



BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE:

Is the Pentagon at War Against America's Presidents?

May 1, 2018

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Summary

We asked a handful of experts to review Mark Perry's new book, *The Pentagon's Wars: The Military's Undeclared War Against America's Presidents*.

1. Introduction: The Invisible War on the White House

Rosa Brooks

The title of Mark Perry's new book, *The Pentagon's Wars: The Military's Undeclared War Against America's Presidents*,¹ suggests the tale of something rather dramatic. If not a coup, then, at the very least, a systematic military effort to undermine America's civilian commanders in chief. In fact, Perry's book offers less of a bang than a whimper. It's a detailed account of the behind-the-scenes griping and sulking that results when civilian policy makers give military leaders what the latter view as foolish directives. But if there's truly a "war" against U.S. presidents, declared or undeclared, it's not evident from the examples cited in *The Pentagon's Wars*.

Gays in the military? Perry reminds us that as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Colin Powell did his darnedest to broadcast his disapproval of Bill Clinton's efforts to end the military ban on homosexuality. U.S. involvement in Bosnia, and, later, Kosovo? Perry tells the story of the many senior military leaders who viewed these interventions as doomed nation-building efforts, which distracted the military from its core tasks. The Iraq War? Perry notes that senior military officials made no secret of their dismay at being ordered into Iraq based on flimsy intelligence and with a war plan that failed to look beyond toppling Saddam Hussein.

¹ Mark Perry, *The Pentagon's Wars: The Military's Undeclared War Against America's Presidents* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2017).

But muttering, sulking, and occasional bureaucratic slow-rolling don't amount to a war – at least not in the traditional sense. Of course, if the United States can call fifteen years of fitful, geographically diffuse and generally inconclusive strikes against “terrorism” a war, perhaps there's no reason not to call intermittent military discontent with presidential orders a war as well. It's certainly true that U.S. wars have lately been no more successful than the episodic military grumbling Perry painstakingly describes

To Perry, both these failures are cause for concern. Why, he asks, can't America win its wars? And why haven't military leaders more consistently spoken out against foolhardy presidential commands? To Perry, these two questions are interconnected: America no longer wins wars, he argues, in part because America's military commanders have been unwilling to stand up and tell American presidents “No” — or even “Yes, sir, but.”²

In this book review roundtable, three experts on civil-military relations evaluate and respond to Perry's book. Alice Hunt Friend takes Perry to task for his military-centric view of decision-making processes. While his account offers granular detail about military discontent with presidential decisions, Perry makes little effort to understand or explain the process or the reasons that led to decisions disliked by military brass, much less describe the complex interplay between military officers and civilians, including within the Pentagon itself. The result, argues Friend, is “an oddly incomplete history and a poor civil-military analysis.” Perry takes it for granted that sometimes a resounding military “No!” is the appropriate response to

² Perry, *Pentagon's Wars*, 297

a presidential directive, but gives no thought to the dangers of encouraging unelected military leaders to second-guess the decisions of elected officials.

Granted, Friend acknowledges, “in the Huntingtonian tradition of civil military-relations, there is a perennial search for the line between politics, from which the military is ideally excluded, and military operations, where it is unclear whether and in what way civilians belong.” She also acknowledges that “civilian and military leaders constantly redefine the boundaries between political and military decisions,” and the resulting ambiguity about military and civilian “lanes” creates genuine uncertainty and confusion about “where senior military authority begins and ends.” But Perry never directly engages with this dilemma. Instead, he starts from the presumption, as Friend puts it, that “military leadership *should* sometimes supersede presidential judgment in wartime....”

Jason Dempsey echoes Friend’s critique, arguing that “Perry offers no theory of how defense policymaking *should* work, and his book is the weaker for it.”

Dempsey does, however, find a different value in Perry’s account of military wrangling with civilian policymakers: His narrative sheds light on “two key dynamics that help explain why success has been so elusive for the American military: the chasm between the military and civilian policymakers, and the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986.” In part, argues Dempsey, the examples provided by Perry illustrate the degree to which military naïveté about “how Washington works” contributes to frequent military misunderstandings of civilian motivations and incentive structures (and thus contributes to military failures to understand how and why civilians come up with the policies they ask the military to execute). At the same time, military naïveté about the Washington sausage-making machine routinely allows politically savvy

civilians to out-maneuver dissenting military commanders, making military efforts to voice disagreement less effective. The military's reputation for being "apolitical" is important to its credibility, argues Dempsey, "but, paradoxically," only those military leaders who "understand and are capable of maneuvering in Washington's inherently political environment" will be canny enough to find ways to express divergent views without sacrificing their credibility.

Dempsey also notes that "by divorcing the service chiefs from the warfighting chain of command," Goldwater-Nichols separated "those fighting the war and the country's political leadership." Service chiefs consequently prioritize the overall health of the force over the nation's ability to achieve its strategic goals through the use of the military, while combatant commanders are pulled, like it or not, into the political world. Ultimately, the interplay between these different forces within the military produces "least common denominator options that are designed to avoid outright failure, but repeatedly fall short of achieving our national security objectives."

Like Friend and Dempsey, Matthew Moten takes Perry to task for failing to deliver on his central promises: "[W]hile he has produced a ripping good narrative, his book fails to answer" the fundamental questions he poses, or even examine them rigorously. In Moten's view, Perry is too quick to attribute America's recent military failure to excessive "nation-building," a task Perry regards as doomed. But, as Moten notes, Perry makes no effort to square his argument with the impressive American successes in post-World War II Germany and Japan.

Like Friend, Moten also worries about Perry's "blinkered view" of civil-military relations. While Perry chastises senior military officials who failed to "stand up" to

civilians, he doesn't take the time to ask whether our world would truly be better if military leaders said "no" more often. To Moten, civilian elected officials have, as Peter Feaver once put it, "the right to be wrong." This is how our democracy works.³ As Moten notes, this doesn't mean military leaders shouldn't express their views candidly and firmly, for "vigorous debate about policy and strategy, while sometimes tense or even unpleasant, is a sign of a healthy civil-military relationship." But if civilian leaders — even misguided civilian leaders — usually "win," this is as it should be. Ultimately, "if the president says 'go,' it is a close cousin to a *coup d'état* for his generals to say 'no.'"

Inevitably, readers of Perry's book may find it hard to divorce his normative claims from their own views. Those who favored ending the military ban on homosexuality will find themselves rooting for Bill Clinton in the face of Gen. Colin Powell's intransigence. Those who opposed the 2003 invasion of Iraq will find themselves wishing that military dissenters had been more effective in halting the march to war. In different ways, Friend, Dempsey, and Moten all offer an implied warning: Those who find themselves sympathetic to military dissenters based on their views on a particular issue should be careful what they wish for, as empowering military dissent may be a genie that can't be returned to the bottle.

But just as inevitably, readers may find it hard not to read Perry's book in light of the Trump presidency. Numerous military and national security experts from both political parties have expressed concern over the president's departures from

³ Peter Feaver, *Armed Servants* (Cambridge University Press, 2003); Peter Feaver, "The Right to be Right," *International Security* 35, no 4 (2011): 87-125.

decades of bipartisan foreign policy consensus and his often erratic and bellicose pronouncements. In that context, there has been a renewed debate about whether military leaders have the right — or even the duty — to say “no” to what they regard as dangerous and reckless orders.

As Friend, Dempsey, and Moten all remind us, the lines between “political” and “military” matters are rarely as clear as the Huntingtonian model presumes. Unlike enlisted personnel, military officers only undertake to “support and defend the Constitution,” not to “obey the orders of the president” — and both U.S. and international law make it clear that military personnel have no obligation to obey unlawful orders. Unfortunately, the demands of the Constitution are not always crystal clear, and the line between “unlawful” and merely “catastrophically unwise” can also be murky. “Target those civilians because I said so,” would be an unlawful order. “Target those civilians because I believe they are participating actively in hostilities and have thus waived their protected status” is not unlawful on its face, but might be unlawful if the facts indicate otherwise.

Oddly, Perry’s book ignores one example of military dissent that touches directly on issues of legality. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, when the Bush Administration adopted the view that waterboarding and other “enhanced” interrogation methods were lawful, there was immediate and sustained military dissent, particularly (though not exclusively) from within the service judge advocate generals’ corps.⁴

⁴ See, for example, the various memos written in February and March 2003 by the Judge Advocate Generals of the Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marines, available at

<https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/torturingdemocracy/documents/20030205.pdf>. See also Josh White,

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In some ways this too was a story of “failed” military dissent: The Bush administration simply relied on the CIA rather than the military to carry out interrogations that military lawyers denounced as torture. But the military dissenters ultimately carried the day: Within a few years, the Bush administration’s Justice Department had repudiated its earlier approval of waterboarding, and intense media and congressional pressure, inspired in part by military dissenters, forced the Bush administration to abandon the practice.

This example helps illustrate, perhaps, the complexity of the civil-military terrain. Perry’s book — incomplete and flawed as it is — won’t resolve any of these debates. But despite its shortcomings, *The Pentagon’s Wars* offers valuable historical context for those on both sides of the issue, and is an important volume for all students of civil-military relations.

Rosa Brooks is the Associate Dean for Graduate Programs and Professor of Law at Georgetown University Law Center. She also serves as an adjunct scholar at the Modern War Institute at West Point and as a Senior Fellow in the New America/ASU Future of War Program. From 2009-2011, Brooks served as Counselor to Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Michele Flournoy. Her most recent book, How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything, was published in August 2016 by Simon and Schuster.



“Military Lawyers Fought Policy on Interrogations,” *Washington Post*, July 15, 2005,

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/07/14/AR2005071402187.html>.

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2. *The Pentagon's Wars:* Winning at Home While Losing Overseas

Jason Dempsey

With his latest book, *The Pentagon's Wars*, Mark Perry has written an informative volume about the pinnacle of national security decision-making — the interaction between the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the White House during times of war — and adds his voice to the likes of Bob Woodward and Tom Ricks, who have dissected key moments in our most recent military adventures. Perry's approach is unique, however, in that his reporting focuses directly on the intersection of political and military leadership and spans the entirety of the post-Cold War era. Having surveyed this history he finds the record wanting and our military leadership inadequate.

Unfortunately, Perry offers no theory of how defense policymaking *should* work, and his book is the weaker for it. *The Pentagon's Wars* offers extensive documentation of the string of foreign policy failures that have defined American military efforts over the past few decades, but Perry fails to explain the structural factors that led to these failures. Nevertheless, his narrative does offer evidence of two key dynamics that help explain why success has been so elusive for the American military: the chasm between the military and civilian policymakers, and the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986.

Fish Out of Water

The gulf between the military and civilian policymakers is natural, given the military's bureaucratic structure and how it differs dramatically from the free-wheeling and non-hierarchical nature of domestic politics. This gulf is exacerbated further by military leaders who are unaccustomed to how Washington works. Although this is a well-documented dynamic, Perry contributes a number of excellent examples of the military's cultural ignorance of the D.C. Beltway. The most compelling is the 2006 "Revolt of the Generals," when several retired officers came out publicly to criticize Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and America's conduct of the war in Iraq. Perry covers the incident in depth and his account highlights how the military's simplistic approach to dealing with leaders like Rumsfeld made the confrontation inevitable.

By 2006, Rumsfeld had outmaneuvered the Joint Chiefs of Staff and manipulated them into conveying their approval to President George Bush for operations in Iraq, despite reservations from the Army Chief of Staff and Marine Corps commandant about long-term chances of success. He achieved this by shaping what questions would be asked, thereby taking advantage of the military's "stay in your lane" approach to the civilian-military relationship.

While generally a good rule of thumb, the perils of how this mantra could actually lead to the neutering of military leaders reached its pinnacle under Marine General Peter Pace's tenure as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Hand-picked by Rumsfeld because of his pliability and inexperience with Washington, Pace

embraced the “stay in your lane” mantra⁵ without realizing that it was also his responsibility to keep his lane to the president open. Instead, his passivity gave Rumsfeld control of what advice got to the president and ultimately led to Pace being sidelined from the policy-making process, becoming so shut out that he was not even able to relay the thinking of the White House to other military leaders, let alone have a voice in ongoing debates.

It was this inability to get a hearing for dissenting views about the war, paired with extreme dissatisfaction with Rumsfeld’s leadership, that led a string of retired senior officers to publicly criticize the war effort. Collectively, these criticisms from Paul Eaton, Anthony Zinni, and Greg Newbold came to be known as “the Generals’ Revolt.” Although the grievances of these retired officers were understandable, taking the fight public put their concerns into the realm of the political and led to a counter offensive from Rumsfeld. Concerned for his reputation, the secretary of defense deployed surrogates across Washington to push the narrative that the Pentagon was merely chafing under civilian control.⁶ He also undercut their concerns by painting them as “Clinton’s Generals,” ascribing their motivations to partisan politics.

In addition to demonstrating the ways in which naïveté of Washington politics can have unexpected outcomes, this episode also highlights the potential for public confrontations to undercut the military’s reputation for being apolitical advisors. But while Perry adds to our understanding of the Generals’ Revolt with meticulous

⁵ Mark Perry, *The Pentagon’s Wars: The Military’s Undeclared War Against America’s Presidents* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2017), p. 199.

⁶ Perry, *Pentagon’s Wars*, 200

reporting, the reader is left wondering just how the military should navigate such situations. Unfortunately, too many military officers see political engagement as a trap, where the only options are either to say something and risk being seen as insubordinate or never voice dissent at all. What Perry leaves unsaid is how generals should ensure that the military perspective is heard in policy debates while not becoming part of the story themselves.

The Downside of Goldwater-Nichols

The second factor contributing to the continued failures of our military is the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986.⁷

Unfortunately, Perry does not directly tie some of the issues faced in his analysis to the passage of this bill, because it was the Goldwater-Nichols Act that removed the service chiefs from the formal chain of command, thereby separating the men and women responsible for sustaining the readiness of the military from those who are fighting America's wars. Perry's narrative shows how one of the unintended implications of this revised structure can be a lack of accountability: Competing demands between readiness of the force for future wars and resourcing the wars we are in often lead to unsatisfying compromises between the service chiefs and commanders in the field, and can preclude policymakers from making informed decisions about the conduct of war. While Perry again does not directly address how the structure of Goldwater-Nichols can lead to such outcomes, his outline of

⁷ For the history and motivation behind this act, see James R. Locher III, *Victory on the Potomac: The Goldwater-Nichols Act Unifies the Pentagon*. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2002).

the machinations behind our Iraq strategy provides a case study for how it can lead to less-than-optimal strategies.

The frustration that many senior officers felt with Pace for his failure to articulate their reservations about the Iraq strategy not only led to the Generals' Revolt, but also pushed others to seek change via unofficial channels. As security in Iraq continued to deteriorate in the years after the invasion, several outside actors began to search for a way forward. Chief among them was the former Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, retired general Jack Keane.

Having only recently retired, Keane was among many close observers worried about the direction of the war in Iraq. Despite being out of uniform, Keane was able to use his reputation and informal networks to lobby for a change of strategy. He viewed the situation as perilous and sought a significant troop increase to bring order to Iraq. To help bolster the case for a new strategy, Keane encouraged Pace to assemble a "council of colonels" from outside the Pentagon who could bring a fresh perspective to the fight.⁸

Although this council of colonels was not the only attempt in Washington to assess the war and recommend an expansion or "surge" of additional troops, the outcome of the effort dramatically encapsulates how competing interests can hobble national security decision-making. Perry reports that, during one of the briefings the council made to the Joint Chiefs, the option of adding more troops to the effort came up. The reaction of the Chief of Staff of the Army, Gen. Peter Schoomaker, to this possible strategy was "Forget it. It would break the Army" to

⁸ Perry, *Pentagon's Wars*, 208.

which the briefer responded, “Well, maybe if you’d have made that point before we got into this mess, we wouldn’t be talking about it now.”⁹

Ultimately the Joint Chiefs removed the council’s assessment of a surge option from the final report.¹⁰ But Bush had been forewarned of the resistance of the service chiefs to the idea of an expansion of troops through informal channels and was prepared to push back against them when opting for a new strategy. Even then, the plan was subject to relentless “salami slicing” by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, whereby “they would reluctantly agree on a policy and then carefully slice away at it until they got their way.”¹¹

By divorcing the service chiefs from the warfighting chain of command, Goldwater-Nichols streamlined the link between those fighting the war and the country’s political leadership. But Perry’s book reveals the unintended consequences of what appeared at first to be a move toward efficiency. The primary negative effect of the act is that it allows the service chiefs to be somewhat detached from the war. During the debates over Iraq, the chiefs were, as one member of the council of colonels, Col. Peter Mansoor, noted, “oddly detached from the crisis.”¹²

With no direct say in the fighting, it is natural for service chiefs to prioritize maintenance of the force and readiness for the next fight while minimizing disruption to the force from any current conflict. However, as D.C. denizens and

⁹ Perry, *Pentagon’s Wars*, 208.

¹⁰ Perry, *Pentagon’s Wars*, 215.

¹¹ Perry, *Pentagon’s Wars*, 216.

¹² Perry, *Pentagon’s Wars*, 209.

the most senior officers of their services, they also possess an out-sized voice compared to those leading the war effort in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. Field commanders must therefore both anticipate service concerns and be resigned to the chiefs having the ability to actively shape conversations in Washington, despite the chiefs not being directly in the warfighting chain of command.

This dynamic can limit the number of options as a result of the extensive compromise between the chiefs and the combatant commanders that is often required to achieve consensus. That, in turn, can preclude elected leaders from being presented with options that the chiefs feel present too great of a risk to the readiness of the military to fight future wars. While this can be a good thing in theory, the examples of Iraq and Afghanistan point to a process that leads to compromises that limit the military's commitment to the fight at hand. And as with Iraq and Afghanistan, these are often least-common denominator options that are designed to avoid outright failure, but repeatedly fall short of achieving our national security objectives.

Evidence without Analysis

The major shortcoming of Perry's book is that he provides examples of a dysfunctional national security decision-making process but does not analyze them in any depth. His concluding recommendation is that we simply need military leaders who are willing to speak up and make themselves heard in Washington. Unfortunately, it is not so simple — he himself laments the outsize role that Colin Powell played as Chairman in the Clinton administration. When, how, and on what topics military leaders should advocate without usurping the principle of civilian control of the military is left unanswered.

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Without such an analysis, the value of the book lies in its documentation of an often overlooked, but vital, element of national security decision-making. Readers not familiar with competing theories of civilian-military relations would therefore do well to pair the book with a primer on the topic, such as Suzanne Nielsen and Don Sinder's overview of modern civilian-military relations or Jim Golby's recent article on the strategic dialogue between military and civilian leadership.¹³

But by detailing the debates and tensions between elected officials and military leaders over the course of the last several decades, Perry at least adds to our understanding of how the United States goes to war — and why it seems to perennially come up short. That he is willing to look critically at both the civilian *and* the military sides of the decision-making process is a welcome addition to the literature, and will do much to advance our understanding of the shortcomings of our national security decision-making process.

Dr. Dempsey has written extensively on civilian-military relations and the failures of our military efforts in Afghanistan. His book, [Our Army: Soldiers, Politics and Civil-Military Relations](#) was published by Princeton University Press and was the

¹³ Suzanne C. Nielsen and Don M. Snider, *American Civil-Military Relations: The Soldier and the State in a New Era* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), <https://jhupbooks.press.jhu.edu/content/american-civil-military-relations>; Jim Golby, "Improving Advice and Earning Autonomy: Building Trust in the Strategic Dialogue," *The Strategy Bridge*, Oct. 3, 2017, <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2017/10/3/improving-advice-and-earning-autonomy-building-trust-in-the-strategic-dialogue>.

first major work to delve into the social and political attitudes of all ranks of the active-duty Army. He served 22 years as an infantry officer in the United States Army, with deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. He last served as Special Assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.



3. Retention of Duty: On Civilians in *The Pentagon's Wars*

Alice Hunt Friend

Sometimes civil-military relations scholarship is distorted by a selection bias. Academics and defense practitioners alike are so focused on how the military behaves that there is relatively little written on the role civilians play in the relationship. Bias is a problem, of course, because it blinds the researcher to underlying explanatory dynamics and generates fallacies that build on each other. Systematic disregard for civilians can make the military seem like the only institution or actor that matters. In his new book, *The Pentagon's Wars: The Military's Undeclared War Against America's Presidents*, Mark Perry provides a military-centric narrative of wartime decision-making since the end of the Cold War. The result is an oddly incomplete history and a poor civil-military analysis.

Perry opens the book's prologue by asserting, through the words of retired Adm. William Crowe, that the Cold War victory was a purely military one — perhaps the country's greatest. The author leaves out any mention of the intelligence, diplomatic, and economic elements of the strategy or the diplomats and politicians who surely made some contribution. These assertions, made via the former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), ensure that the reader is viewing the topic through a military lens, and that few civilians will appear in a serious light. In fact, in the course of describing some of the major decision points in recent American national security history, Perry either omits civilians altogether or minimizes the roles they played in policymaking. In the description of the ambush in Mogadishu in 1993, Perry ignores Secretary of Defense Les Aspin's role and focuses instead on Generals Joe Hoar and John Shalikashvili. Similarly, in the

chapter covering President Obama’s initial Afghanistan-Pakistan strategy review (in which, full disclosure, I had a tiny bureaucratic part), it is as if neither Amb. Richard Holbrooke nor Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Michèle Flournoy existed, even though they co-led the review with Bruce Reidel (who is mentioned) and had influence over both the Secretaries of State and Defense. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates merits discussion, but instead of exploring his strategic impact on the debate over the Afghanistan war, Perry concentrates on Gates’ judgment about the war’s commander, Gen. David McKiernan. It is not that the Gates-McKiernan relationship is irrelevant. It is rather that Gates’ centrality to the Afghanistan strategy discussion was a vital element of that relationship — and of the strategy itself.

Where Perry’s narrative does acknowledge civilians as consequential, it often impugns the results of their involvement. “Once again,” Perry explains about the George H.W. Bush administration’s decision not to depose Saddam Hussein at the end of the Gulf War in 1991, “the politicians had weighed in, carefully excising the word ‘decisive’ from the war’s description.” Because the book claims to present a military perspective, Perry conveys disdain for civilian leaders through the eyes of senior officers. A long disquisition on the military’s disapproval of Bill Clinton begins chapter two, followed by CJCS Colin Powell’s thoughts on the fitness of various civilian appointees to serve in their posts, including the secretary of defense. A similar pattern launches chapter five (“Tommy Franks: Rumsfeld’s General”). The author uses the words “slob” and “questionable hygiene” to describe how Secretary of Defense Aspin appeared to those in uniform. Perhaps Perry chose such descriptions to give color to the narrative, but the words also give the reader the impression that military leaders think civilians lack the discipline necessary to make sound national decisions. Moreover, these descriptive

sections are not accompanied by any analysis of the civil-military ramifications of general and flag officers supplanting political leaders' judgment with their own.

This is not to suggest that Perry does not have critiques for the senior military officers he profiles. In fact, much of his argument is that senior officers failed frequently. But their failings are of choice rather than ability, and are typically borne of acquiescing to civilian ineptitude or in the normal course of inter-service rivalry. The lead-up to the 2003 Iraq War is especially fertile territory in this regard. Maj. Gen. Gene Renuart (USAF) and Gen. Tommy Franks (USA) are quoted as having expletive-filled responses to civilian direction. In Perry's telling, officers like them did the best they could in a dysfunctional bureaucratic environment. Few civilians in these pages are given similar license or complexity.

The sum of these omissions is a series of missed opportunities to analyze the implications of civil-military disagreement for democracy. Perry's book presents thorough evidence of the strategic and political roles military officers in the United States can play if they choose to do so — and if a large enough group of relevant actors chooses to encourage them. Yet Perry fails to mention that being apolitical is a key feature of American military professionalism. The Founders crafted the Constitution to ensure that no one political power broker or faction wielded too much military power as a bulwark against autocratic rule.¹⁴ Yet Perry reports more than once on the partisan voting patterns among the military and the supposedly average service member's attitude toward the Commander in Chief without

¹⁴ Richard H. Kohn, "The Constitution and National Security: The Intent of the Framers" in *The United States Military Under the Constitution of the United States, 1789-1989* ed. Richard H. Kohn (New York: NYU Press, 1991).

reference to the norm of non-partisan military service. It is not clear whether Perry endorses politicization of the military, but the book certainly fails to consider the possibility and consequences of it.

Of course, what counts as political activity is not always straightforward. In the Huntingtonian tradition of civil-military relations, there is a perennial search for the line between politics, from which the military is ideally excluded, and military operations, where it is unclear whether and in what way civilians belong.¹⁵ In practice, tactical and operational choices have political implications, as those who have written about “the strategic corporal” know well.¹⁶ At the level of strategy, civilian and military leaders constantly redefine the boundaries between political and military decisions. This ambiguity has generated confusion about where senior military authority begins and ends. Whether military officers may insist on their preferences in the face of civilian disagreement with their advice continues to be a topic of national debate.¹⁷ After the 2003 Iraq invasion, and eight years of Obama-era “micromanagement,” many in military institutions complain that civilians are the ones who have overstepped their expertise if not their legal authority.¹⁸ There

¹⁵ Although Eliot A. Cohen argues persuasively that civilian leaders’ involvement in operational matters has frequently had positive results. Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime*. (New York: Anchor Books, 2002).

¹⁶ Charles C. Krulak, “The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War,” *Marines Magazine*, January 1999, http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/usmc/strategic_corporal.htm.

¹⁷ Kori Schake, “Dereliction of Duty Reconsidered: The Book that Made the National Security Advisor” *War on the Rocks*, Mar. 28, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/03/dereliction-of-duty-reconsidered-the-book-the-made-the-national-security-advisor/>.

¹⁸ Rowan Scarborough, “Obama’s Micromanagement of Airstrikes Hinders Fight Against ISIS, Generals Say,” *Washington Times*, Sept. 13, 2016,

is a reason many applaud President Donald Trump's hands-off approach with the Pentagon and his appointment of a secretary of defense who spent 40 years in uniform: The professionals in war are being allowed to do their jobs. Given his subject matter, Perry has a great deal of empirical evidence to leverage on this controversial topic, but instead of scrutinizing the record to make a normative argument about whether military leadership *should* sometimes supersede presidential judgment in wartime and why, he simply assumes it and then proceeds to evaluate the quality with which the examined officers perform that function.

Even so, the book advances the long-running argument that when senior military officers disagree with civilian direction, they should push back forcefully, and, if necessary, protest loudly. This is most obvious in the chapter on the so-called "Revolt of the Generals," the 2006 call from multiple retired general officers for Defense Secretary Rumsfeld to resign because of his handling of the Iraq War. (Rumsfeld is the most prominently visible civilian leader in the book). An active duty officer who "astonishingly" declined to join the so-called revolt is depicted as "out of his depth." Reporters who described it as a challenge to civilian control of the military were "unwitting" that they had "aped" Rumsfeld's line of self-defense. Yet it is entirely consistent to agree with the substance of the critiques of Rumsfeld *and* still believe this was a problematic moment for civil-military relations. Indeed, this episode raises a critical civil-military question: Is it appropriate for generals and flag officers, even retired ones, to weigh-in on the tenure of a politically appointed civilian in the chain of command? Perry quotes

<https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/sep/13/obama-administration-micromanagement-hamstrings-ai/>.

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retired Lt. Gen. Bill Odom as saying that there are many other civilians and institutions responsible for oversight of military policy and the performance of the secretary of defense. After this rush of insight, the reader hopes Perry is about to dig into the issue of whether the military should ever fill this role. Instead, the offhand Odom quote is as far as he goes.

Perry concludes the book by asserting that the mark of a true military leader is his ability to tell a president “no,” lamenting that in recent American history, only Colin Powell has demonstrated that ability. It is as if the military were the only actor with moral agency, and the judgment to use it appropriately. As appealing as this perspective may be to those disappointed in our political leaders’ foreign policy choices, the author fails to marshal sufficient evidence that giving a veto to the chairman would solve strategic problems, and there is no thought given to the problems it might create.

Would presidents really make better choices if they only listened more closely to senior military officers? While there is value in learning about the frustrations military leaders have with their civilian superiors, and while Perry’s stories reveal problematic civilian behavior, his conclusion is overdetermined. His failure to provide evidence that the military’s strategic judgment is consistently superior to civilians’ diminishes his capacity to persuade the reader of his arguments. This reader, therefore, was not convinced that American foreign policy shortcomings over the past 30 years were a result of insufficient military intransigence in the face of poor civilian direction — or, more to Perry’s point, that the military capital built up during the 1990s would not have been “squandered” if civilians had acquiesced to military preferences.

Moreover, the normative assertion pervading these pages that military judgment should prevail over civilian judgment is very troubling. Perhaps rather than saying “no,” the chairman and combatant commanders should stick with telling the president when they disagree with him or her on operational grounds, and why. The difference is more than semantic. General and flag officers in our system do not have a veto on presidential decisions. To suggest that they should is to accept that the only important considerations are those that impact military outcomes, or that the military should act as politicians. Perry, like H.R. McMaster before him¹⁹, has a reasonable argument to make about the necessity for candor and the need for officers who have the courage to tell a commander in chief what he does not want to hear. But there should not be shame in a military professional failing to persuade the democratically elected leader of our country to change course. To borrow two of Peter Feaver’s phrases, civilians may have the right to be wrong, but they also have the right to be right. In the end, both failure and success at the strategic level rests with the president, whose performance will be judged by the American people. That is the process by which our system devises and validates national purpose. Civilian responsibility for defense policy is not a cost of civilian control of the military. It is the point of it.

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¹⁹ H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997).

4. A Blinkered View of Civil-Military Relations in a Democracy

Matthew Moten

By the fall of 2002, the Bush Administration was shifting its focus away from al Qaeda and the Taliban and toward Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, a move that was met with a great deal of dissent around the country and among American allies. In his new book, *The Pentagon's Wars*, Mark Perry tells us that the consternation started, surprisingly enough, in the senior ranks of the military. The highest ranking officers in the Pentagon were "absolutely terrified of [secretary of Defense Donald] Rumsfeld," Perry explains. That included the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Air Force Gen. Richard Myers. At a Fall 2002 White House briefing, Myers muzzled his doubts as Rumsfeld pushed the Iraq war plan on President Bush: "You could see him struggling, but then his face fell and you could see he'd decided to remain silent." Down the chain, however, flag officers in commands around the globe were less reticent. Several replied with frustration to a "warning order" to prepare for war with Iraq. A senior naval officer who received the order recalls widespread frustration in the upper echelons of the military: "People were angry, really angry." One admiral wrote back to the Pentagon, "What the hell are we doing?" After several such messages, the Joint Staff had to send a second memo reaffirming the first, which one planner described as the "'keep your mouth shut' order."

Perry is a gifted storyteller, as this anecdote suggests. His prose is crisp and his narrative well-crafted. He is a master of the character sketch, whether of

politicians or of generals and admirals. This reviewer knows several of the men Perry describes and finds his word portraits both revealing and accurate. Perry is a journalist by trade, and if, as his profession likes to boast, journalism is the first draft of history, this would be a very good start. The problem is that he has billed the book as more than just journalism.

His aim is to provide “an account of the internal battles between America’s highest-ranking military commanders and the nation’s most powerful and senior civilian officials” from the end of the Cold War to the end of the Obama presidency. He chose that period because “the US military ... engage[d] in a series of military adventures that cost it thousands of lives and trillions of dollars.” Perry wants to know why. Answering this question requires an appreciation for the history of civil-military relations in all their complexity. And while he has produced a ripping good narrative, his book fails to answer its central question — or even to investigate it with rigor.

Perry sets the scene with the passage of the transformative 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act and the Joint Chiefs chairmanship of Adm. William J. Crowe, who is something of an icon for him. What follows is a page-turning, fly-on-the-wall chronicle of high command from Desert Storm to the election of Donald Trump. The story is compelling, but unsettling, because the United States has achieved few, if any, unmitigated victories during the period.

According to Perry, Crowe’s strategic ideal, realized at the end of the Cold War, was to build a military so formidable that it could win without having to fight. He laments American involvement in small wars from Somalia and Kosovo to Afghanistan and Iraq. The problem, in Perry’s mind, is America’s predilection for

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“nation building,” which he and Crowe believe is “fated to fail.” And while politicians reflexively recoil from nation building, “for thirty years America’s elected officials have required the military to do exactly that.”

Antipathy toward “nation building” is a reliable rhetorical whipping boy, not least because it can connote just about any military initiative one dislikes. To argue that nation building is fated to fail requires more than a dose of historical amnesia. By starting his narrative in the mid-1980s, Perry allows himself to forget, for example, the spectacular successes of American assistance to war-torn countries after World War II, in both Europe and Japan. Moreover, nation building may be defined as any constructive actions a victorious force takes after conquering its enemy. To avoid nation building after a victory would seem to require one of two options: leave the vanquished enemy in a Hobbesian state of nature, or refrain from starting war in the first place. Perry doesn’t say which of these he prefers, but I suspect it is the latter.

Which brings me to the second malady Perry identifies, a dearth in the post-Cold War era of senior officers willing to say “no” to the president when he desires to launch another military adventure. The author waxes nostalgic for the kinds of generals America used to produce — from George Washington to Ulysses Grant to John Pershing, and, best of all, the “military pantheon” who won World War II. He doesn’t explain how or when those former generations negated the desires of their civilian bosses and thereby ensured victory. Likewise, Perry doesn’t tell us what has changed to make modern military leaders so feckless. He does relate an anecdote in which an outgoing President Clinton warned incoming George W. Bush: “Whatever you do, never appoint a strong chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.” Perry notes that Clinton learned that lesson from Colin Powell, who was the

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only general in this era ever to tell a president “no,” and that was over the issue of gays in the military, not a question of war and peace. The author also suggests that Bush and his successors took that lesson to heart.

Once again, Perry’s naïveté springs from a lack of historical perspective. Politicians have been choosing military leaders for political reasons since the American Revolution. The Continental Congress foisted so many political hacks on Washington that he threatened to resign. Abraham Lincoln appointed Grant general-in-chief only after receiving credible and repeated assurances that Grant had no desire to run for president. Pershing got the top job in the Great War because Woodrow Wilson considered other more senior officers politically unreliable. Especially since Douglas MacArthur’s serial insubordination and final relief by Harry Truman, presidents have realized that generals bear close scrutiny. Indeed, they have often sought out military leaders who are generally in agreement with their policy agendas. Civilian control of the military has quite often taken the form of presidents attempting to corral their top brass.

A larger flaw in his book is that Perry betrays a blinkered view of the norms of civil-military relations in a democracy. He desires top brass who will tell the president “no’ when they think he is heading in the wrong direction. At the very least, he wants generals who will say “yes, sir, but.” He traces the troubles of the past three decades to a lack of flag officers who would stand up to their commanders-in-chief. But civil-military relations don’t and aren’t supposed to work that way. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs does not say “no” to the president. He offers his best military advice in the Oval Office or the National Security Council. He provides the president with options to achieve his policy aims. The CENTCOM commander provides plans to fight a proposed war in the

Middle East. And if the president asks either of them if the war is a good idea, they should feel quite free to give strategic and political reasons why it is not. But if the president says “go,” it is a close cousin to a *coup d'état* for his generals to say “no.”

In addition to its lack of historical context and analytical rigor, *The Pentagon's Wars* also suffers from an over-reliance on anonymous sources. Just look at the anecdote that commenced this review. The sources for the direct quotations were the author's interviews with a “senior CIA officer,” a “senior retired US Navy officer,” a “senior retired US Army officer,” and a “senior US Army officer.” Perry doesn't just use such sources in this instance, but in every chapter. Background sourcing is permissible for a journalist working within a news organization with a reputation for editorial integrity. Such institutions protect their credibility with rigorous fact checking and strict rules demanding multiple-source confirmation. But Perry is working outside such institutional restraints to write a work of history. Historians work alone — without the institutional imprimatur of say a *Washington Post* — within a professional peer-review system that demands that they show their work. Most historians want to know who, exactly, said what to whom.

Ultimately, Perry's narrative arrives at a simplistic conclusion, that the failures of the past quarter century can be traced directly to a persistent lack of military statesmanship in the Pentagon. But the problem has not been a lack of four-star backbone. Perhaps, as Tom Ricks has argued, American difficulties stem from a

modern reluctance to relieve generals for failure on the battlefield.²⁰ Or maybe, as Jeremi Suri concludes, it is because the modern presidency, potent as it is, is just expected to do too much, leaving presidents to react to crises rather than plot long-range strategy and policy.²¹ Then again, it could be that administrations occasionally make serious mistakes in planning and strategy, like in Iraq in 2003, despite a great deal of helpful advice and dissent.

Perry's work never fulfills the promise of its subtitle: *The Military's Undeclared War against America's Presidents*. In chapter after chapter, Perry portrays generals and secretaries and national security advisors and presidents wrestling with thorny strategic issues. These debates have almost always taken place within the councils of government, not in the media. That is as it should be. There are several theories about how civil-military relations should work. Eliot Cohen calls the process an "unequal dialogue" between civilian superiors and their military advisers.²² I refer to such give-and-take as a "continuous negotiation."²³ Whatever one calls it, vigorous debate about policy and strategy, while sometimes tense or even unpleasant, is a sign of a healthy civil-military relationship. And this is where Perry's argument is most flawed. American problems over the past thirty years have not stemmed from a war by generals on their presidents, but from a civil-

²⁰ Thomas E. Ricks, *The Generals: American Military Command from World War II to Today* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012).

²¹ Jeremi Suri, *The Impossible Presidency: The Rise and Fall of America's Highest Office* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

²² Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: The Free Press, 2002).

²³ Matthew Moten, *Presidents and Their Generals: An American History of Command in War* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014).

military dialogue that has often lacked the needed vigor and rigor to produce sound strategic thinking.

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