



Principals with Agency: Assessing Civilian Deference to the Military

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When and why do civilian policymakers defer to military expertise? Although scholars agree that civilian deference to military expertise is important to assess the health of civil-military relations, there is much less agreement over the causes of deference, especially whether it is the product of structure or agency. Using cases of policy disagreements over special operations forces, cyber operations, and nuclear strategy and force structure, we argue that civilian deference is not merely a product of the structure of the information environment. Although civilians defer when the military has a near monopoly on information, they also defer in cases when military expertise competes against civilian knowledge and analysis. In other words, civilian deference is not a byproduct of civilians' access to information — it is a choice over which civilians have agency.

There is little doubt that civilian leaders often defer to military expertise. Congress, for example, tends to boost defense spending based upon inputs from the service chiefs, going so far as to request each year a list of “unfunded requirements” that the military wants but which are absent from the president’s budget request.¹ Despite their commitments to wind down the war, both Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump eventually deferred to the military on keeping troops in Afghanistan.² And many civilian leaders over the years have followed the military’s preferences on social issues, resulting in delays in integrating the armed forces, accepting gay and lesbian servicemembers, and allowing women to serve in combat roles.³

But is this deference by civilian decision-makers primarily structural, i.e., do civilian leaders defer to the military because they depend on the military’s expertise and have little access to outside or competing sources of expertise? Or is it more a function of agency — do civilians choose to defer to the military? In other words, if civilians have competing sources of expertise made available to them, are they more likely to opt for policy choices that contradict military preferences, or will they still defer to the military?

To shed light on this question, we focus on three cases in which U.S. presidential administrations had to form an opinion for an emerging policy choice, but in the context of different information environments. The first case has to do with the use of special operations forces during the Reagan and George W. Bush administrations. This example provides a base line for understanding civil-military interaction when the military has a near monopoly on expertise. As expected, civilian leaders in both administrations deferred to the military. The other two cases involve how cyber operations were viewed and used from the Reagan administration through the Obama administration, and Obama’s efforts to change U.S. nuclear policy. In each case, there existed expertise oligopolies, in which civilian leaders had multiple credible sources of information in addition to the military. And yet, civilian leaders eventually adopted the military’s policy preferences in both cases, even though those preferences were in direct opposition to those initially expressed by the president.

If civilian leaders defer to the military even under such different conditions, this suggests that the military’s dominance when it comes to policy decision-making is something that civilians choose and is not imposed on them by how much access they have to information. Although the cases presented here

1 Sharon K. Weiner, *Managing the Military: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and Civil-Military Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 121, 147.

2 Bob Dreyfuss, “The Generals’ Revolt: Rolling Stone’s 2009 Story on Obama’s Struggle with His Own Military,” *Rolling Stone*, Oct. 28, 2009, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/the-generals-revolt-rolling-stones-2009-story-on-obamas-struggle-with-his-own-military-200776/>.

3 “Most Continue to Favor Gays Serving Openly in the Military,” Pew Research Center, Nov. 29, 2010, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2010/11/29/most-continue-to-favor-gays-serving-openly-in-military/>.



indicate that a variety of different bureaucratic and partisan political incentives are at play, collectively they suggest that civilian control cannot necessarily be strengthened by a decision-making structure that forces competition between bureaucracies, experts, or preferences. In other words, civilian control is limited not by structure, but by choice.

Efforts to strengthen civilian control should focus on understanding the political clout of military expertise rather than on making structural changes aimed at increasing civilian access to competing sources of information and analysis. Civilians weigh military expertise more heavily than expertise from other sources. This is not because they believe military expertise to be substantively superior in every possible instance, but rather because it is politically challenging to oppose military advice and often politically beneficial to align with military opinion. Although the cases presented below are only able to eliminate the lack of access to alternative sources of expertise as an explanation for civilian deference to the military, our analysis suggests that the political sway of military expertise is the most likely explanation for civilian deference.

Structure or Politics?

In order to maintain healthy civil-military relations in a democracy, elected officials must exercise control of the military. Scholars concerned with civilian control can evaluate the strength of that control by examining instances when civilian policymakers and military officers disagree. In such cases, decisions should reflect civilian preferences. If they do not, it likely means that civilian leaders are losing control of their military agents.⁴

Certainly, for civilian control to be meaningful, civilians must exercise choice independently on a routine basis rather than allowing the military to dictate those choices. There is a difference between choosing to defer for political benefit and deferring

out of ignorance or a lack of power. The latter is a concern because it would suggest that civilians are in a structurally weaker position than the military. But for civilians to choose deference because it is beneficial, or at least avoids harm, would suggest that political incentives are unhealthy for civil-military relations.

Deference generally refers to yielding to another's judgment. There are many reasons for one person or entity to defer to another, ranging from a clear superiority in knowledge to relative status. Certainly, few scholars of civil-military relations argue that civilians should never defer to military expertise. Civilian governments keep professional armed forces to develop and maintain expertise about national defense. But outsourcing, and therefore deferring to, technical military expertise does not obviate civilian responsibility to evaluate military advice against the full range of governing considerations. Yet, there is empirical evidence that political leaders sometimes defer to the preferences of military advisers for political reasons.⁵ Military expertise provides policymakers with political insulation from criticism: Deferring to the military passes the buck to another responsible party, should things turn out badly.⁶ The military's popularity and apparent partisan neutrality also give its preferences credibility that helps partisans win arguments — or inhibits them from opposing military-endorsed courses of action. In addition, the American public is hesitant to question the military's expert judgment. For example, when it comes to using military force, polls show that over the last two decades the public has become more inclined to trust the military rather than civilian leaders.⁷ The public's representatives thus surmise that aligning with the military can gain them approval with their constituents and bolster their position in policy battles within an administration or between it and Congress.⁸

While scholars agree that civilians tend to defer to the military, there is plenty of disagreement

4 Deborah D. Avant, *Political Institutions and Military Change: Lessons from Peripheral Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994); Michael C. Desch, *Civilian Control of the Military: The Changing Security Environment* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); and Peter D. Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

5 Christopher P. Gibson and Don M. Snider, "Civil-Military Relations and the Potential to Influence: A Look at the National Security Decision-Making Process," *Armed Forces and Society* 25, no. 2 (Winter 1999): 193–218, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X9902500202>; and Elizabeth L. Hillman, "Outing the Costs of Civil Deference to the Military," *Journal of Homosexuality* 60, no. 2–3 (2013): 312–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2013.744675>.

6 This is common practice in Congress regarding use-of-force decisions. See James M. Lindsay, "Deference and Defiance: The Shifting Rhythms of Executive-Legislative Relations in Foreign Policy," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (September 2003): 530–46, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1741-5705.00005>; and James A. Baker, III and Warren Christopher, *National War Powers Commission Report*, Miller Center of Public Affairs, 2008, <http://web1.millercenter.org/reports/warpowers/report.pdf>.

7 Ronald R. Krebs and Robert Ralston, "More Deferential but also More Political: How Americans' Views of the Military Have Changed Over 20 Years," *War on the Rocks*, Nov. 17, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/11/more-deferential-but-also-more-political-how-americans-views-of-the-military-have-changed-over-20-years/>.

8 Although there is evidence that politicians overdetermine the benefits of military endorsements. James Golby, Kyle Dropp, and Peter Feaver, *Military Campaigns: Veterans' Endorsements and Presidential Elections*, Center for a New American Security, Oct. 15, 2012, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/military-campaigns-veterans-endorsements-and-presidential-elections>.

as to what constitutes excessive deference. Some analysts worry that the military often has “undue influence” over policy, putting democratic control over the armed forces at risk.⁹ Many practitioners, however, particularly those in uniform, tend to fret more about excessive civilian control. Recurring debates about civilian “micromanagement” of the military pivot on the assumption that the military ought to have an irreducible degree of autonomy from civilians.¹⁰

There is also disagreement over how to ensure civilian control. Some argue that the solution is an improved decision-making structure, while others insist that it requires a societal shift such that military expertise carries less political clout.¹¹ Yet another argument is that Congress is the culprit. When legislators insist on prioritizing a formal role for military advice, they risk downplaying the advice of civilian defense experts or other voices in the policy evaluation process.

Irrespective of these disagreements, explanations of military influence over policy typically focus on information, especially military expertise.¹² The barriers to acquiring military expertise — especially combat experience and detailed technical training available only to those in uniform — give military actors a near-monopoly on certain information about military capabilities, operations, and tactics. Because this information — and the judgments derived from it — is often essential to the national security policymaking process, civilians must turn to the military in order to gain access to it.

Civilian reliance on military expertise gives the military opportunities to influence policy in

at least two ways. First, military actors can hide information. The literatures on principal-agent problems and legislative oversight both observe that delegating tasks also delegates real-time knowledge of whether and how those tasks are being implemented.¹³ Military actors may omit certain information or present data in a biased way, while civilians have few means to access or validate that information independently.¹⁴ Theorists prescribe civilian monitoring to incentivize agents — in this case the military — to comply and to uncover and punish non-compliance.¹⁵ But if the military is successful in maintaining its monopoly on information, it can also control (or at least dominate) the information necessary for effective oversight. Second, because military advisers have a monopoly on the expertise that is relevant for actually using force, they can limit policy choices by giving their opinion about what military operations are and are not possible to execute.¹⁶ Some scholars argue that this ability extends beyond evaluating proposed options and includes more comprehensive framing of potential policies and decisions.¹⁷ In this way, the military can engineer the direction it prefers to receive from the civilian leadership.

But are civilians simply outmaneuvered because of information asymmetries? Or would having competing sources of expertise make it more likely that civilians would choose alternatives to what the military recommends? The answer to these questions will have different implications for how to understand and strengthen civilian control. If civilians simply lack information in certain circumstances, then making adjustments to clas-

9 Gibson and Snider, “Civil-Military Relations and the Potential to Influence.”

10 Mara E. Karlin, *The Inheritance: America's Military After Two Decades of War* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 2022).

11 For a discussion of the growing norm of deference to military expertise, see James Golby and Mara Karlin, “Why ‘Best Military Advice’ Is Bad for the Military—and Worse for Civilians,” *Orbis* 62, no. 1 (Winter 2018): 137–53, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2017.11.010>. In contrast, the Goldwater-Nichols Act, for example, assumed the preferences of the combatant commanders would be more influential in policy choices if the decision-making process were formally changed to include their inputs. See Archie D. Barrett, *Reappraising Defense Organization* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1983).

12 Feaver, *Armed Servants*; Janine A. Davidson, Emerson T. Brooking, and Benjamin J. Fernandes, *Mending the Broken Dialogue: Civil-Military Relations and Presidential Decision-Making*, Council on Foreign Relations, 2016, <https://www.cfr.org/report/mending-broken-dialogue>; and Risa A. Brooks, *Shaping Strategy: The Civil-Military Politics of Strategic Assessment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

13 For a review of principal-agent theory, see Susan P. Shapiro, “Agency Theory,” *Annual Review of Sociology*, no. 31, (2005): 263–84, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.31.041304.122159>. See also Mathew D. McCubbins and Thomas Schwartz, “Congressional Oversight Overlooked: Police Patrols Versus Fire Alarms,” *American Journal of Political Science* 28, no. 1 (February 1984): 165–79, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2110792>.

14 Scholars also note that the military's expertise monopoly is reinforced by the classification-related secrecy surrounding it. “The information classification system vastly eases the task of an agent who wishes to keep inconvenient information from being disseminated.” Peter Feaver, *Armed Servants*, 71.

15 Feaver, *Armed Servants*, 87–94.

16 Jeff W. Legro, “Culture and Preferences in the International Cooperation Two-Step,” *American Political Science Review* 90, no. 1 (March 1996): 118–37, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2082802>.

17 Richard K. Betts, *Soldiers, Statesmen, and Cold War Crises* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977); Richard H. Kohn, “How Democracies Control the Military,” *Journal of Democracy* 8, no. 4 (October 1997): 140–53, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/how-democracies-control-the-military/>; and Cori Dauber, “The Practice of Argument: Reading the Conditions of Civil-Military Relations,” *Armed Forces & Society* 24, no. 3 (Spring 1998): 435–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X9802400306>.

sification policies or investing in educating and training civilians more could rebalance the policy influence of civilian and military actors. However, if civilians defer to the military regardless of the information environment, then such remedies will only address the symptoms and not the disease.

To better understand the degree to which civilians control, defer to, or are manipulated by military expertise, we focus on variations in access to information. We review three cases where presidential administrations sided with military preferences on important national security questions, but under different structural conditions. First, we examine special operations forces and the role of the military's near-monopoly on expertise in convincing civilians to embrace these forces as an independent military capability. The other two cases involve information oligopolies — situations in which civilian decision-makers had access to other credible sources of information that contradicted the military. In deciding to shift from the defensive to the offensive use of cyber capabilities, multiple presidential administrations had broad access to alternative sources of expertise from both the public and private sectors. Yet, military preferences prevailed. Similarly, Obama was firmly committed to reducing the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. national security and his administration considered a variety of contending arguments from government and private sector sources. But ultimately the outcome was the one favored by the military. These cases span the Reagan to Obama presidential administrations, providing insight into current civil-military dynamics while grounding the analysis in longer historical trends.

In each case, we examine multiple policy formulation processes. For our discussions of special operations forces and cyber capabilities, we look at the approaches taken by two different presidential administrations. For the case of nuclear weapons, we examine three policy processes that took place during the course of Obama's eight years in office. Collectively, these examples demonstrate the difficulty that civilians have in turning their preferences into policy.

Although the military's monopoly on expertise is a structural feature of many aspects of the policy-making environment, civilian principals do in fact have agency. They can change the access they have to information and seek out contending sources of expertise. However, they frequently choose not to do so, or they ignore the additional advice they are given, both for political and bureaucratic reasons. This indicates that civilian deference to the military is a choice — it is not inevitable.

Special Operations Forces: Defining the Mission

Although America's special operations forces (SOF) have been around since World War II, they were seen for many decades as niche capabilities that augmented regular conventional forces. It wasn't until the late 1980s that their mission solidified into that of an independent military force used for irregular or low-intensity conflict or crisis response. This shift happened under two very different presidential administrations — the Reagan and George W. Bush administrations — and during two very different geostrategic contexts — one, heightened Cold War competition with the Soviet Union, and the other, global counterterrorism operations.

Both Presidents Ronald Reagan and Bush entered office generally ignorant about special operations and SOF. But by the end of each administration, SOF had expanded their institutional capacity dramatically. Under Reagan, a small group of special operators were able to work with congressional staff to force the Reagan administration to accept a more robust and reorganized SOF enterprise. From this foundation, SOF were able to convince the Bush administration more than a decade later that they had a unique mission distinct from and independent of the conventional military.

In both administrations, civilian policy choices about SOF were informed almost entirely by the special operations community itself. Military voices dominated not only the supply of information but its interpretation and application to contemporary events, most specifically the invasion of Grenada and the response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The civilian leadership showed little interest in finding alternative sources of information, opting instead to adopt SOF's preferences as their own.

This case would seem to support the conventional wisdom that having a monopoly on expertise equates to having power over policy outcomes. But upon closer examination, it suggests that this happens not because civilians are overpowered by the military's superior command of information and expertise, but because they choose to adopt the military's preferences.

From Conventional War to Low-Intensity Conflict

When Reagan took office, SOF had received little attention from civilian leadership aside from their role in the 1980 failed Iran hostage rescue attempt. Although a small cadre of retired intelligence analysts and special operations officers joined Reagan's campaign and inserted the "revitalization of

special operations forces” into the defense plank of his platform, only a handful of civilians in the administration had any real expertise in this area.¹⁸

The military’s top leaders preferred that SOF be seen as part of conventional warfighting.¹⁹ But within the Army, a small community was laying the groundwork for a mission shift. The Army had become the military’s — and the country’s — main locus of research and innovation on special operations. It embraced two elements of the late Cold War security environment that increasingly seemed to demand capabilities for which the Army was ill-suited: terrorism and so-called low-intensity conflict. In the early 1970s, the Army began to build its SOF capacity, reestablishing two Ranger battalions, expanding Special Forces units, and creating the counterterrorism-focused Delta force. An Army base, commanded by Army Gen. Dick Scholtes, became home to the first major inter-service SOF command. The Army’s Training and Doctrine Command was a particular center of activity and knowledge in this area. In 1985, its Center for Low-Intensity Conflict led the Joint Low-Intensity Conflict Project, which focused on the missions that were assigned to special operators.²⁰

After the Iran hostage rescue mission failed in 1980, a study panel composed entirely of active-duty and retired generals and admirals recommended the creation of a multi-service organization to eliminate some of the pitfalls that led to the disaster. The result was the creation of the Joint Special Operations Command, the main mission of which was to “plan and conduct military operations that would counter terrorist acts.”²¹

Despite all the studies and new organizations developing inside military institutions, civilians in the Reagan administration didn’t seek very much information on SOF — least of all Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, who rejected the idea of small numbers of forces conducting operations below the threshold of major conventional war.²² The revitalization of SOF looked increasingly like empty rhetoric and, despite the Army’s support for SOF, the other services and the Joint Staff

harbored suspicions of SOF from the Vietnam War and the Iran hostage rescue debacle. SOF sought out more receptive civilians.

Noel Koch, the principal deputy assistant secretary for international security affairs in the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy and a Vietnam veteran, became a major SOF booster because his military assistant, a Special Forces colonel, convinced him. Koch then began to lobby Weinberger and the military service chiefs for larger budgets and more missions for SOF. Worried that the military would dismiss his advocacy because he was a civilian, Koch created the Special Operations Policy Advisory Group, a collection of retired senior generals and flag officers.²³ He also established a special planning directorate that reported directly to the undersecretary for policy, allowing him to skip the normal coordination process within the Department of Defense and submit plans directly to the deputy secretary of defense.

But Koch’s bureaucratic maneuvers might have led to nothing without the U.S. invasion of Grenada in 1983. The invasion itself was entirely consistent with the view that SOF existed to complement conventional operations, a view echoed in after-action analysis by Weinberger. But for special operators, it was another example of how not to conduct an operation. Disagreements between the services led to contradictory planning, incomplete intelligence collection, and operational delays. As the vanguard force, SOF took the brunt of the surprise resistance from the Grenadians, making up 68 percent of the nine-day war’s killed-in-action casualties.²⁴ SOF’s objections to the way the war was conducted were the minority among overall military opinion, but they found a receptive ear in Congress. Concerns about the seemingly avoidable casualties in the Grenada operation prompted Congress to consider SOF reforms as part of the ongoing broader effort to encourage service cooperation that would eventually lead in 1986 to the Goldwater-Nichols Act. But even though Grenada provided legislators with the motivation for reform, it was active and retired members of the so-called “SOF Liberation

18 Retired Gen. Richard Stillwell was the chief architect of the “SOF revitalization” campaign, which made its way into the first Reagan defense review but did not appear to achieve any lasting programmatic or organizational effects.

19 Steven Emerson, *Secret Warriors: Inside the Covert Military Operations of the Reagan Era* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1988), 38–39.

20 *Joint Low-Intensity Conflict Project Final Report*, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, Fort Monroe, VA, 1986, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA185970.pdf>.

21 “Rescue Mission Report,” Joint Chiefs of Staff, Special Operations Review Group, 1980, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/i/iran-hostage-rescue-mission-report.html>.

22 Caspar Weinberger, “U.S. Defense Strategy,” in *The Reagan Foreign Policy*, ed. William G. Hyland (New York: New American Library, 1987), 194.

23 Susan L. Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare: Rebuilding U.S. Special Operations* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1997), 82.

24 Mark Moyer, *Oppose Any Foe: The Rise of America’s Special Operations Forces* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 179.



Front” who shaped the legislative process and the legislation itself.²⁵ As Senate Armed Service Committee staffer Jim Locher later wrote, “current and former special operators and their civilian supporters” were a major source of ideas and information for legislators and staffers.²⁶ The SOF Liberation Front eventually succeeded in convincing Congress to create U.S. Special Operations Command and its civilian counterpart in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict. Both were created over the objections of Weinberger and without support from Reagan. It was the creation of U.S. Special Operations Command that provided the institutional foundation that would allow SOF to maneuver themselves into major strategic documents as experts in low-intensity conflict rather than as an addendum to regular conventional forces.

A Niche of One's Own

The George W. Bush administration initially appeared a likely supporter of SOF having an independent role in future conflicts. As a candidate, Bush campaigned on the transformation of the military into a more “agile, lethal, readily deployable” force.²⁷ His first secretary of defense, Donald Rumsfeld, translated this into an emphasis on technologically advanced capabilities. Between the president’s promise that the force would be more agile, and the secretary’s promise that it would be equipped with high-technology tools, SOF faced two dangers. One was that they would no longer be “special” if the rest of the force became lighter and more deployable. The other danger was that the regular conventional military would merge new technologies and mobility with old assumptions about conventional war. This would put SOF’s mission right back to where it was in the 1970s: to complement the conventional force.

Rumsfeld’s knowledge of SOF was minimal and outdated. He had been secretary of defense before, from 1975 to the beginning of 1977, when SOF were arguably at their institutional nadir. SOF’s secrecy, especially secrecy about the counterterrorism capabilities they had begun building in 1977, gave Rumsfeld little opportunity to learn deeply about SOF until he returned to the Pentagon’s E ring and gained access to closely held information. He therefore started his second tenure as secretary neither in favor of nor opposed to SOF.

After the terrorist attacks on 9/11, the SOF community’s self-promotion, rather than Rumsfeld’s instincts, shaped the secretary’s views about what SOF was capable of. He wanted the entire military, but especially the Army, to deliver immediately on the president’s vision of a light, deployable force to invade Afghanistan. SOF’s smaller units and the Joint Special Operations Command’s emphasis on rapid deployment made them the first responders. But the evidence shows that, over time, Rumsfeld came to equate SOF with counterterrorism. He even pushed the foreign security capacity-building capabilities out of SOF to free them to concentrate on “more upper-tier tasks—reconnaissance and

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The creation of a separate command for special operators gave SOF independent intelligence-gathering, analytical, and strategic planning staffs, centralizing information about SOF into a single military organization. Although the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict was intended to provide civilian expertise and oversight, in practice the two organizations became symbiotic, with the latter highly dependent on SOF for the information necessary to develop policy expertise and U.S. Special Operations Command dependent on Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict to advocate for it with the secretary of defense. SOF had managed to secure a lasting institution for themselves with civilians’ help.

25 It is unclear who coined the term “SOF Liberation Front,” but it appears to have been a derogatory reference to the advocates for SOF inside the Department of Defense. See Moyer, *Oppose Any Foe*, 180.

26 James R. Locher, III, “Congress to the Rescue: Statutory Creation of USSOCOM,” *Air Commando Journal* 1, no. 3 (Spring 2012): 33–39.

27 George W. Bush, “A Period of Consequences,” transcript of speech delivered at The Citadel, Charleston, SC, Sept. 23, 1999, http://www3.citadel.edu/pao/addresses/pres_bush.html.

direct-action [capture or kill] missions.”²⁸ This reflected not just SOF’s ideas about what they were for, but a specific part of the SOF world: Joint Special Operations Command.

Rumsfeld was not the only one who adopted this view of SOF as a capture-kill force. The Bush administration in general accepted SOF’s view of itself as a force of man-hunters, a fact reflected in how SOF operated in the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq: largely independent of regular conventional forces. Where SOF acted as the offensive element of counterinsurgency efforts, conventional forces tended to follow SOF’s lead rather than vice versa. SOF also steadily expanded their numbers and budget because of their increased operations, not just in Iraq but elsewhere around the world.²⁹ Thus, an administration that began with no particular preference with regard to SOF came to rely on them extensively for exactly the type of missions that SOF had envisioned for itself for over 20 years. Civilians, whose predecessors had deferred to the conventional force’s views on SOF during the Reagan era, were now deferring to SOF.

Enduring Independence

For both the Reagan and George W. Bush administrations, civilian leaders derived most of their knowledge about special operations and the forces that conducted those operations from military sources. Uniformed proponents and opponents of SOF supplied different storylines, but civilian leadership had few sources of information outside of the military. Even civilian analysts were highly dependent on special operations organizations for information about everything from training and equipping to the operations themselves. The relevant expertise was not in a technology that existed separately from the military but in the people conducting the operations — as U.S. Special Operations Command puts it, not in “hardware,” but in “humans.”³⁰ Because it was impossible to study special operations without being granted access to the special operators, knowledge was restricted and controlled by SOF.

Because the Bush administration prioritized the number of terrorists killed, it tended to approve SOF concepts of operations, which emphasized

intelligence-driven direct action. Although White House overseers were sometimes unsure about the efficacy of SOF-led direct action, they had few sources of alternative proposals. The only non-military alternative source of information about SOF-like capabilities was the CIA. After some initial bureaucratic competition between the Department of Defense and the agency over the war in Afghanistan, SOF adopted a “flood the zone” approach, putting itself in every possible intelligence headquarters and downrange outpost. They operated alongside the CIA and conducted their own operations at a volume and speed that dominated both the actual battlespace and the flow of information about that battlespace to policymakers.³¹

However, civilians in the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the White House never lost their formal authority to limit or change SOF activities. Secretaries of defense approved deployment orders, successive National Security Councils reviewed counterterrorism strategies that emphasized SOF capabilities and activities, and civilians expanded SOF’s size and funding across multiple budget cycles. Civilians also controlled the selection of the commanders for Special Operations Command — and, for that matter, the service chiefs and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Moreover, although SOF itself controlled much of the information necessary to build expertise about special operations, the special operations community could not entirely control how the information they released was analyzed. Critiques of SOF and counterproposals were difficult to make entirely credible, but not impossible, especially as the wars ground on.

Both the Reagan and Bush administrations presided over a significant shift in the role of SOF. Both administrations adopted SOF’s own preferences for what its mission should be. The conventional military offered a wholly different vision of warfare, arguing that SOF should be subordinate to larger missions, rather than independent from them. SOF believed they provided capabilities for a different kind of war and, in the wake of 9/11, civilians found that argument convincing. Civilians’ adoption of SOF’s argument showed how civilians, rather than concoct their own recipes, can turn to the military for menu-planning. During the Reagan and Bush years, SOF solidified their claim to an

28 Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown: A Memoir* (New York: Penguin Group, 2011), 654.

29 *Special Operations Forces: Opportunities Exist to Improve Transparency of Funding and Assess Potential to Lessen Some Deployments*, U.S. Government Accountability Office, July 2015, <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-15-571>.

30 “SOF Truths,” United States Special Operations Command, accessed Sept. 22, 2022, <https://www.socom.mil/about/sof-truths>.

31 Christopher J. Lamb and Evan Munsing, *Secret Weapon: High-Value Target Teams as Organizational Innovation* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2011), <https://inss.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/inss/Strategic-Perspectives-4.pdf>; and Stanley McChrystal, *My Share of the Task: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 2013).

independent role as the sole provider of a unique mission capability. This is a military preference that civilians have continued to leave largely unquestioned today. Even as U.S. operations in Iraq and Afghanistan wind down and America's foreign policy shifts back to state-based military competition, SOF continue to focus on counterterrorism, and civilians continue to think of SOF as *the* counterterrorism force.³²

Certainly, SOF's monopoly on expertise in these examples had preponderant influence over the policy outcomes. But was this because there were few alternative sources of expertise and thus less criticism of the advice offered by the SOF community? Or did civilian leaders find it politically convenient to make SOF an independent counterterrorism force? As a small, capable force, SOF offered civilian policymakers a military option that was less likely to demand large-scale, politically costly deployments or prompt battles with Congress. In fact, Congress was the early ally of SOF and presented the White House and the Department of Defense with ready access to funds in a context of little public pushback on the use of SOF.

From Cyber Defense to Cyber Warfare

Civilian leaders from the Reagan to the Obama administrations entered office all sharing a general preference to keep the Department of Defense's cyber capabilities focused on defense, security, and resilience missions. Throughout these decades, civilian policymakers thought of cyberspace as a civilian jurisdiction. Even as cyber capabilities advanced from computer network defense to exploitation to attack, U.S. civilian leaders preferred to uphold a norm of state non-aggression in the cyber domain. But a joint U.S.-Israeli cyber attack on Iranian infrastructure using the Stuxnet virus revealed that civilian leaders had adopted a new preference, one that endorsed at least certain kinds of cyber-based aggression. Civilian deference to

military expertise played a large role in that shift.

In contrast to the SOF case, civilian leaders have always had multiple non-military sources of expertise to help them to formulate cyber policy. Much of the domestic economy relies on the internet, and many of the technical innovations in computer networking come from the private sector. Thus, the military's expertise and preferences regarding cyber issues are counterbalanced by civilian expertise and preferences. For years, civilian policymakers and politicians consulted civilian sources of information to a greater extent than they solicited military expertise.³³ Despite these different sources of information and varying levels of expertise, cyber policy follows a similar pattern to SOF policy: Over time, civilians increasingly deferred to the military's cyber policy preferences.

This case traces the evolution in cyber defense policy from the first term of the George W. Bush administration to the first term of Obama's presidency. This period illustrates how two very different presidents shifted their thinking about military cyber capabilities — from a defensive tool to an offensive one.

A Focus on Security

The Bush administration entered office thinking about cyber issues much the way previous administrations had: as ways that the civilian economy and infrastructure could be made vulnerable. The 2003 *National Strategy to Secure Cyberspace* bore this perspective out, using the words “vulnerability” or “vulnerabilities” over 100 times and focusing on measures to shore up weaknesses in data security and to protect infrastructure. The priorities listed in the document included, “reducing the potential damage” from cyber events and “prevent[ing] cyber attacks with the potential to impact national security assets.”³⁴

This basic framing led civilian leaders to approach cyber issues as matters of security and defense. The notion that the United States should

32 SOF may even have suffered catastrophic success in shaping civilians' preferences regarding their major roles and missions, as civilians have failed to redefine SOF's purpose away from counterterrorism even as they have de-emphasized its importance in national strategy. Shannon Culbertson and Alice Hunt Friend, *Special Obfuscations: The Strategic Uses of Special Operations Forces*, Center for Strategic and International Relations, March 6, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/special-obfuscations-strategic-uses-special-operations-forces>.

33 This had to do at first with the dominance of both civilian parts of the Department of Defense and the private sector in the development of networked computing. The Advanced Research Projects Agency, a civilian organization in the Defense Department with connections to academia and the science and engineering sectors, developed the technology that became the internet. The private sector continued to develop computing networking capacity for commercial purposes, adopting the technology much more rapidly than the military services. At the Pentagon itself, expertise was concentrated in the civilian assistant secretary of defense for command, control, communications, and intelligence (ASD C3I). See Jason Healey, ed., *A Fierce Domain: Conflict in Cyberspace, 1986 to 2012* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 2013); and Fred Kaplan, *Dark Territory: The Secret History of Cyber War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016). In the first national-level policy document regarding computer networks and national security, the Reagan administration emphasized the importance of the private sector as a partner. *National Security Decision Directive Number 145: National Policy on Telecommunications and Automated Information Systems Security*, The White House, Sept. 17, 1984, National Security Archives, accessed Sept. 22, 2022, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/21567-document-01-ronald-reagan-national-security>.

34 *The 2003 National Strategy to Secure Cyberspace*, The White House, February 2003, 3, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/pcipb/>.

deter or respond to cyber attacks with commensurate destructive cyber actions did not appear either in the new president's own words nor in official national strategy documents. Instead, civilian leaders preferred to make American networks impervious, or at least resilient, to cyber threats. Offensive uses of cyber tools were not in the civilian lexicon.

Bush and the civilians around him in his administration relied on the newly created Department of Homeland Security for cyber policy and the information that underwrote it. And the department inherited much of its own thinking about cyber issues from a long history of civilian-dominated computer expertise both in and out of government. The 2003 strategy, which was drafted largely at the Department of Homeland Security, emphasized public-private partnerships, observing that most of the critical infrastructure that was vulnerable to computer network exploitation and attack was not even in government hands.

Military organizations, however, were concluding that cyberspace had become both a territory to defend and a new kind of warzone. In 2006, the Joint Staff produced its *National Military Strategy for Cyberspace Operations*, an update to Defense Department thinking about how the military services and the combatant commands should integrate cyber issues and capabilities into military campaigns and planning. The document defined cyberspace as a military operational "domain," analogous to the air, sea, and land domains, and emphasized the benefits of offensive capabilities, which would provide "opportunities to gain and maintain the initiative."³⁵ It provided a military definition of "computer network attack," and went on to describe cyber warfare as an "emerging concept." Moreover, although the Bush White House had designated the Department of Homeland Security as the lead government agency on national cyber security issues — following the precedent set by the Reagan administration to give the Defense Department a distinctly secondary role in national computer network defense — the 2006

strategy expanded the military's role in federal cyber activities. "[The Defense Department] may conduct cyberspace operations across national boundaries" the document asserted, and "will partner with ... Federal departments and agencies to further [Defense Department] cyberspace operations."³⁶

Despite the Department of Defense's embrace of the idea that cyberspace was a warfighting domain, the White House continued to rely on alternative sources of information. In one of his final policy statements about cyber issues, Bush again made clear that the Department of Homeland Security was in the lead, and that the military's role was restricted to defending its own networks.³⁷ The memorandum also specified that "cyber threat, vulnerability, mitigation, and warning information" would be developed and distributed according to the National Infrastructure Protection Plan, another Department of Homeland Security-owned document and process.³⁸ Bush and his administration left office with their preference to focus cyber capabilities on defensive measures intact.

Shifting to the Offense

When Obama entered office, he saw cyber threats as an "economic national security" issue.³⁹ Like his predecessor, he worried about cyber vulnerabilities in commerce, communications, and critical infrastructure. Although his administration did not produce a national cyber strategy until two years into its first term, it persisted in expressing similar preferences to those held by Bush. The administration focused so much on the importance of global cooperation that when the strategy was released it was named the *International Cyber Strategy*. Regardless, the document called for building "network resilience" and promised that "we will exhaust all options before [using] military force whenever we can."⁴⁰ Moreover, it highlighted the importance of federal collaboration with the private sector, including for "technical information sharing."⁴¹

35 "National Military Strategy-Cyber Operations" Department of Defense, U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2006, 10, <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=35693>.

36 U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, "National Military Strategy-Cyber Operations," 2.

37 "National Security Presidential Directive-54: Cybersecurity Policy," The White House, Jan. 8, 2008, <https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/nspd/nspd-54.pdf>.

38 The National Infrastructure Protection Plan is updated in full every three years. The plan that is relevant to the 2008 National Security Presidential Directive-54 would have been the 2007/2008 update: *National Infrastructure Protection Plan: 2007/2008 Update*, Department of Homeland Security, August 2008, https://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/nipp_update_2007_2008.pdf. The document noted that the Department of Homeland Security's National Cybersecurity Division was responsible for coordinating cyber security measures across the government.

39 Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at the Cybersecurity and Consumer Protection Summit," Stanford University, Feb. 13, 2015, Obama White House Archives, accessed Sept. 22, 2022, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/13/remarks-president-cybersecurity-and-consumer-protection-summit>. "So shortly after I took office, before I had gray hair, I said that these cyber threats were one of the most serious economic national security challenges that we face as a nation, and I made confronting them a priority."

40 *International Strategy for Cyberspace: Prosperity, Security, and Openness in a Networked World*, The White House, May 2011, 9, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/international_strategy_for_cyberspace.pdf.

41 The White House, *International Strategy for Cyberspace*.

Meanwhile, a cyber attack against the Defense Department only reinforced the military's belief that offensive cyber warfare capabilities would need to become a prominent part of U.S. cyber strategy. In fall 2008, spying software infiltrated classified systems on an American base in the Middle East, gaining access to operational plans, among other sensitive information.⁴² The incident spurred military actors, particularly those who had previously worked at the National Security Agency — home to the government's leading experts in cryptology and computer-based spying — to lobby for the creation of a cyber-focused combatant command.⁴³ To avoid redundancy, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates co-located the new Cyber Command with the National Security Agency and made the director of the National Security Agency and the commander of Cyber Command one and the same. The director position had long been filled by senior military officers, but by giving that role command authority over a combat organization, Gates gave the military the institutional capacity it needed to start taking the kinds of actions outlined in the 2006 *National Military Strategy for Cyberspace Operations* at scale. It also enormously expanded the military's control over the information that the government both generated and collected regarding activities in cyberspace.

Around the same time, the United States was launching a cyber operation that hewed far more closely to the military's preference for offensive uses of cyber capabilities than to the defensive preferences previously expressed by the White House. Although the U.S. government has never taken responsibility for the Stuxnet "worm" that destroyed centrifuges in Iranian nuclear facilities over the summer of 2009, numerous cyber forensic analysts and investigative journalists have attributed the attack to the United States.⁴⁴ Most significant about the malware was its ability to cause damage in the physical world — a first for cyber capabilities.

The substance of the debate over the offensive uses of cyber capabilities has remained largely out

of public view. But there are enough hints about the internal bureaucratic struggle to suggest that civilian leadership in the Obama administration long opposed launching cyber offensives. News reports from Obama's first term portrayed a fierce interagency debate, with the Justice Department, State Department, and the CIA "resisting" military action, and the Department of Homeland Security arguing that it should remain in control of cyber operations, in any case.⁴⁵ In 2011, for example, Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano gave a pointed speech at the University of California's engineering school, asserting that "at DHS, we believe that cyberspace is fundamentally a civilian space."⁴⁶ Even after the Stuxnet operation, civilian agencies continued to be suspicious of offensive uses of cyber capabilities, especially by the military.

What accounts for the Obama administration's embrace of the first known major offensive cyber operation, then? The divergence between Obama's defense-and-resilience approach to cyber strategy and what it was willing to do with cyber weapons, as evidenced by Stuxnet, raises questions about how civilians understood cyberspace and from where they derived that understanding. Stuxnet was not an anomaly, but the beginning of a new approach to cyber capabilities. By the end of Obama's second presidential term, his secretary of defense publicly acknowledged that the military used "offensive cyber operations" against the Islamic State.⁴⁷ Obama also reportedly came to embrace the use of offensive cyber tools against North Korea.⁴⁸ Over time, then, he began to embrace the kinds of offensive uses of cyber capabilities first described in the 2006 strategy on cyber operations.

Embracing Cyber War

The cyber case demonstrates how civilian officials, despite having access to alternative sources of information and expertise to form their policy preferences, eventually deferred to the military

42 William J. Lynn III, "Defending a New Domain: The Pentagon's Cyberstrategy," *Foreign Affairs* 89, no. 50 (September/October 2010): 97–108, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20788647>.

43 Kaplan, *Dark Territory*.

44 Kim Zetter, "An Unprecedented Look at Stuxnet, the World's First Digital Weapon," *Wired Magazine*, Nov. 3, 2014, <https://www.wired.com/2014/11/countdown-to-zero-day-stuxnet/>.

45 Ellen Nakashima, "Cyber-Intruder Sparks Response, Debate," *Washington Post*, Dec. 8, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/national-security/cyber-intruder-sparks-response-debate/2011/12/06/gIQAxLuFgO_story.html.

46 William Jackson, "DHS Secretary: 'Cyberspace Is Civilian Space,'" *Government Computer News*, April 27, 2011. Napolitano's deputy, Jane Holl Lute, echoed the remarks in a co-authored op-ed that year. Jane Holl Lute and Bruce McConnell, "A Civil Perspective on Cybersecurity," *Wired*, Feb. 14, 2011, <https://www.wired.com/2011/02/dhs-op-ed/>.

47 Ash Carter, *A Lasting Defeat: The Campaign to Destroy ISIS*, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, October 2017, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/lasting-defeat-campaign-destroy-isis>.

48 David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, "Trump Inherits a Secret Cyberwar Against North Korean Missiles," *New York Times*, March 4, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/04/world/asia/north-korea-missile-program-sabotage.html>.



about using cyber tools to attack a foreign country. The conditions for the shift were an increase in military institutional capacity — and therefore increased military control over information — and a shift in global uses of cyber tools, including network exploitation and attack capabilities and an increase in aggressive cyber activities by adversary states and groups. Cyber attacks therefore became easier for the military to conduct just as cyberspace became more anarchic.

As military institutions, and in particular Cyber Command, expanded their cyber capacity and began supplying information for policy debates, civilian political leaders continued to rely on civilian sources of information and expertise, including the private sector, for innovations in data, network, and infrastructure security. Rather than creating a competitive information environment, this approach divided cyber policy between cyber security and cyber warfare, freeing the Defense Department from its supporting role in national policy and giving it wider latitude over intelligence and cyber operations. Even though civilians never lost access to a diverse range of non-military sources of

information and analysis, both inside and outside government, and even though civilian institutional views remained deeply skeptical of offensive uses of cyber tools, the military's view that the best cyber defense was a good cyber offense prevailed in at least the few publicly revealed cases.

The split between cyber security and cyber war allowed the military to claim its traditional monopoly of expertise on capabilities used in the context of conflict. At the same time, classification became a means for those with knowledge of cyber operations to restrict broad access to information — a point of leverage for Cyber Command and an opportunity for busy senior civilian leaders to defer to military judgment.⁴⁹ Accompanying the institutional shifts was political change, as America's vulnerability to aggressive foreign and non-state cyber campaigns became another area where political leaders risked being weak on national defense. Political risk induced civilian leaders to cede more and more authority to military institutions that specialized in cyber operations.

49 Jason Healey and Robert Jervis, "Overclassification and Its Impact on Cyber Conflict and Democracy," Modern War Institute, March 22, 2021, <https://mwi.usma.edu/overclassification-and-its-impact-on-cyber-conflict-and-democracy/>. See also U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, *Examining the Costs of Overclassification on Transparency and Security: Hearing Before the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform*, 114th Cong., 1st sess., Dec. 7, 2016, <https://sgp.fas.org/congress/2016/overclass.pdf>.



Changing Nuclear Policy

Obama came into office with a clear preference about nuclear policy: to reduce America's reliance on nuclear weapons.⁵⁰ After less than three months in office, he used his first major foreign policy address to articulate his dream of a nuclear-free world. Speaking to a packed square in central Prague, Obama noted the 10th anniversary of the Czech Republic's admission to NATO and called for international cooperation to eliminate nuclear weapons — "the most dangerous legacy of the Cold War."⁵¹ The unresolved question was how to do this. Moreover, the president himself cast doubt on the feasibility of his goal by also telling the audience in Prague that abolition was a goal that "will not be reached quickly — perhaps not in my lifetime." Nonetheless, throughout Obama's presidency, his administration continued to search for ways to change U.S. nuclear strategy, targeting options, and force structure to reduce the size of the arsenal as well as the country's reliance on nuclear weapons. But after eight years, few enduring changes had been made and certainly not the more sweeping revisions that were considered, and rejected, during Obama's two terms.

Examined here are three central instances in which the Obama administration attempted to translate preferences about nuclear weapons into concrete policy changes: the 2010 *Nuclear Posture Review*, a review of nuclear weapons employment guidance, and a "mini-nuclear posture review" conducted in 2016. In its decision-making process, the administration relied heavily on military expertise. But civilian expertise was also plentiful. It was sometimes in sync with the president's preferences and at other times allied with those of the military. In the end, however, Obama proved unwilling to adopt policy changes that contradicted the views of the military.

Trying to Implement the Prague Agenda

The Obama administration had a first crack at translating the Prague speech into U.S. nuclear policy with its nuclear posture review. Since 1994, each incoming administration has conducted its own review of the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. policy and the appropriate strategy and force structure for enabling that role.⁵² The Obama nuclear posture review was released in April 2010 and was the first such review to result in a detailed unclassified summary.⁵³ The review process was ultimately led by Jim Miller, the principal deputy under secretary of defense for policy. Although it included the Joint Staff, the Obama-era process relied much less on military expertise than the two previous reviews had, and much more on civilian advisers in the White House. Also influential were several non-governmental organizations and outside experts, such as the Arms Control Association and former Secretary of Defense Bill Perry, who pushed for less reliance on nuclear weapons. In the end, even though the administration lost on two key debates, it did succeed in making several significant changes to the review's language and, in general, administration officials thought that the review established a path for subsequent changes in strategy and force structure.⁵⁴ That victory, however, turned out to be largely rhetorical and fell short of the lasting change that Obama sought.

The 2010 *Nuclear Posture Review* verbally reduced the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. security by shifting the focus from fighting and winning a nuclear war, to discouraging proliferation, securing nuclear materials, and preventing nuclear terrorism. It also brought back a version of so-called negative security guarantees in which the United States pledges not to use nuclear weapons against states without nuclear weapons, if those states are abiding by their commitments under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.⁵⁵

Obama proved willing to hold up the review process to get concessions from the Departments of

50 Obama had long been interested in nuclear issues. As a senior at Columbia University, he wrote an article about a nuclear-free world. As a U.S. senator, he was mentored by Sen. Richard Lugar in the dangers of the aging Soviet nuclear stockpile. See William J. Broad and David E. Sanger, "Obama's Youth Shaped His Nuclear-Free Vision," *New York Times*, July 4, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/05/world/05nuclear.html>.

51 Barack Obama, "Remarks by President Barack Obama in Prague as Delivered," transcript of speech delivered in Hradcany Square, Prague, Czech Republic, April 5, 2009, Obama White House Archives, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-prague-delivered>.

52 Prior to Obama, there were two previous nuclear posture reviews — one produced in 1994 by the Clinton administration and the second produced in 2002 by the George W. Bush administration. Both were classified, although portions of the 2002 review were leaked.

53 *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, Department of Defense, April 2010, https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/NPR/2010_Nuclear_Posture_Review_Report.pdf.

54 Author interview with Jon Wolfsthal, Aug. 20, 2020.

55 The Trump administration's 2018 nuclear posture review also adopted the Obama review's language about negative security assurances. Prior to the Obama nuclear posture review, U.S. policy had been based on "strategic ambiguity" — by not limiting the use of nuclear weapons, such a policy implies that they might be used to respond to biological, chemical, or cyber-weapon attacks.

Defense and Energy. When the initial draft of the review hewed to more traditional thinking about nuclear weapons, Obama rejected it.⁵⁶ Although the review was initially drafted primarily by Brad Roberts, the deputy assistant secretary of defense for nuclear and missile defense policy, the task was eventually given to Miller. In contrast to Roberts, Miller was a proponent of making more radical changes in nuclear policy and had written his Ph.D. dissertation on how to reduce nuclear arsenals.⁵⁷ Additionally, the release of the nuclear posture review was delayed twice, mainly because of a disagreement over language about limiting the role of nuclear weapons.⁵⁸

Under declared U.S. policy, nuclear weapons have been seen as a possible response to a variety of nuclear and non-nuclear threats. Presidents have also consistently reserved the right to use them first in a conflict. In contrast to this precedent, Obama's deputy national security adviser, Ben Rhodes, favored a no-first-use policy, a pledge that limits the use of nuclear weapons to responding to an attack.⁵⁹ Obama, Miller, and Vice President Joe Biden, among others, were inclined toward no first use or sole purpose — a related policy under which nuclear weapons are reserved for use only in response to a nuclear attack.⁶⁰ Adopting either policy would have had the effect of reducing America's reliance on nuclear weapons by reserving them for deterrence of existential threats to the United States, rather than using them for warfighting or in a limited war. Gates, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and Gen. Kevin Chilton, the head of U.S. Strategic Command, were all opposed to making such changes. Their main concerns were that such a shift would reduce flexibility, cause allies to question U.S. security guarantees, and make it harder to respond to exigencies involving targets that might disappear.⁶¹ Eventually, Obama himself suggested compromise language that was ambiguous enough to satisfy most parties. The 2010 *Nuclear Posture Review* states: "The fundamental role of U.S. nuclear weapons, which will continue as long

as nuclear weapons exist, is to deter nuclear attack on the United States, our allies, and partners."⁶² (italics added)

In the debate over no first use, Obama repeatedly heard arguments from a variety of well-established civilian experts. Although the military was vocal in its opposition to making this change in America's declaratory policy, military expertise did not dominate decision-making. And yet, despite his own preferences, Obama decided not to go against the combined opposition of the military and two of his cabinet members. His administration thought that it would get other opportunities to make lasting significant changes to U.S. nuclear policy during the implementation of the review.⁶³ As the next section explains, this proved not to be the case.

Making Changes to Targeting

In November 2011, Obama ordered a review of the nuclear employment guidance that provides the military with the rules and objectives that link nuclear weapons to specific strategies, launch options, and targets. This "90-day review," also referred to as the "NPR implementation study," focused especially on how to reduce the size of the arsenal in preparation for the next round of arms control negotiations with Russia that were expected to follow on from the New START Treaty. Announced just before the release of the *Nuclear Posture Review*, New START reduced U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals by 30 percent to an upper limit of 1,550 strategic nuclear warheads.⁶⁴ But Obama wanted to go lower.

Directed by Miller, the implementation study involved repeated in-depth discussions between the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the National Security Council staff, and U.S. Strategic Command. The new combatant commander, Robert Kehler, gave detailed briefings on the nuclear war plan over a four-month period.⁶⁵ That expertise was met with a variety of challenges from civilians, who

56 Peter Beaumont, "Barack Obama Orders New Nuclear Review amid Growing Feud," *The Guardian*, Feb. 27, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/feb/28/barack-obama-nuclear-review>.

57 James Miller, *Approaching Zero: An Evaluation of Radical Reductions in Superpower Nuclear Arsenals*, (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1989).

58 Josh Rogin, "Nuclear Posture Review Delayed Until Mid to Late March," *Foreign Policy*, Feb. 25, 2010, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/02/25/nuclear-posture-review-delayed-until-mid-to-late-march>.

59 Fred Kaplan, *The Bomb: Presidents, Generals, and the Secret History of Nuclear War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 231.

60 For Miller's preferences, see Kaplan, *The Bomb*, 229–30.

61 Kaplan, *The Bomb*, 228–32; and Michal Smetana, "A Nuclear Posture Review for the Third Nuclear Age," *Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (2018): 142, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2018.1520554>.

62 Kaplan, *The Bomb*, 231; and Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, April 2010, VII, (emphasis added).

63 Author interview with Jon Wolfsthal, Aug. 20, 2020.

64 Shannon Bugos, "New START at a Glance," Fact Sheet, Arms Control Association, April 2022, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/NewSTART>.

65 Kaplan, *The Bomb*, 238.

argued for changes in targeting policy that would enable nuclear reductions and a decreased reliance on launch on warning, a strategy that allows the launch of nuclear weapons upon detection of an incoming nuclear attack and before that attack is confirmed by detonations on U.S. soil.

In particular, Jon Wolfsthal, Obama's National Security Council director for arms control and non-proliferation, argued for a strategy of minimum deterrence that would make deterrence of existential threats the basis for sizing forces rather than targeting for warfighting or limiting damage.⁶⁶ Prominent in these discussions was a report from two Washington, D.C.-based non-governmental organizations that provided a detailed analysis of targeting under a strategy of minimum deterrence.⁶⁷ The National Security Council staff also adopted a new strategy for challenging the military's expertise. Burned by a previous review of Afghanistan policy in which the military provided the president with options, only one of which — the military's preference — was obviously suitable, this time the National Security Council staff provided specific numbers of weapons and asked the military to explain what the consequences would be for targeting.⁶⁸

Although the Joint Staff was initially quite reluctant to do the analytical work to consider different arsenal sizes, eventually the military's analysis showed that all necessary targets could be covered with an arsenal containing fewer warheads than allowed under the New START Treaty. Such a reduction would have been possible because of revised targeting guidelines that focused on key facilities.⁶⁹ But Kehler and the service chiefs said that they would publicly endorse reductions only if Russia made similar cuts.⁷⁰ Gates, too, said that he opposed unilateral changes.⁷¹

The employment guidance review would take almost two years to complete and would end with a rejection of any further reductions to the nuclear

arsenal. Overall, Obama's employment guidance was much the same as that produced by earlier administrations.⁷² According to Fred Kaplan's research and analysis of the targeting review, despite Obama's preference for reducing the nuclear arsenal, he did not want to go against the Joint Chiefs of Staff for fear that doing so would jeopardize their support for other policy changes that he had in mind.⁷³

One Last Chance

Late in the summer of 2016, the administration tried again to reduce America's reliance on nuclear weapons, this time by considering reductions in intercontinental ballistic missiles and the adoption of a no-first-use doctrine. Although there were many possible options for furthering the agenda that Obama had laid out in Prague, these two items had gotten the most traction among the arms control community. Former Secretary of Defense Perry was a vocal advocate of no first use, and intercontinental ballistic missiles were considered the most politically vulnerable leg of the triad because they had little strategic value outside of an all-out nuclear war.⁷⁴ Obama favored both policy ideas, and yet ultimately he adopted neither. This outcome was not due to a lack of credible expertise in support of making such changes but, instead, to opposition from key cabinet secretaries, allies, and the military. In this case, military expertise was part of a larger coalition that made it politically difficult for the president to act on his preferences.

On the intercontinental ballistic missile question, there were multiple sources of expertise that supported the president's preference for reducing the arsenal. The arms control community had repeatedly laid out the dangers of the intercontinental ballistic missile launch posture, including that these missiles could be launched on warning as a result of a misunderstanding or miscalculation.

66 Kaplan, *The Bomb*, 240–41; and author interview with Jon Wolfsthal, Aug. 20, 2020.

67 Hans M. Kristensen, Robert S. Norris, and Ivan Oelrich, *From Counterforce to Minimal Deterrence: A New Nuclear Policy on the Path Toward Eliminating Nuclear Weapons*, Federation of American Scientists and the Natural Resources Defense Council, Occasional Paper No. 7, April 2009, https://pubs.fas.org/_docs/occasionalpaper7.pdf.

68 Author interview with Jon Wolfsthal, Aug. 20, 2020.

69 Hans M. Kristensen, "Options for Reducing Nuclear Weapons Requirements," Federation of American Scientists, Feb. 11, 2013, <https://fas.org/blogs/security/2013/02/nukeoptions/>.

70 Kaplan, *The Bomb*, 242.

71 Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Random House, 2014), 407.

72 For an analysis, see Hans M. Kristensen, "Falling Short of Prague: Obama's Nuclear Weapons Employment Policy," *Arms Control Today*, September 2013, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2013-09/features/falling-short-prague-obama%E2%80%99s-nuclear-weapons-employment-policy>.

73 Kaplan, *The Bomb*, 243–44.

74 Because of their payload, intercontinental ballistic missiles are not useful for limited nuclear strikes. Additionally, because they are vulnerable to destruction by incoming Russian missiles, there are widespread concerns that intercontinental ballistic missiles would have to be launched on warning and before the circumstances of hostilities are clear. This "hair trigger alert" posture was seen by the arms control community as the most likely way to inadvertently start a nuclear war.

Inside the White House, the Office of Science and Technology Policy, led by science adviser John Holdren, outlined options for how to reduce intercontinental ballistic missile modernization spending by reconsidering the need for new missile rocket engines. Wolfsthal, now the National Security Council's director for arms control, supported reconsidering elements of the modernization plans, including those for these missiles. Just prior to the 2012 election, Obama had endorsed eliminating some intercontinental ballistic missiles but postponed that decision because of concerns that it would hurt the reelection prospects of Jon Tester, the Democratic senator from Montana.⁷⁵

The Air Force supported maintaining the current arsenal size. It also argued that delaying intercontinental ballistic missile modernization would lead to increased expenses due to the need to replace parts of the missiles.⁷⁶ Although the military had previously determined that it could reduce the size of the arsenal without making sacrifices to strategy or target coverage, it had not analyzed specific reductions in the intercontinental ballistic missile fleet. In October 2010, the president asked Secretary of Defense Ash Carter for this analysis. Carter initially refused the request, arguing that the size of the arsenal was already set.⁷⁷

[D]espite Obama's preference for reducing the nuclear arsenal, he did not want to go against the Joint Chiefs of Staff for fear that doing so would jeopardize their support for other policy changes that he had in mind.

Eventually, Obama accepted the recommendation of the National Security Council and did not reduce the size of the intercontinental ballistic missile force or delay its modernization. The problem was not a lack of experts who supported these options but rather that the Department of Defense — both the secretary as well as senior military advisers — were opposed.

Obama's preference for a no-first-use policy

had a similar fate. Although Holdren and Wolfsthal supported adopting the policy, Carter opposed it and was joined by Secretary of Energy Ernest Moniz, whose department includes nuclear warhead research, design, and production. Secretary of State John Kerry agreed with them, based upon concerns from allies about the reliability of U.S. defense commitments under a policy of no first use. According to Kaplan, at the crucial National Security Council meeting on making this decision, the military representative — Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Joseph Dunford — played a minor role.⁷⁸

The End of the Prague Agenda

In each of these instances, the president had a clear preference for making a change to America's nuclear policy. The president had access to credible sources of civilian expertise that challenged the positions and analysis provided by military experts. And in one review process, the military itself presented analysis that supported the president's preferred policy outcomes, although it nevertheless withheld its endorsement of the proposed change. Yet, Obama refused to make policy choices to which the military was opposed.

Part of the explanation for this has to do with Obama's focus on process. Rather than making a unilateral decision, Obama insisted on using the National Security Council's Principals Committee process. This allowed cabinet members, some of whom opposed the specific policy changes favored by the president, to make their arguments while sidelining the views of White House staff and advisers, who generally supported the president's preferences. Another

factor was the split in the president's cabinet. The secretaries of defense, energy, and state opposed making reductions to the nuclear inventory and adopting a no-first-use policy. Certainly, it would have been politically difficult for the president to go against the preferences of these senior officials and the military, and doing so would have reduced his leeway for pursuing other policy changes. And yet, in other policy decisions, Obama had proved

75 Bryan Bender, "Politics Tangles Nuclear Review: Election May Alter Timing of Obama's Plan to Cut Arsenal," *Boston Globe*, April 30, 2012, http://archive.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2012/04/30/politics_tangles_nuclear_review/.

76 United States Air Force, "Cost Comparison of Extending the Life of the Minuteman III Intercontinental Ballistic Missile to Replacing it with a Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent," Department of Defense briefing, July 2016, 4–6.

77 Kaplan, *The Bomb*, 250–51.

78 Kaplan, *The Bomb*, 254.

willing to go against these cabinet officials.⁷⁹

In seeking to change nuclear policy, Obama went to considerable effort to get the military to not only endorse his preferences but also to provide analysis in support of his views. In other words, the president wanted the military to endorse his preferences, but he also wanted military expertise as the analytical basis for changing America's nuclear weapons policy. Regardless of why Obama failed to stick to his own preferences on nuclear policy, it appears that having credible contending sources of expertise was not enough for the president to go against the military's preferences.

Does Expertise Matter?

To understand civilian control of the military, it is important to study the sources of civilian deference to the military. Our aim was to focus on one possible reason for civilian deference: the information environment. The cases presented above demonstrate that, although having a wider range of information sources may bolster civilian independence from military expertise, civilian leaders nevertheless often defer to military preferences regardless of the availability of alternative sources of information and expertise. This finding is especially true once the military institutionalizes its own expertise — as it did in the SOF and cyber cases. At that point, civilians tend to adopt preferences that mirror those of military institutions, even when policymakers still have a range of non-military sources of information.

Our findings also suggest that the civil-military relations literature should not continue to assume that information asymmetries prevent civilian decision-makers from developing and pursuing policy preferences independent from the military. In all three cases, civilians embraced military preferences regardless of the depth of their commitment to alternative policies and regardless of contending independent sources of information and expertise. When there was credible civilian expertise coming from civilian agencies that competed with the

views offered by the military, civilians did engage with these alternative perspectives, but the military's preferences still eventually prevailed. This suggests that it is not the quality or availability of information that determines civilian defense policy choices, but rather who wields the information. Civilians are deferring to the military by choice, not because they lack divergent sources of expertise.

The availability of competing sources of expertise does not necessarily strengthen civilian control, measured as the ability of civilians to implement their preferences. This, of course, raises the question of what explains this civilian deference to military preferences. An institutionalist hypothesis would suggest that civilians are more likely to accept military preferences if they come from organizations that have a strong sense of mission. Such institutions are simply more persuasive because their preferences are strongly held and there is little internal dissent. For example, the creation of Joint Special Operations Command and U.S. Special Operations Command facilitated special operators' persistent advocacy for counterterrorism and direct-action activities. The same is true in the cyber case, where the military's advocacy became stronger once Cyber Command was established.

Another possible explanation for civilian deference is that military expertise is politically powerful. The literature on civil-military relations has long acknowledged that political imperatives create important incentives for civilian action.⁸⁰ Yet, few studies explore how extensively electoral incentives affect civilian control of the military. Civilians may be willing to outsource not only decisions but also the development of policy preferences to military institutions because those institutions have deep and broad credibility with the public and government elites alike. Civilians may believe that deferring to military expertise will yield electoral rewards, shield them from electoral consequences in the case of failure, or enable them to build coalitions to prevail in policy battles with other civilians.⁸¹ This appears to have been the case for Obama and his attempts to change U.S. nuclear policy. The president realized that he had to pick


79 For example, in 2009, 2010, and 2011, Obama repeatedly overruled Gates and cut the defense budget. At the time, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Michael Mullen was on record as stating that the defense budget should properly play a role in deficit reduction. See Sharon K. Weiner, *Managing the Military: The Structure of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and U.S. Civil-Military Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), chap. 7. Against initial opposition from Moniz, Obama proposed the termination of the Mixed Oxide Fuel Fabrication Facility, an expensive project that would turn former Soviet weapons plutonium into nuclear reactor fuel. Obama also overruled Clinton on a variety of foreign policy issues. For examples, see Aaron Blake, "The 6 Big Issues where Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama Disagree," *Washington Post*, June 9, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2014/06/09/the-6-big-issues-where-hillary-clinton-and-barack-obama-disagree/>.

80 Samuel Huntington himself explored the ways that the division of civilian power in the American government structures civilian control and prevents civilians from separating military institutions from politics. Samuel P. Huntington, "Civilian Control and the Constitution," *American Political Science Review* 50, no. 3 (September 1956): 676–99, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1951551>.

81 Michael Kenwick and Sarah Maxey, "You and Whose Army? How Civilian Leaders Leverage the Military's Prestige to Shape Public Opinion," Working Paper, last revised December 2020, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3686738.

and choose his battles with the military because their political clout meant he could only persuade, not command.

Finally, civilians may abdicate policy control to military actors because they simply wish to focus their attention elsewhere and they trust the military's judgment enough to do so.⁸² That was certainly the case for members of Congress regarding special operations during the Reagan years. However, the opposite was true for Obama and nuclear policy. In that case, the administration repeatedly sought out contending sources of expertise because it did not trust the military bureaucracy to present honest options.

Our goal was not to explain why civilians defer to the military but to refute a frequent assumption: that this deference is due to a lack of expertise. Our analysis shows that deference is not, in fact, a function of access to information. In each of the examples of civilian deference given at the beginning of this article — budget decisions, withdrawal from Afghanistan, changes to military personnel policy — civilian leaders have demonstrated the ability to overrule military objections. Thus, stronger civilian control is unlikely to result from broadening debates over national security policy to include other sources of expertise, as some have suggested. Instead, civilian control turns on the politics of national security choices. As long as military expertise carries political weight, decision-makers will have incentives to defer to military opinion as a way to win or avoid partisan battles over policy. 

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82 The comparative literature in civil-military relations has begun to find evidence of civilian inattention in other democratic states. See David Pion-Berlin and Harold Trinkunas, "Attention Deficits: Why Politicians Ignore Defense Policy in Latin America," *Latin American Research Review* 42, no. 3 (October 2007): 76–100, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lar.2007.0031>; and David Pion-Berlin, Igor Acacio, and Andrew Ivey, "Democratically Consolidated, Externally Threatened, and NATO Aligned: Finding Unexpected Deficiencies in Civilian Control," *Democratization* 26, no. 6 (2019): 1070–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1594197>.