coordinated international policy, such as addressing climate issues.

“Military expertise” does not consist of a special or unique understanding of how to keep the territory and people of the United States safe and prosperous. These individuals are experts at what the U.S. military organization can do, how quickly and for how long it can do it, how many people and what kind of equipment is required, and, to some extent, how much it is all likely to cost. Many senior officers may also have specific experience or expertise that would be helpful in particular circumstances — for example, experience dealing with a particular adversary, or expertise in cyber operations — but the most important asset they bring is the ability to help policymakers understand the military tools that they have at their disposal.

But competent statecraft considers and employs other tools beyond military ones, from diplomacy to sanctions, trade, international law, and international institutions. Experts in

⁸³ See Peter Lucier, “Not your Messiah,” *The Revealer*, Sep. 8, 2017.

<https://wp.nyu.edu/therevealer/2017/09/08/not-your-messiah/>.

these areas must also be part of the policy conversation. Even when the issue at hand is war, economic expertise is critical to determining how to sustain our efforts over time, how to undermine the adversary's ability to resource its military, and how to weaken an opponent before things come to blows. Experience in diplomacy and international relations can help to evaluate whether other points of leverage can be used to trade for peace, whether we can avoid an armed confrontation, which allies would stand with us, and how we can limit the ability of others to threaten us with armed confrontations. Domestic politics is always a factor as well: What will different plans of action cost us in terms of overall national goals? What are the policy trade-offs? On what matters can we gain agreement from other government actors?

While scholars of civil-military relations openly worried about the precedent and the dynamics of having so many recently retired GOFs in the cabinet, they still, almost to a person, expressed relief about the presence of Mattis, McMaster, and Kelly.⁸⁴ So many foreign policy experts — including a large number of conservatives and Republicans⁸⁵ — had concerns about the new president's lack of foreign policy experience, that most were willing to tolerate the break with norms, because the officers involved were at least competent and qualified. While the president might well have done far worse than Mattis or McMaster (the Flynn flameout is a case in point), accepting these choices may be

⁸⁴ See Mark Perry, "Are Trump's Generals in Over Their Heads?" *Politico Magazine*, Oct. 25, 2017.

<https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/10/25/donald-trump-john-allen-kelly-generals-military-215740>;

for an exception to this rule, note that Richard Kohn has been outspoken in his reservations: Mary Louise Kelly, "Trump's Cabinet of Ex-Generals Indicates Focus on National Security," *National Public Radio*, Dec. 7, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/2016/12/07/504723677/trumps-cabinet-of-ex-generals-indicates-focus-on-national-security>.

⁸⁵ "Open Letter on Donald Trump from GOP National Security Leaders," *War on the Rocks*, Mar. 2, 2016,

<https://warontherocks.com/2016/03/open-letter-on-donald-trump-from-gop-national-security-leaders/>.

creating a new and undesirable status quo. Moreover, it helps to validate a narrative in which uniformed general officers are seen as more competent and trustworthy policymakers than elected or appointed civilians. Most in the national security community are simply hoping that the current situation is an exception to an important rule, not the beginning of the new normal.

According to some, the senior officers on Trump's national security team (active and retired) have already devised a method to avoid following orders from the president that they consider inappropriate. Phillip Carter of the Center for a New American Security has termed it "respectful disobedience," by which he means that "military leaders have found a formula for saluting their commander in chief while keeping his worst excesses at bay."⁸⁶ As evidence of this phenomenon, Carter points in particular to Trump's attempt to overturn the Obama administration decision to allow transgender individuals to serve in the military. Carter may not have this particular decision quite right: There are other plausible interpretations for the slow-down in implementing the ban that do not imply that the military leadership deliberately shirked the president's policy. One possibility, for example, is that Mattis and Kelly engaged Trump to explain the logistical and organizational difficulties that would be involved with an outright ban on transgender

⁸⁶ Phillip Carter, "Military Chiefs' Reluctance to March," *Slate*, Dec. 12, 2017, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2017/12/how_military_leaders_slowed_down_trump_s_transgender_troop_ban.html. It is true that Kelly and Mattis are no longer active duty military officers and therefore not technically required to "obey orders," but they are widely seen through the lens of their military service (Trump and his spokespersons regularly refer to both as "General"), and the public discussion of their potential disobedience seems to stem directly from a hope that, as military officers, they would have the courage and fortitude to resist what mere civilians could not. Thus, though they are technically no longer on the "military" side of the civil-military relationship, from the public perspective, they might as well be.

personnel and got him to issue the eventual memo tasking the Secretary of Defense with studying the issue, which Mattis then did. But Carter may nevertheless turn out to be prophetic as time goes on, and this could set a dangerous precedent. Is civilian control not eroded when senior officers simply decide not to implement decisions they disagree with?⁸⁷ Even if many agree that this particular president's excesses need to be curbed, surely it is unhealthy for our democracy when the military can pick and choose which president, and which policies to heed. Furthermore, even when top military officials are not disobeying, some commentators may be tempted to spin the narrative that way. This places an extra burden onto military officers to try to keep up with the political optics of everything they say and do.

Our Men and Women in Uniform

Another sign that the civilian-military relationship has gone awry is a concerning trend among politicians, pundits, and the public, of using people's respect for veterans and servicemembers to undercut political debate on non-military matters. This is bad both for the attitude of Americans toward their military and for the actual conduct of politics and governance. It could also harm the armed forces themselves by further politicizing budget debates or relationships with top policymakers. One example includes the NFL kneeling protests, where an appeal to the troops was deployed to dismiss the concerns of the protestors. Another is the debate over a shutdown and near shutdown of the government in January and February 2018, during which lawmakers argued that it was unfair to the

⁸⁷ More to Carter's point was the situation after the Charlottesville marches and the death of Heather Heyer, when the president made fairly non-critical comments about the white supremacist marchers, and nearly all the service chiefs made public statements soon after, condemning both the violence in general and white supremacy in particular. This was not a policy disagreement, as such, but was seen by many as military pushback against a political narrative they thought might be damaging.

troops and their families to have a shutdown over lack of agreement on other political issues. Yet another example can be seen in the proposed changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, or “food stamps”), where it was argued that the United States should not impose such indignity on military families who rely on SNAP. And this is only in the last six months or so.⁸⁸

Each of these cases has followed a well-worn pattern: A political point is raised, followed by one or both sides arguing for or against the point on the basis of how it affects servicemembers, veterans, or both. It is of course valid to be concerned about how

⁸⁸ On the shutdown debates, see Dan Lamothe, “Amid Government Shutdown, the Military Becomes a Major Front in Political Battle”, *Washington Post*, Jan. 20, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2018/01/20/amid-government-shutdown-the-military-becomes-a-centerpiece-to-make-political-jobs/?utm_term=.7e4a9eba6cbd; Richard Sisk, “Lawmakers Push Bills to Keep Paying Troops Amid Shutdown”, *Military.com*, Jan. 20, 2018, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2018/01/20/democrats-republicans-push-bills-keep-paying-troops-shutdown.html>; Gregory Hellman and Conor O’Brien, “Troops Caught in Shutdown Crossfire”, *Politico*, Jan. 21, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/01/21/government-shutdown-military-soldiers-302007>; Kayla Tausche and Jacob Pramuk, “Mitch McConnell Says Senate Leaders Have Reached a Major Budget Deal”, *CNBC*, Feb. 7, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/07/shutdown-news-senate-seeks-deal-to-raise-military-spending.html>. On the NFL protests, see Jennifer Earl, “How NFL National Anthem Protests Have Evolved since Kaepernick”, *Fox News*, Mar. 6, 2018, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2018/03/06/how-nfl-national-anthem-protests-have-evolved-since-kaepernick.html>; P.R. Lockhart, “Trump’s Reaction to the NFL Protests Shows How He Fights the Culture War”, *Vox*, Feb. 4, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/identities/2018/2/4/16967902/nfl-protests-patriotism-race-donald-trump-super-bowl>. On the Proposed Changes to SNAP, see Amy Bushatz, “How President’s Food Stamp Cuts Would Impact Military Families,” *Military.com*, Feb. 14, 2018, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2018/02/14/how-presidents-food-stamp-cuts-would-impact-military-families.html>; Scott Simon, “Military Families and SNAP Benefits,” *Weekend Edition*, NPR, Feb. 17, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/02/17/586759930/military-families-and-snap-benefits>.

policies, budgets, or public debates affect the people who have served this country in uniform. The problem is that this “appeal to the troops” bypasses a discussion about genuine disagreements that require political solutions. Instead of engaging in debates about whether the United States is fulfilling its promises for all its people, how the government should be funded and what it ought to spend money on, or how the state should be involved in helping the poor buy food, this tactic instead accuses dissenters of “not supporting the troops” — an unanswerable attack. Any attempt to argue that the concerns of other members of society merit as much attention as those of the military is denounced as further evidence of a lack of respect for servicemembers and veterans. What’s more, this line of argument suggests that servicemembers and veterans (and their families) matter more than other members of society. It is a perilous way of thinking because it renders unimportant things like poverty or the proper running and funding of government, except in so far as they impact servicemembers and their families. Ultimately, this implies that the only way to merit basic respect and dignity is to have served in the military or be a dependent of someone who has. Such cynical political use of American popular support for the military undermines the conduct of politics and governance.

The long-term danger is two-fold: First, the longer this pattern continues, the more likely some civilians are to resent military members. If this tactic is used too often, some people may start questioning whether they do, in fact, support the troops, if doing so means they must concede on all of their political claims. Second, the more this approach proves useful, the more some people will become reactively and uncritically supportive of anything that has “the troops” attached to it, making it easier for politicians to manipulate them.

Of course veterans and military personnel deserve things like health care, job security, funding for their programs, and aggressive poverty assistance. On the other hand, the broader issues of budgets, pay, and benefits of military service members cannot simply be declared off limits. So long as the conditions of every other American's life are up for debate — taxes, minimum wage, unemployment protection, labor protection, disability — why should only military service members be protected from the debate? It is absolutely clear why members of the military and veterans deserve societal respect and care. It is not clear why they are the only ones who do.⁸⁹ When politicians deflect discussion by hiding behind a sacred cow, nothing gets resolved. When grievances remain unresolved, aggrieved parties become resentful.

Where to From Here?

Civil-military relations scholars are right to worry: A political arena in which the military is deployed as a political shield has potentially dangerous consequences. When “military expertise” is seen as supreme or is allowed to go largely unquestioned — either because no one dares to question it or because there is no one with any other expertise in a position to balance it — it can have devastating implications for U.S. policy both foreign and domestic. While we are not yet at a point of crisis, left unchecked the current path might well lead us there. It is good and healthy for uniformed servicemembers to enjoy the respect and gratitude of society, but not for a society to treat uniformed servicemembers as paragons of virtue whose opinions are always valid and whose claims on society are unlimited.

⁸⁹ Lindsay P. Cohn, “How Much is Enough?” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 3, (Fall 2015): 47-61.

What, then, can be done? First, scholars, journalists, pundits, politicians, and the engaged public should call out these trends rather than allow them to become part of the status quo. It should not be normal to expect military officers to “save us” from corrupt or inept politicians. Citizens should fight the corruption and ineptitude themselves — by engaging in the debate and by holding their elected officials in Congress accountable, for example — rather than place the burden on the military.

Second, American society must learn to talk with and about servicemembers and veterans without putting them either in the “hero” category or the “broken” category.

Servicemembers and veterans are diverse groups of people with extremely diverse experiences, and they deserve to be taken as they are rather than stereotyped or mythologized. Above all, they should not be used by politicians as a way to win political arguments.

Third, scholars, policymakers, and military professionals must develop a new set of civil-military norms. Otherwise, “respectful disobedience” may fill the vacuum left by the crumbling model proposed by Samuel Huntington. He argued that military officers ought to be completely apolitical, focusing only on their technical expertise as “managers of violence.”⁹⁰ This was predicated on a presumption, however, that a thick bright line could be drawn between “political” problems and decisions, and “military” problems and decisions, and that this bright line could allow both policymakers and military personnel to clearly understand their remit and the limits thereof. Most experts now agree that that

⁹⁰ Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (The Belknap Press, 1957).

distinction is not realistic, leaving us without a roadmap for the future of civil-military relations.⁹¹

Eliot Cohen has proposed the concept of an “Unequal Dialogue” to clarify both the need for military and political actors to engage in discussion with one another and develop some mutual understanding, as well as the need for the military to remain subordinate in that relationship.⁹² Peter Feaver has argued that civilian policymakers have the “right to be wrong,” that is, the right to make policy decisions that are opposed by their military advisors, even if they turn out to be wrong, because it is the elected officials who have the moral and legal authority to make such judgments. Feaver has also noted, however, the civilian policymaker’s “right to be right,” which acknowledges that military advisors may not in fact have the best plan or understand the full picture as well as the policymaker.⁹³

But standing in the way of a truly new set of civil-military norms is a common line of thinking that leads both politicians and military leaders to believe that, as long as we can “let the military win the war,” everything will turn out well. As Americans should understand from repeated experiences, military victory does not automatically or necessarily achieve the desired political outcomes. Until we can reach a generalized understanding of how to use force as a bargaining tool, and how the political and military competencies must intermingle, there will be a dysfunctional relationship at the top of

⁹¹ Jim Golby, Lindsay P. Cohn, and Peter Feaver, “Thanks for Your Service: Civilian and Veteran Attitudes After Fifteen Years of War” in *Warriors and Citizens: American Views of Our Military*, ed. Kori Schake and James Mattis (Hoover Institution Press, 2016), 97-142.

⁹² Eliot Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (Simon and Schuster, 2012).

⁹³ Peter Feaver, *Armed Servants* (Cambridge University Press, 2003); Peter Feaver, “The Right to be Right,” *International Security* 35, no 4 (2011): 87-125.

the political system, a distorted public dialogue about American interests and America's role in the world, and a tendency to start fights that do us no good and seem never to end.

New frameworks for civil-military relations in the post-post-9/11 era are still evolving, as they have each time there have been major changes in the strategic environment. Yet, irrespective of the particular challenges the country faces, we all have a role to play in ensuring healthy civil-military relations in the United States. The public must hold their elected officials accountable and not allow them to hide behind uniforms and exploit the high regard in which the military is held. Military professionals, politicians, and policymakers must devote time and effort to understanding and respecting their different competencies and responsibilities. Only through vigilance and the building of effective relationships can the nation avoid the scenario Alexander Hamilton warned of more than two centuries ago.

The views expressed in this piece are those of the author alone and do not represent the views of the U.S. Naval War College, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

Lindsay P. Cohn is Associate Professor in the National Security Affairs Department at the U.S. Naval War College. Her research focuses on civil-military relations — particularly personnel issues, public opinion, and democratic theory. Before joining the Naval War College, she spent a year at the Pentagon as a Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow and was an Assistant Professor at the University of Northern Iowa. She comes from a long line of combat veterans, and is the proud daughter and sister of Marines.



5. Trump and His Generals: An Unfolding Crisis in Civil-Military Relations

Maj. Gen. (ret.) Paul Eaton

Over the last seventeen years, successive American presidents have concentrated extraordinary powers in the executive branch. Congressional passivity, gridlock, and dysfunction have resulted in a legislative branch of government that is missing in action. During the Obama administration, the Republican party's leadership in both houses demonstrated an inability to govern, focusing their energies instead on their stated intent to frustrate the president's initiatives, particularly on domestic policy.⁹⁴ This left Obama little choice but to govern by executive order. In foreign policy matters, Congress has been content to stand idly by for nearly two decades now, ignoring its duty to decide when and where America wages war. This does not bode well for how the Congress might perform in a crisis.⁹⁵ If the nation cannot count on its elected representatives or many other U.S. institutions to provide leadership, where is America to turn?

As the only institution that retains much trust among the American people, the military might seem to be a natural answer.⁹⁶ Senior officers have signed an oath to support and

⁹⁴ Glenn Kessler, "When did Mitch McConnell Say He Wanted to Make Obama a One Term President," *Washington Post*, Jan. 11, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/when-did-mcconnell-say-he-wanted-to-make-obama-a-one-term-president/2017/01/11/fact-checker-mcconnell-say-he-wanted-to-make-obama-a-one-term-president/>

⁹⁵ Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, "How the Republicans Broke Congress," *New York Times*, Dec. 2, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/02/opinion/sunday/republicans-broke-congress-politics.html>.

⁹⁶ Frank Newport, "U.S. Confidence in Military Reflects Perceived Competency (Americans with a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the military: 78%)," *Gallup*, July 27, 2017, <http://news.gallup.com/poll/214511/high-confidence-military-reflects-perceived-competency.aspx>.

to defend the Constitution of the United States, against all enemies, foreign and domestic. They have the extraordinary duty and privilege to do the right thing for the nation and their troops. There is no more noble charge.

But this route is fraught with danger. The prominence of recently retired or active duty military men in the Trump administration, such as James Mattis as secretary of defense and John Kelly as White House chief of staff, should concern Americans — certainly more than it appears to — for a number of reasons.

First, the training of a military officer does not necessarily prepare him or her to make difficult, strategic trade-off decisions for the nation. These men and women have a strongly ingrained tendency to fight for their position but, if they lose the argument, ultimately salute and execute. In the past, our military officers have not always been forthcoming with the bad news when it comes to calling out questionable decisions or policies the military cannot execute. President Trump therefore presents the current and former officers serving in his administration with a conundrum: carry out his policies, whether or not they consider them wise, in keeping with a lifelong deference to civilian control, or buck those decisions and fail to fall into line with their commander in chief. A civilian may face similar dilemmas, but disagreement is easier to express when you have not spent thirty years yielding to “civilian control.”

Second, the Trump Administration’s staffing choices raise the question of whether so many senior officers, regardless of their personal qualities, should occupy critical leadership positions in government and thus be in the policy-making business. This is not only important from the perspective of appearances — the “militarization of American foreign policy” has been a concern of observers for some time. But it is particularly relevant when the other elements of national power, such as the State Department, are

being systematically dismantled, leaving only military voices to evaluate complex issues that range well beyond their traditional areas of expertise.⁹⁷

Third, the common background of these officers — the prominence of Marines, for example — is concerning from the perspective of whether the president is receiving a sufficiently diverse set of viewpoints. However well-intentioned (and well-qualified) the individuals in question are, their shared background will limit the diversity of opinion they offer up to the president.

The Cultural Gap

Military officers are not trained to tell their leaders they cannot do something. An abiding “can do” spirit is inculcated early and often in their careers, which is usually a virtue. But in the realm of national policy, sometimes a chief executive must be told that what they wish to happen cannot be achieved or cannot be done without prohibitive cost. A brief look at some examples of this trait in action helps illustrate the point.

Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, in his superb book, *Dereliction of Duty*, describes how the very conflicted Chief of Staff of the Army, Gen. Harold K. Johnson, seriously considered resigning from his post after a study of the ongoing Vietnam War revealed victory was unlikely at best.⁹⁸ And yet, Gen. Johnson, as well as the rest of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, failed in the end to do the right thing. They instead allowed the report to be hidden away

⁹⁷ Nicholas Burns and Ryan C. Crocker, “Dismantling the Foreign Service,” *New York Times*, Nov. 27, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/27/opinion/dismantling-foreign-service-budget.html>.

⁹⁸ H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), 300.

and a futile war to grind on. The conflict continued to take the lives of many thousands more young Americans.⁹⁹

Years later, America's four-star officers failed again in a similar way. In the face of the decision to attack Iraq in 2003, Army Chief of Staff Gen. Eric Shinseki was the only person to oppose Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and his decision to under-resource that war.¹⁰⁰ The seeds of the current situation in Iraq were sown in early 2003 when the Combatant Commander of Central Command, Tommy Franks, and all but one of our senior generals, failed to insist on properly planning for the inevitable occupation.¹⁰¹

There are also significant differences between the culture and leadership styles in military organizations and civilian ones. Some individuals can cross the boundary smoothly, but these people are rare. Kelly perhaps best exemplifies the difficulty many officers would find and do experience in shedding a lifetime of military habits. Perhaps unwittingly, he has managed to become one of the more politicized former generals in recent memory. In previous months, he has insulted young immigrants, a gold star mother, a Congresswoman, and joked when Trump was given a ceremonial sword that he could use it on the press.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Among those were my own father, killed flying over the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos.

¹⁰⁰ Michael R. Gordon and General Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006), 102.

¹⁰¹ According to Tom Ricks, "Gen. Franks appeared to believe that planning for the end of the war was someone else's job." Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2006), 79.

¹⁰² CBS News/AP News, "John Kelly Says Some Immigrants Didn't Sign Up under DACA Because They Were 'Lazy.'" *CBS News/AP News*, Feb. 6, 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/john-kelly-says-he-doesnt-think-trump-will-extend-daca-deadline/>. Matthew Rozsa, "Here's What John Kelly is Missing About Trump's Gold Star Insult," *Salon*, Oct. 20, 2017, <https://www.salon.com/2017/10/20/heres-what-john-kelly-is-missing-about->

This is not to suggest such behavior is condoned in the military, but rather that speaking carefully and diplomatically to the press is not a core competency among many general officers. No less an authority than former Secretary of Defense and former Director of the CIA Leon Panetta said of Kelly, “John is a great Marine ... but he is not a politician, and one thing he lacks is the ability to look at the big political picture and understand what you should and shouldn’t say as chief of staff.”¹⁰³ To borrow from a trusted friend and advisor, “Kelly doesn’t know how to civilian.”

Policymakers or Policy Executors?

Certainly, civilians can be — and have been — wrong as well. But four-star generals and admirals operate at the interface between policy direction and policy execution, and in recent months that boundary has shifted in surprising ways, with more uniformed or recently uniformed people being placed in positions to actually make policy. However skilled and sophisticated these men and women may be, their background does not necessarily prepare them for the roles they are in. At a minimum, they may turn to the military to solve problems that arise, rather than employing other elements of national power.

The appointment of so many military men to key leadership positions has also given the appearance of a “militarization” of the American government. Enhancing this sense of

[trumps-gold-star-insult/](https://www.military.com/daily-news/2017/05/17/kelly-jokingly-tells-trump-use-ceremonial-sword-media.html). Richard Sisk, “Kelly Jokingly Tells Trump to Use Ceremonial Sword on Media,” *Military.com*, May 17, 2017, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2017/05/17/kelly-jokingly-tells-trump-use-ceremonial-sword-media.html>.

¹⁰³ David A. Graham, “The Rise and Fall of John Kelly’s Reputation,” *Atlantic*, Feb. 7, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/02/john-kelly-rob-porter/552704/>.

militarization is the systematic emasculation of a once great Department of State — all the more dramatic not only with the replacement of Secretary Rex Tillerson, but the manner in which he was fired.¹⁰⁴ The State Department is now a lonely place that has suffered an epic loss of talented career men and women, diplomats and bureaucrats who were mentored by the most successful in the department.¹⁰⁵ It is impossible to overstate how difficult rebuilding the department will be. We have only to look at how hard it was to rebuild the U.S. Army after Vietnam to see the challenges that lie ahead.

If it seemed that the administration's military appointees were managing, the concerns above notwithstanding, then perhaps one might step back and declare the current situation an important exception. However, the administration's handling of its first real national security crisis — the rise of a nuclear-capable North Korea — has been stunningly inept, revealing a national security team either unprepared for the real world or incapable of managing a Twitter-empowered, rogue president. The upcoming summit between North Korea, South Korea, and the United States is emblematic of a failure to understand sophisticated and difficult foreign policy negotiations. The summit should be the final step in the process in which those nations' leaders approve the extraordinary

¹⁰⁴ Dan Mangan, "Rex Tillerson Found Out He Was Fired as Secretary of State from President Donald Trump's Tweet," *CNBC*, March 13, 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/03/13/tillerson-learned-he-was-fired-from-trumps-tweet.html>.

¹⁰⁵ Robbie Gramer, Dan de Luce, and Colum Lynch, "How the Trump Administration Broke the State Department," *Foreign Policy*, July 31, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/07/31/how-the-trump-administration-broke-the-state-department/>.

work of our best and brightest in hammering out the details of a negotiated deal. A summit ought to be the end, not the beginning of the negotiation.¹⁰⁶

Diversity of Views

Mattis possesses a remarkable intellect, steadiness, and ability to speak plainly. His Marines loved him, as did and do his peers. But it is inevitable that, on some level, Mattis is still a Marine, and the Marine Corps is a small family. Mattis and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Marine Gen. Joe Dunford, have known each other for decades. This is also the case with Kelly and the Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen. Robert Neller.

At the highest levels of the American government sit critical players who emerged from the same, close-knit family. It is worth asking whether the perspectives they have to offer the president are sufficiently diverse and whether the dialogue that occurs in policymaking is brutally honest, as it ought to be. These military men and women have strong bonds rooted in years of service together. The risk is that these individuals will seek consensus with one another rather than face the uncomfortableness of disagreeing with former “family.” The result is that the president may not be getting the best and most wide-ranging analysis from his top appointees.

With the recent appointment of CIA Director and former Army officer Mike Pompeo to Secretary of State, the problem of the militarization of our foreign policy and the lack of diversity of thought and analysis has grown further. Notwithstanding the departure of

¹⁰⁶ Evans J.R. Revere, “A U.S.-North Korea Summit: What Could Possibly Go Wrong?” *Brookings Institution*, March 9, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/03/09/a-u-s-north-korea-summit-what-could-possibly-go-wrong/>.

H.R. McMaster and his replacement by a civilian, the primary sources of advice and input to the National Security apparatus are now largely military — active, retired, and former. This is not what our founding fathers envisioned.

Duty, Honor, Country

Among scholars of civil-military relations, “politicization” of the military is a perennial concern.¹⁰⁷ With a president in office who suggests that Democrats who failed to applaud for him at his State of the Union address might be considered treasonous,¹⁰⁸ fulfilling the task our retired and active generals in government doubtless have set out for themselves — to protect the nation and curb the worst excesses of a mercurial commander in chief — is doubtless more challenging than ever. For his part, Kelly appears to have the most difficult task.

I can only commend to these individuals the quote by Brevet Major William Jenkins Worth that every West Point plebe is required to memorize:

But an officer on duty knows no one — to be partial is to dishonor both himself and the object of his ill-advised favor. What will be thought of him who exacts of his friends that which disgraces him? Look at him who winks at and overlooks offenses in one, which he causes to be punished in

¹⁰⁷ Andrew Exum, “The Dangerous Politicization of the Military,” *Atlantic*, July 24, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/07/the-danger-of-turning-the-us-military-into-a-political-actor/534624/>.

¹⁰⁸ Jacob Pramuk, “‘Un-American’ and ‘Treasonous’: Trump Goes after Democrats Who Didn’t Clap during State of the Union,” *CNBC*, Feb. 5, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/05/trump-calls-democrats-un-american-and-treasonous.html>.

another, and contrast him with the inflexible soldier who does his duty faithfully, notwithstanding it occasionally wars with his private feelings. The conduct of one will be venerated and emulated, the other detested as a satire upon soldiership and honor.¹⁰⁹

The Trump Administration has certainly made life more difficult for our senior officers. Their challenge is to hold themselves and their organizations to a higher standard than Trump has so far set for his Administration. And they should also be prepared to take the blame should anything go wrong, from a Commander in Chief with a proven track record of shirking all responsibility when a crisis arises.

***Maj. Gen. (ret.) Paul Eaton** retired from the U.S. Army after thirty-three years of service in Germany, Somalia, Bosnia and Iraq. He served as Chief of Infantry for the Army and commanded the effort to rebuild Iraq's Armed Forces immediately after the fall of Baghdad. He now manages a non-profit, 501(c)(3) foundation, the Vet Voice Foundation and advises VoteVets.*



¹⁰⁹ United States Military Academy, "Bugle Notes: Learn This!" accessed March 15, 2018, <http://www.west-point.org/academy/malo-wa/inspirations/buglenotes.html>.

6. The Lack of Diverse Viewpoints on Trump's National Security Team and its Long-Term Consequences

Lauren Fish

President Donald Trump has been in office for over a year, and while many key staffers have departed and been replaced already, there are a few clear trends in his staffing decisions. First, the president has relied heavily on active-duty or retired military to fill crucial national security roles, going as far as to regularly refer to them as “my generals,” including when traveling abroad.^{110,111} Second, when staffing the Pentagon, he has tapped many defense industry executives to fill senior roles, against the preferences of the Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Sen. John McCain, who has threatened not to confirm them on at least two occasions, saying “we’ve had a couple, and that’s okay, but I don’t want [more of] them.”^{112,113} Perhaps most significantly, these selections have collectively been made to the exclusion of other, civilian, policy professionals. The Trump administration has not only eschewed individuals deemed

¹¹⁰ Mark Abadi, “Trump Won’t Stop Saying ‘My Generals’ – and the Military Community Isn’t Happy,” *Business Insider*, Oct. 25, 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/trump-my-generals-my-military-2017-10>.

¹¹¹ “Trump Thanks Cabinet, ‘My Generals,’” *CNN*, Jan. 26, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/politics/2018/01/26/trump-thanks-cabinet-generals-davos-sot.cnn>.

¹¹² Aaron Mehta and Joe Gould, “McCain to White House: No more Defense Industry Nominees,” *DefenseNews*, July 11, 2017, <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2017/07/11/mccain-to-white-house-no-more-defense-industry-nominees/>.

¹¹³ “McCain Says No More Defense Industry Execs for Top DoD Posts,” *ABC News*, Nov. 2, 2017, <http://abcnews.go.com/amp/Politics/wireStory/mccain-defense-industry-execs-top-dod-posts-50887220>.

insufficiently loyal during Trump’s campaign, but also those who, even privately, do not wholly endorse all of the administration’s policy predilections.¹¹⁴

The implications of these staffing decisions are difficult to see day-to-day. They are more likely to manifest themselves as opportunity costs — roads not taken, insights not provided, contributions not considered. However, reducing the number of qualified voices and minimizing diverse perspectives on a team often does result in suboptimal decisions.¹¹⁵ While it is not uncommon or inappropriate to include retired officers or defense industry executives in an administration, such individuals usually feature among a broader cohort that includes policy analysts, academics, and other experts. It is the lack of diverse voices and perspectives in the staffing decisions of the current administration that should be the cause for greatest concern.

The relevance of this phenomenon for civil-military relations is that military views are likely to be privileged over those of civilian policy experts who are simply not invited to the table. The power balance in the Pentagon between and among civilians, the military services, and the Joint Staff has been adjusted since the creation of the Department of Defense — whether by legislation, regulation, or practice — and maintaining that power balance has traditionally been viewed as a mechanism for ensuring strong civilian

¹¹⁴ David Nakamura and Anne Gearan, “Disagreement on North Korea Policy Derails White House Choice for Ambassador to South Korea,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 30, 2018,

https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/disagreement-on-north-korea-policy-could-derail-white-house-choice-for-ambassador-to-south-korea/2018/01/30/3a21191c-05da-11e8-94e8-e8b860oade23_story.html?utm_term=.427e2704204a.

¹¹⁵ Justin Fox, “The Computer Models Say That Diversity Helps,” *BloombergView*, Aug. 21, 2017,

<https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2017-08-21/the-computer-models-say-that-diversity-helps>.

control.¹¹⁶ This balance was arguably lost in the early days of the Trump administration by its failure to fully staff the civilian, policy-making side of the Pentagon, which left the Service and Joint Staffs empowered and at the helm.

Staffing the Administration

The staffing of any administration begins long before an election. Policy experts seeking future positions align with a candidate early in the hopes that they have bet on the right horse. Those who align with the party's nominee and ultimate electoral victor might even find their way into their dream jobs. Others who chose poorly have to settle for the positions still available after campaign staff have taken first pick. In general, political parties tend to seek reconciliation as the task turns to governing, which means hiring advisors who worked for rival campaigns. Those whose experience and policy insight can build a legacy for the administration are valued, despite whose campaign they worked on during the primaries.

Yet none of the usual rules have applied when it comes to staffing for the Trump administration. During the campaign, the Trump team was notoriously staffed by only a skeleton crew of largely unknowns.¹¹⁷ Many of the most well-known Republican experts had concerns about then-candidate Trump's policies and statements and therefore chose not to support his candidacy. Some signed letters, such as the one published on *War on*

¹¹⁶ Consider the first line of the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act: "An Act To reorganize the Department of Defense and strengthen civilian authority in the Department of Defense..." Goldwater- Nicholas Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986. Armed Forces. Defense and national security, 10 USC §111.

¹¹⁷ Michael Crowley, "Trump's Foreign Policy Team Baffles GOP Experts," *Politico*, Mar. 21, 2016,

<https://www.politico.com/story/2016/03/donald-trump-foreign-policy-advisers-221058>.

*the Rocks*¹¹⁸ or the follow-on released in the *New York Times*,¹¹⁹ while others endorsed other primary candidates, Hillary Clinton, or write-in Republican favorites, like 2012 presidential candidate Mitt Romney.

Instead of bringing those individuals into the fold after the election, as would normally be the case, Trump and his closest advisors instead rejected many of them, regarding them as disloyal. In fact, it is rumored that the administration maintains a list of letter-signers, which constitutes an automatic rejection for a job in government.¹²⁰ Needless to say, this decision has severely limited the pool of experienced national security hands available to guide the administration, including those from the civilian policy world.

This is unfortunate because policy professionals working in think tanks and academia are able to offer unique and valuable insights that help to layout the options available for the nation's leaders. They tend to focus less on specific operational, technical, or process details (though some are also experts in such areas) and more on the desired end states or outcomes for the nation. Policy experts then theoretically join up with experts in other areas — those who bring deep tactical proficiency about how military operators use equipment on the ground, masters of technical and scientific detail, or defense industry

¹¹⁸ WOTR Staff, "Open Letter on Donald Trump From GOP National Security Leaders," *War on the Rocks*, Mar. 2, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/03/open-letter-on-donald-trump-from-gop-national-security-leaders/>.

¹¹⁹ "A Letter from G.O.P. National Security Officials Opposing Donald Trump," *New York Times*, Aug. 8, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/08/08/us/politics/national-security-letter-trump.html>.

¹²⁰ David Nakamura, "'Never Trump' National Security Republicans Fear They Have Been Blacklisted," *Washington Post*, Jan. 16, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/never-trump-national-security-republicans-fear-they-have-been-blacklisted/2017/01/16/a2fadf54-d9a3-11e6-b8b2-cb5164beba6b_story.html?utm_term=.813bb7a0a1a1.

veterans who have survived the acquisition gauntlet, for example — to produce a fully informed set of options for leaders to consider. And yet, since most of the Republican national security establishment disagreed vocally with Trump on his stated policies during the campaign, the policy expertise side of this equation has, thus far, been anemic or non-existent.

The Need for Civilian Policy Professionals

It is a truism that experience shapes perceptions and is the foundation of a person's knowledge base. It would be too simple to say that those with military experience inevitably approach every problem with a military solution. However, it is arguable that such individuals will be less familiar with the nuances of the diplomatic or economic options available to resolve foreign policy challenges, and will be unlikely to see their own organizations and their attendant pathologies from the perspective of an outsider. While not in uniform, those from the defense industry do not bring purely civilian perspectives either. Senior executives have financial incentives for the sales of certain equipment, and while they are required to divest of financial holdings that could create a conflict of interest with their government duties, Sen. McCain, for one, has recognized that these risks persist. He kept the issue front and center during the confirmation process of the Department of Defense's civilian leaders.¹²¹

The Trump administration, however, has not just challenged norms by hiring primarily senior military officers or defense industry professionals. Those staffing decisions have

¹²¹ Phil Stewart, "McCain Warns Trump over Staffing Pentagon with Industry Insiders," *Reuters*, Nov. 16, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-pentagon/mccain-warns-trump-over-staffing-pentagon-with-industry-insiders-idUSKBN1DG39N>.

also excluded people who disagree, even privately, with the administration’s policy preferences. Rather than seeking educated and experienced thinkers who could offer dissenting views, the Trump team has rejected anyone suspected of holding even slightly divergent opinions. For example, the administration recently rejected the immensely qualified and widely lauded Victor Cha after he privately shared concerns about its North Korea strategy.¹²² In response, Cha drafted an articulation of the risks of the Trump administration’s dangerous “bloody nose” gamble.¹²³ By not including countervailing views in its policy and strategy deliberations, the Trump administration narrows its options and limits its analysis of particular policy decisions. So much for a “team of rivals.”

There is clear business literature that discusses the benefits of assembling a diverse team. Such teams tend to review facts in more depth, rather than relying on shared assumptions, and are often more innovative.¹²⁴ Bringing alternative viewpoints together means that group members expect to argue their case, rather than assume minimum push back, refining and increasing the value and persuasiveness of their positions.¹²⁵ The

¹²² Nakamura and Gearan, “Disagreement on North Korea Policy.”

¹²³ Victor Cha, “Victor Cha: Giving North Korea a ‘Bloody Nose’ Carries Huge Risk to Americans,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 30, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/victor-cha-giving-north-korea-a-bloody-nose-carries-a-huge-risk-to-americans/2018/01/30/43981c94-05f7-11e8-8777-2a059f168dd2_story.html?utm_term=.bdb1d1d131bd.

¹²⁴ David Rock and Heidi Grant, “Why Diverse Teams Are Smarter,” *Harvard Business Review*, Nov. 4, 2016, <https://hbr.org/2016/11/why-diverse-teams-are-smarter>.

¹²⁵ Katherine W. Phillips, “How Diversity Makes Us Smarter,” *Scientific American*, Oct. 1, 2014, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-diversity-makes-us-smarter/>.

increased friction that occurs when convening people of different backgrounds ultimately improves analysis and decisions.¹²⁶

Furthermore, there is evidence from senior military officers themselves that leadership styles beyond the conventional military model are needed when countering modern adversaries. Gen. Stanley McChrystal, when he led Joint Special Operations Command, realized that al-Qaeda's leadership was nimbler than the military's cumbersome, hierarchical decision-making processes. In response, he rebuilt his command to produce faster responses and enabled smaller units, which he describes in his book *Team of Teams*.¹²⁷

Diverse viewpoints in national security will also help ensure that none of the military Services or other entities receive special treatment. It's hard to dismantle an organization that one helped build or that propelled one's career. Outsiders naturally find it easier to identify inefficiencies and are less sentimental about taking a hatchet to an organizational chart. This principle holds true for our military institutions. For example, many, including current Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph Dunford, have suggested the need for reform of the combatant commands.¹²⁸ Secretary Mattis' final post was as the

¹²⁶ Katherine W. Phillips, Katie A. Liljenquist, and Margaret A. Neale, "Better Decisions through Diversity," *Kellogg Insight*, Oct. 1, 2010, https://insight.kellogg.northwestern.edu/article/better_decisions_through_diversity.

¹²⁷ McChrystal Group, "Team of Teams," accessed Mar. 22, 2018, <https://www.mcchrystalgroup.com/insights-old/teamofteams/>.

¹²⁸ Gen. Joseph F. Dunford, Jr., "Meeting Today's Global Security Challenges with General Joseph F. Dunford," remarks and Q & A, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Mar. 29, 2016, <https://www.csis.org/events/meeting-todays-global-security-challenges-general-joseph-f-dunford>.

combatant commander of Central Command, raising concerns that he might be more likely to shun reform of his former command.

The Boiling Frog

Given the staffing decisions made within Trump's administration, the president inevitably receives a disproportionate number of opinions from current and former military officers, as well as from defense industry insiders. His staff also hints that the American people should not question the choices of such distinguished officers, curbing debate.¹²⁹ Trump does not appear to hear perspectives from individuals with other backgrounds, those who bring different kinds of expertise to the table, such as regional knowledge, experience in economic development and trade, or those trained in the subtleties of diplomacy. Such lack of diversity in background can easily result in groupthink.

The consequences of the Trump administration's staffing choices are not yet clear. Like the proverbial boiling frog, small changes often go unnoticed until they have resulted in wholesale transformation. The American people may rebuff these centralized voices, but they also may not. The insidious part of this lack of diverse viewpoints is that its effects can best be measured in the opportunity costs of options never even contemplated, the outcomes of which will manifest themselves somewhere down the road. At that point, changing course may be more difficult or even impossible.

¹²⁹ John Wagner, "White House Press Secretary: It's 'Highly Inappropriate' to Question a 4-star Marine General," *Washington Post*, Oct. 20, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/10/20/white-house-press-secretary-its-highly-inappropriate-to-question-a-4-star-marine-general/?utm_term=.64246392f730.

Lauren Fish is a Research Associate for Defense Strategies & Assessments at the Center for a New American Security.

