THE PRECARIOUS STATE OF CIVIL–MILITARY RELATIONS IN THE AGE OF TRUMP

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

–Alexander Hamilton, Federalist 8

Civil-military relations scholars were aflutter after the national conventions of the two major parties in 2016, in which each side deployed a recently-retired general officer to demonstrate ... Credibility? Expertise? Patriotism? It was not entirely clear. The buzz picked up again concerning the number of recently-retired or still active senior general officers/flag officers (GOFOs) that Donald Trump had tapped for his administration — retired general James Mattis for defense secretary, retired general John Kelly for secretary of homeland security and then White House chief of staff, and first retired general Michael Flynn and then active-duty three-star general, H.R. McMaster, for national security advisor (who will soon leave his position). There has been further chatter about Trump’s own avoidance of military service, juxtaposed with an almost excessive admiration of all things military (Could he have tanks for his inaugural parade? Can we have a military parade for Veterans’ Day?). Others have reacted with concern about his administration’s military personnel initiatives — including how to deal with transgender
servicemembers and whether the Marine Corps will be allowed to keep the combat ban on women — as well as about Trump’s own tendency to push both decision-making and ultimate responsibility down to field-level commanders. Take, for example, when he said that “the generals … lost [the Navy SEAL killed in Yemen].” More recently, the apparent ramping-up of the U.S. military presence in Syria, Afghanistan, and parts of Africa has continued apace, while lacking a clear and consistent strategic narrative about what this is supposed to accomplish. There is no shortage of things for observers and scholars to worry about when it comes to civil-military relations.

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

Save Us, Adults

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

“Military expertise” does not consist of a special or unique understanding of how to keep the territory and people of the United States safe and prosperous. These individuals are experts at what the U.S. military organization can do, how quickly and for how long it can do it, how many people and what kind of equipment is required, and, to some extent, how much it is all likely to cost. Many senior officers may also have specific experience or expertise that would be helpful in particular circumstances — for example, experience dealing with a particular adversary, or expertise in cyber operations — but the most important asset they bring is the ability to help policymakers understand the military tools that they have at their disposal.
But competent statecraft considers and employs other tools beyond military ones, from diplomacy to sanctions, trade, international law, and international institutions. Experts in these areas must also be part of the policy conversation. Even when the issue at hand is war, economic expertise is critical to determining how to sustain our efforts over time, how to undermine the adversary’s ability to resource its military, and how to weaken an opponent before things come to blows. Experience in diplomacy and international relations can help to evaluate whether other points of leverage can be used to trade for peace, whether we can avoid an armed confrontation, which allies would stand with us, and how we can limit the ability of others to threaten us with armed confrontations. Domestic politics is always a factor as well: What will different plans of action cost us in terms of overall national goals? What are the policy trade-offs? On what matters can we gain agreement from other government actors? While scholars of civil-military relations openly worried about the precedent and the dynamics of having so many recently retired GOFOs in the cabinet, they still, almost to a person, expressed relief about the presence of Mattis, McMaster, and Kelly. So many foreign policy experts — including a large number of conservatives and Republicans — had concerns about the new president’s lack of foreign policy experience, that most were willing to tolerate the break with norms, because the officers involved were at least competent and qualified. While the president might well have done far worse than Mattis or McMaster (the Flynn flameout is a case in point), accepting these choices may be creating a new and undesirable status quo. Moreover, it helps to validate a narrative in which uniformed general
officers are seen as more competent and trustworthy policymakers than elected or appointed civilians. Most in the national security community are simply hoping that the current situation is an exception to an important rule, not the beginning of the new normal. According to some, the senior officers on Trump's national security team (active and retired) have already devised a method to avoid following orders from the president that they consider inappropriate. Phillip Carter of the Center for a New American Security has termed it “respectful disobedience,” by which he means that “military leaders have found a formula for saluting their commander in chief while keeping his worst excesses at bay.” As evidence of this phenomenon, Carter points in particular to Trump’s attempt to overturn the Obama administration decision to allow transgender individuals to serve in the military. Carter may not have this particular decision quite right: There are other plausible interpretations for the slow-down in implementing the ban that do not imply that the military leadership deliberately shirked the president’s policy. One possibility, for example, is that Mattis and Kelly engaged Trump to explain the logistical and organizational difficulties that would be involved with an outright ban on transgender personnel and got him to issue the eventual memo tasking the Secretary of Defense with studying the issue, which Mattis then did. But Carter may nevertheless turn out to be prophetic as time goes on, and this could set a dangerous precedent. Is civilian control not eroded when senior officers simply decide not to implement decisions they disagree with? Even if many agree that this particular president’s excesses need to be curbed, surely it is unhealthy for our democracy when the military can pick and choose which
president, and which policies to heed. Furthermore, even when top military officials are not disobeying, some commentators may be tempted to spin the narrative that way. This places an extra burden onto military officers to try to keep up with the political optics of everything they say and do.

**Our Men and Women in Uniform**

Another sign that the civilian-military relationship has gone awry is a concerning trend among politicians, pundits, and the public, of using people’s respect for veterans and servicemembers to undercut political debate on non-military matters. This is bad both for the attitude of Americans toward their military and for the actual conduct of politics and governance. It could also harm the armed forces themselves by further politicizing budget debates or relationships with top policymakers. One example includes the NFL kneeling protests, where an appeal to the troops was deployed to dismiss the concerns of the protestors. Another is the debate over a shutdown and near shutdown of the government in January and February 2018, during which lawmakers argued that it was unfair to the troops and their families to have a shutdown over lack of agreement on other political issues. Yet another example can be seen in the proposed changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, or “food stamps”), where it was argued that the United States should not impose such indignity on military families who rely on SNAP. And this is only in the last six months or so.
Each of these cases has followed a well-worn pattern: A political point is raised, followed by one or both sides arguing for or against the point on the basis of how it affects servicemembers, veterans, or both. It is of course valid to be concerned about how policies, budgets, or public debates affect the people who have served this country in uniform. The problem is that this “appeal to the troops” bypasses a discussion about genuine disagreements that require political solutions. Instead of engaging in debates about whether the United States is fulfilling its promises for all its people, how the government should be funded and what it ought to spend money on, or how the state should be involved in helping the poor buy food, this tactic instead accuses dissenters of “not supporting the troops” — an unanswerable attack. Any attempt to argue that the concerns of other members of society merit as much attention as those of the military is denounced as further evidence of a lack of respect for servicemembers and veterans. What’s more, this line of argument suggests that servicemembers and veterans (and their families) matter more than other members of society. It is a perilous way of thinking because it renders unimportant things like poverty or the proper running and funding of government, except in so far as they impact servicemembers and their families. Ultimately, this implies that the only way to merit basic respect and dignity is to have served in the military or be a dependent of someone who has. Such cynical political use of American popular support for the military undermines the conduct of politics and governance.

The long-term danger is two-fold: First, the longer this pattern continues, the more likely some civilians are to resent military members. If this tactic is used too often, some people may start
questioning whether they do, in fact, support the troops, if doing so means they must concede on all of their political claims. Second, the more this approach proves useful, the more some people will become reactively and uncritically supportive of anything that has “the troops” attached to it, making it easier for politicians to manipulate them. Of course veterans and military personnel deserve things like health care, job security, funding for their programs, and aggressive poverty assistance. On the other hand, the broader issues of budgets, pay, and benefits of military service members cannot simply be declared off limits. So long as the conditions of every other American’s life are up for debate — taxes, minimum wage, unemployment protection, labor protection, disability — why should only military service members be protected from the debate? It is absolutely clear why members of the military and veterans deserve societal respect and care. It is not clear why they are the only ones who do. When politicians deflect discussion by hiding behind a sacred cow, nothing gets resolved. When grievances remain unresolved, aggrieved parties become resentful.

Where to From Here?

Civil-military relations scholars are right to worry: A political arena in which the military is deployed as a political shield has potentially dangerous consequences. When “military expertise” is seen as supreme or is allowed to go largely unquestioned — either because no one dares to question it or because there is no one with any other expertise in a position to balance it — it can have devastating implications for U.S. policy both foreign and domestic. While we are not yet at a point of crisis, left unchecked the current path might well
lead us there. It is good and healthy for uniformed servicemembers to enjoy the respect and gratitude of society, but not for a society to treat uniformed servicemembers as paragons of virtue whose opinions are always valid and whose claims on society are unlimited. What, then, can be done? First, scholars, journalists, pundits, politicians, and the engaged public should call out these trends rather than allow them to become part of the status quo. It should not be normal to expect military officers to “save us” from corrupt or inept politicians. Citizens should fight the corruption and ineptitude themselves — by engaging in the debate and by holding their elected officials in Congress accountable, for example — rather than place the burden on the military.

Second, American society must learn to talk with and about servicemembers and veterans without putting them either in the “hero” category or the “broken” category. Servicemembers and veterans are diverse groups of people with extremely diverse experiences, and they deserve to be taken as they are rather than stereotyped or mythologized. Above all, they should not be used by politicians as a way to win political arguments.

Third, scholars, policymakers, and military professionals must develop a new set of civil-military norms. Otherwise, “respectful disobedience” may fill the vacuum left by the crumbling model proposed by Samuel Huntington. He argued that military officers ought to be completely apolitical, focusing only on their technical expertise as “managers of violence.” This was predicated on a presumption, however, that a thick bright line could be drawn
between “political” problems and decisions, and “military” problems and decisions, and that this bright line could allow both policymakers and military personnel to clearly understand their remit and the limits thereof. Most experts now agree that that distinction is not realistic, leaving us without a roadmap for the future of civil-military relations. Eliot Cohen has proposed the concept of an “Unequal Dialogue” to clarify both the need for military and political actors to engage in discussion with one another and develop some mutual understanding, as well as the need for the military to remain subordinate in that relationship. Peter Feaver has argued that civilian policymakers have the “right to be wrong,” that is, the right to make policy decisions that are opposed by their military advisors, even if they turn out to be wrong, because it is the elected officials who have the moral and legal authority to make such judgments. Feaver has also noted, however, the civilian policymaker’s “right to be right,” which acknowledges that military advisors may not in fact have the best plan or understand the full picture as well as the policymaker.

But standing in the way of a truly new set of civil-military norms is a common line of thinking that leads both politicians and military leaders to believe that, as long as we can “let the military win the war,” everything will turn out well. As Americans should understand from repeated experiences, military victory does not automatically or necessarily achieve the desired political outcomes. Until we can reach a generalized understanding of how to use force as a bargaining tool, and how the political and military competencies must intermingle, there will be a dysfunctional relationship at the top of the political
system, a distorted public dialogue about American interests and America’s role in the world, and a tendency to start fights that do us no good and seem never to end.

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

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