

CIVIL-MILITARY CONFLICT WITHIN THE DEFENSE STRUCTURE

by

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Civil-military conflict within the US defense structure is not a new problem. Conflict between the Secretary of War and the Army Staff in Washington was a serious problem during the Civil War, and it continued to pose a problem in the years following that war. The period of our history spanning the Second World War was atypical as far as civil-military conflict is concerned. The war years from 1941 to 1945 were generally marked by the effectiveness of civil-military teamwork, particularly in view of the magnitude and complexity of the task at hand. Unfortunately, the relative harmony of civil-military teamwork did not survive the national crisis. Civil-military conflict again arose as a serious problem in the postwar years and, despite efforts to eliminate the problem, it remains with us today.

Our inability to eliminate the sources of conflict should come as no surprise. Several authorities, including Samuel P. Huntington and Lieutenant General Robert G. Gard, Jr., have identified the problem and pointed out the need for change on the part of the military. This article will review the Huntington and Gard assessments of civil-military conflict within the defense structure and attempt to determine whether their recommendations for change on the part of the military professional still appear justified. Our examination of the problem will focus on military perceptions of the military role in the defense structure and will look at recent evidence that suggests the magnitude of civil-military conflict. Understanding civil-military conflict, both its sources and our

ability to eliminate its causes, is of significant importance to national security interests, inasmuch as the elimination of such conflict could serve to increase the productivity of our defense structure.

MILITARY EXPECTATIONS VERSUS REALITY

The military professional has been conditioned by his schooling, training, and environment to expect to play a major role in managing military activities within the Department of Defense (DOD). His study of military history leads him to believe that his ultimate role, if he is successful, will be similar to that played by general officers in our past. His study of strategy leads him to believe that military strategy is made by military professionals. B. H. Liddell Hart defines strategy as the art of the general.¹ Once he becomes a general, the military professional expects to practice the art of developing strategy. Thus, the top military professional has been prepared throughout his career to expect a major role at the highest levels, a role that may no longer exist for him within our Defense Establishment.

Through his earlier training, the military professional is conditioned to exercise significant responsibility. He is given command of relatively large tactical organizations as a young man. In the Army, he commands platoons and companies as a relatively junior officer. He is responsible for as many as several hundred men and millions of dollars' worth of equipment. His success

in these endeavors is rewarded by promotion and the opportunity to command battalions and squadrons numbering many times the men and equipment he earlier commanded. He learns to make decisions and gains confidence in his judgment. Unconsciously, he expects that further promotion will lead to greater reliance upon his judgment and further expansion of his responsibilities.

Once the military professional assumes a position of responsibility on the staff within DOD, he may discover that his earlier experience, training, and schooling have poorly prepared him for the environment in which he now works. Key decisions are usually not made by the military. He exercises little or no command and control authority. His plans and programs are played off against the requirements of the other services, and he is directed by political appointees whose goals and aspirations are quite dissimilar. The cumulative effect for many military professionals has been shock and dismay. The following statements highlight some of the objections that have surfaced in defense-related publications in recent months:

The system is inundated with [civilian] challengers without responsibilities.²

We just aren't organized to run our own show. Outsiders of all sorts are into the Army's business, micromanaging us at every level.³

These are the words of Major General Vernon B. Lewis, Jr., who recently retired in protest against what he perceived to be an ineffective role for the Army Staff. He views the problem as a combination of civilian interference and emasculation of the military decisionmaking process. He describes the changes underway in the Army Staff in these words:

Having achieved management-level rank, I have been very disappointed in what I've seen. We are an institution of committee compromise—not efficiency. The Army is manipulated by everyone but its own

military leadership. The senior uniformed leaders don't seem to carry any weight. What's being created is an Army of conservatists, officers who dare not challenge the system or pursue a radical approach to problem solving.⁴

General Lewis also objects to political interference in the decisionmaking process. He cites examples of congressional staffers "unjustifiably" causing "delays and traumas" in Army programs. His decision to retire was finally prompted by the realization that the XM-1 tank design would be the result of a "political—not a military" decision.

General Lewis is not alone in his objections to the changing role of the military within the Department of Defense, nor is the area of conflict confined to Army personnel. The following comment appeared in a letter written to then President-elect Carter by Vice Admiral Gerald E. Miller, US Navy, retired:

Authority in the military profession has been seriously eroded since you wore the Navy Blue. Had you remained in the Navy and progressed to the rank of admiral (any grade), you would have expected considerable authority to go with the responsibility you were handed with your flag officer commission. I believe that you would be surprised at how that authority has evaporated today under the guise of civilian authority and control, and because of the vacuum created by waffled, compromised counsel provided to the civilian masters as a result of parochial differences within the military.⁵

Admiral Miller objects to the expansion of civilian staffs within DOD and the erosion of military control of decisionmaking within DOD. He feels that problem is partially the result of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) interservice approach to consensus formation and the proliferation of civilian staffs in the defense structure.

The significance of the Lewis and Miller statements is that both give expression to a form of civil-military conflict. Whether they reflect the general attitude of the military

community is beyond the scope of this discussion. The point is that conflict exists. The statements of both officers reflect a wide variance between expectations and reality. Both expected a greater role for the military in the decisionmaking process. Both perceived an ineffective military decisionmaking process. Both perceived erosion of military authority as civilian staffs have grown. General Lewis perceived a conflict between congressional staffers and DOD, as well as usurpation of military authority by political decisions.

SOURCES OF CONFLICT

Contemporary literature addressing the subject of civil-military conflict identifies four sources of conflict that have had major impact upon the Defense Establishment. These sources of conflict can be generally grouped in the following categories: the President versus the Congress; the political or ideological conflict between objective and subjective civilian control of the military; changing policy—the changing demands upon the United States in the international community imposing new roles and missions upon both military and civilian sectors of the government; and the expansion of technology that has severely altered capabilities and roles of civilians and military personnel in the Defense Establishment.

This list of conflict sources is by no means all-inclusive. Still another source of conflict that has emerged appears to be unrelated in substance to the conflicts and the impact of changing roles mentioned above. This form of conflict is created by the power struggle imposed upon the defense structure by virtue of the expansion of employment opportunities for rising technocrats and emerging political elites within the Defense Establishment. This expansion of civilian participation may have become an end in itself and, to the extent that it brings highly talented elites into competitive positions with the military, it serves to create conflict. We will refer to this fifth source of conflict as the “civilian opportunity push.” All of these sources of civil-military conflict merit individual examination.

In his discussion of civilian control of government, Samuel P. Huntington defines the problem in the form of the following question: “How can military power be minimized?”⁶ Huntington points out that the fundamental question of conflict between the executive and legislative branches of government is one of distribution of power between the two. Applying Huntington’s definition of the problem, a common challenge of both branches of government is to minimize military power. This challenge is complicated by the struggle between the two branches for the distribution of the scarce resources of the state. Although both branches have successfully agreed to limit military power through the National Security Act of 1947 and subsequent reorganizations within the Department of Defense, the debate over distribution of the budget brings forth serious questions concerning allocation of national resources to national defense vis-a-vis other priority programs of the administration in office. Thus, the testimony of the military can enter into the conflict between President and Congress. To the extent that the administration has successfully reflected military estimates of defense needs or neutralized military opposition through interservice compromise,⁷ the military leadership within DOD has historically supported the administration

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position. To the extent that the administration has failed to bring the military to a unified—or compromise—position early in the planning and budgeting process, the door is open for potential rivalry within DOD to be aired in congressional hearings.

Testimony before the Congress can become the forum whereby “limited” military influence within DOD is expanded through the support of congressional allies in shaping defense programs. Such “end runs,” contrary to administration intentions, have historically resulted in the reshaping of budgets and achieved a by-product of usually short-lived but intense civil-military conflicts within DOD. The elimination of the renegade military opportunists can bring the military back into line; however, the seeds of the conflict will often remain, if grounded in well-established military estimates. The challenge for the administration is to neutralize military opposition through early identification of this opposition and elimination of conflicts internally through interservice compromise, which should address both the available resources and the diverse needs of the nation.

Political Conflict

Huntington also elaborates on styles of civilian control that reflect differing ideologies to effect civilian control.⁸ He defines the two approaches as objective and subjective civilian control. The objective approach optimizes military professionalism, but it limits military access to the higher-level political decisionmaking apparatus. The subjective approach seeks to socialize the military through inculcation of civilian attitudes in the military, and it allows for the advancement of military elites who will support the liberal philosophy of the administration. According to Huntington, the objective approach is resorted to by conservative administrations, while the subjective approach has been the *modus operandi* of liberal administrations. Changes between conservative and liberal administrations confront DOD with sharply differing styles of control of the military. On

the one hand, military personnel are allowed significant latitude in the development of military programs but are excluded from decisionmaking at the higher levels. On the other hand, military personnel are restrained from exercising independent development, planning, programming, and budgeting of defense programs, and socialized military elites are allowed limited access in the higher-level decisionmaking machinery.

Huntington’s analysis reveals several sources of conflict as a result of the political or ideological conflict. The liberal approach demands an acceptance of the liberal ethic, which generally conflicts with the military ethic, requiring civilian patterns of behavior within the military establishment. Inasmuch as Huntington’s analysis was based upon patterns of behavior before and during World War II in order to demonstrate objective and subjective patterns of civilian control of the military, it appears appropriate to take Huntington’s analysis one step further in the “no-war, no-peace” era which has followed World War II. Just as we are no longer confronted by a sharp dichotomy between war and peace, so is the dichotomy between subjective and objective control blurred. The shift between liberal and conservative administrations has brought about more frequent but less pervasive shifts in styles of civilian control of the military. Conservative administrations have generally allowed the military greater independence in the planning, programming, and budgeting process, whereas liberal administrations have not allowed an extensive independent planning, programming, and budgeting process to be carried out by the military. Consequently, a change of administrations causes a shift in styles of civilian control of the military, producing relatively far-reaching changes in practice and perhaps even in the climate of the military community.

Viewed within the analytical framework provided by Huntington, the development of the Joint Strategic Objectives Plan (JSOP) and its apparently imminent revision is understandable, if not imperative. The liberal administration, applying the subjective model of civilian control of the military,

cannot allow the independent military role granted by a former conservative administration. Moreover, Huntington's analysis explains the proliferation of civilian administrators during liberal administrations, which not only place no ceiling on military advancement, but posit no floor on the proliferation of civilian specialists in order to achieve the degree of socialization deemed necessary by the liberal administration. Thus, the military is confronted with the requirement to accommodate two substantially different approaches to decisionmaking and two fundamentally different criteria toward acceptable military behavior within the bureaucracy. Consequently, the military could conceivably be out of step, by definition, upon the arrival of each new administration. The requirement to change step means new decisionmaking tools and desired behavior patterns. As the military attempts to change step, the less agile often fall by the wayside. The resulting civil-military strain is predictable.

Changing Policy

The altered role of the United States in the post-World War II international community has brought about a gradual shift in the role of its armed forces. Lieutenant General Robert G. Gard, Jr., has described the evolution in national security policy and strategy that has resulted from the new role of the nation, and he has pointed out that "Adjustments to the profound changes prove exceedingly difficult, particularly for the military."⁹

The changes described by Gard include the loss of the military's wartime autonomy and the imposition of political goals at all stages in the conduct of military operations. While US military leaders have recognized the theoretical need for their operations to conform with Clausewitzian concepts—including the subordination of military operations to political objectives—not all have grasped the full implications of the doctrine's application. The scope of limited war has greatly reduced the latitude the military formerly enjoyed in the conduct of

unlimited or general war. As Gard points out, the adjustment of the military to a more limited role has been painful, and it has caused military leaders to reappraise their role. The gradual restriction of military latitude in the conduct of limited military operations has produced open civil-military conflict, and the list of military casualties suffered in the conflict includes General of the Army Douglas MacArthur.

Changing Technology

The inability of the military to keep up with a rapidly changing technology base and the opportunities for civilian leaders to employ technological change to their advantage within DOD have produced new civil-military relationships. Richard Pipes has described the surrender of the military to civilian specialists in the former military stronghold of doctrine and military strategy. Inasmuch as the military was unable to grapple effectively with the complexities of the newly created nuclear technology, civilian specialists responded to the needs of national security: "Current US strategic theory was born of a marriage between the scientist and the accountant. The professional soldier was jilted."¹⁰

Communications advances ushered in further changes in the roles of civilians vis-à-vis the military. Modern communications technology allows political leaders to exercise a degree of control over military operations that was impossible as recently as 25 years ago. The vastly improved technology for command and control has combined with the imperatives of political objectives in a complex and potentially explosive world environment to further jilt the military, and these factors now serve to restrict military leaders from the independent command and control authority their predecessors exercised. The Secretary of Defense now calls the tune for the conduct of operations to an extent not imaginable during the Korean conflict. This shift has been perhaps the most unpalatable change for many rising military leaders, and an obvious product of this shift has been civil-military conflict.

Civilian Opportunity Push

The great changes we have just reviewed have resulted in major reorganizations of the Department of Defense and a substantial shift in the roles of both civilian and military managers in the department. The civilian workforce has expanded significantly as a result of the creation of entirely new staff agencies, and it has expanded into areas formerly staffed by military personnel. The increase in civilian job opportunities for political appointees has attracted a new breed of worker to DOD. For the first time, we see civilian personnel in significant numbers and without significant previous military experience directing military staff agencies. Inasmuch as the political appointee seeks to achieve the political objectives of the administration, which must pay a return translatable at the polls within four years, the political appointee is often at odds with the professional military staffer. Since the military staffer is prone to seek long-term building or growth of military capabilities, the civilian appointee's mandate may not be compatible with the military view. The political appointee must obtain short-term results and is often rewarded for his efforts by a higher appointment elsewhere in the bureaucracy. Thus, a pattern has appeared in which the younger civilian political appointee is seen by the military to be climbing the bureaucratic ladder, with few loyalties to the agency he directs. This perception erodes military confidence and leads to civil-military strife.

ASSESSMENT OF THE CONFLICT

The insights produced by Gard and Huntington clear away much of the mystery that clings to the ever-changing environment of civil-military relationships. Gard explains the altered world environment and the concomitant shift in military roles. Huntington allows us to view the civil-military conflict in a larger context, which reveals that substantial dimensions of the problem are beyond the reach of the military. We cannot disarm these causes of conflict

that are periodically thrust upon the military by external political forces. The role of the military elite is to comprehend the nature of these disruptive forces and to recognize that these forces are legitimate within the larger framework of our constitutional democracy—in effect, the demands of liberal elites for socialization of the military is their political prerogative as the elected officials of the nation. The nation and its elected officials decide the nature of the military establishment they will raise and equip for the defense of the state. The constitutional role of the professional military is to accommodate these demands, however disruptive they may appear from a purely military viewpoint. The parochial views of individual military leaders against political decisions to purchase a new tank or not to purchase a new bomber reflect a basic misunderstanding of political power and its role in society. The allocation of the resources of the state is by definition a political decision, and the professional military must expect that any decision that ultimately commits significant resources of the state will be political in nature.

The perceptions of General Lewis and Admiral Miller which were noted earlier confirm the observations of Huntington and General Gard. The conflicts predicted in their studies of the national security structure appear to be very real and to constitute a problem deserving our utmost attention. The problem we need to address is not the accuracy of individual complaints, however. Our interest lies primarily in the difference between the perceptions of the expected military role versus the perceptions of the actual role. The fact that a wide differential exists between the two suggests that we in the military community have, in fact, failed to keep pace with our changing society.

Closing the gap between expectations and reality requires a more mature appreciation of the constitutional limits on the military in our constitutional democracy, renewed efforts to keep pace with technological developments, and the reinforcing of attitudes among our military elites that are supportive of the political system. The British

FURTHER EFFORTS

ministries have traditionally aided parliamentary-appointed officials to rapidly adjust to the responsibilities of their new offices. Although significant differences exist in the scale of civilian appointments in the two bureaucracies, the adoption of more supportive attitudes on the part of US military professionals could greatly ease the transition of our political appointees. The inculcation of more supportive attitudes on the part of the military would require some rethinking, but minimal reshaping of curriculum within our war colleges. The benefits of the adoption of such an approach would be twofold, aiding the appointee and simultaneously better equipping the military staffer for his actual role in carrying out programs predicated upon initiatives from the political appointee. In time, the military should evolve a role in which the contribution of the military professional would be in advising his civilian superior on the merits of programs and in recommending approaches for the solution of a given problem. Once the decision has been reached, the military professional would then be responsible to loyally carry out the programs of the superior. Such an approach would be in keeping with the traditions of the military and presumably with the ethics of the civilian authority.

Despite some notable exceptions, the vast majority of our military personnel successfully make the transition from field duty to DOD staff duty. This success testifies to the fact that the socialization of our military elites has been relatively effective; however, the fact that civil-military conflict continues to erode confidence and cooperation suggests that much is still needed in our educational programs to prepare our military professionals for bureaucratic shock within DOD. Although our war colleges do allow the military professional to examine the realities of power sharing at the national level, and allow him to undertake a reappraisal of the role of the military in today's world, more effort appears to be needed to equip the military staffer to adapt rapidly to his actual role within the defense structure at the national level.

Critics and students of the US national security posture have pointed out the scope and complexity of potential conflict within the Defense Establishment. Examination of the analyses and recent statements of both civilian and military critics indicate that civil-military conflict continues to constitute a serious problem. Several aspects of the problem defy easy solution. We must expect to experience changes as political administrations change. We must expect that professional military officers may differ with their superiors on the needs of national defense vis-à-vis the requirements of domestic programs. Under these circumstances, the military professional should be expected to provide expert advice in an unbiased and objective manner. If he is unable to support a given program, he must so state, and he must expect to be replaced by his civilian superiors. A danger from the military view is the gradual destruction of the military ethic through continual political demands for compromise on the part of the military. Huntington addresses this problem, and its potential impact upon the military profession deserves further study.

Our military schools and colleges need to place greater stress upon the subordination of the military in all matters political in nature, including the recognition that allocation of national resources is a political decision: The purchase of a new weapon system, for example, is inevitably a political decision and ultimately not subject to military authority. We in the military must help maximize the efficiency of the DOD staff on which we serve. We should assist in the transition of civilian authority and help new appointees understand their duties through providing military advice and helping them recognize the military implications of the programs they devise.

We must recognize that the changes seen in the last quarter century are probably irreversible. Future operations will probably be directed in detail in accordance with Clausewitz' conception of military operations. We must accept political

direction and accordingly surrender preconceptions of strategic military command and control. We must work toward adequate room for maneuver of our tactical commanders in order to be able to reap the benefit of tactical success on the battlefield.

We find ourselves in an era in which the military has greatly reduced power within our defense structure and our democratic system of government. Such was not the case when we elected to enter our profession. Yet criticizing the current state of affairs is not as constructive as working to insure that those scarce resources of our state which are allocated to national defense are protected and wisely used. This is best achieved through the support of our civilian superiors and through our wise counsel. If we successfully achieve these ends, the goals of both our civilian superiors and the American fighting man can best be attained. If the fate of the US military is to serve in lesser capacities than we had earlier thought probable, we should remind ourselves that

the continuing evolution of our state has in reality insured the viability of democratic institutions, the protection of which is the ultimate purpose behind our service.

NOTES

1. B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (New York: Praeger, 1967), p. 336.
2. F. Clifton Berry, Jr., "A General Tells Why the Army Is Its Own Worst Enemy," *Armed Forces Journal*, 114 (July 1977), 22.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. Gerald E. Miller, "An Open Letter to President-Elect Carter," *Armed Forces Journal*, 114 (December 1976), 16.
6. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 80.
7. For a discussion of interservice rivalry as a method of civilian control, see James Clotfelter, *The Military in American Politics* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 189.
8. Huntington, pp. 80-97.
9. Robert G. Gard, Jr., "The Military and American Society," *National Security & American Society*, ed. Frank N. Trager and Philip S. Kronenberg (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1973), pp. 570-78.
10. Richard Pipes, "Why the Soviet Union Thinks It Could Fight and Win a Nuclear War," *Commentary*, 64 (July 1977), 4.

