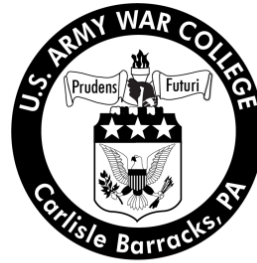


# Strategy Research Project

## Public Confidence and the U.S. Military

by

Colonel Sean McKenney  
United States Army



United States Army War College  
Class of 2012

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**PUBLIC CONFIDENCE AND THE U.S. MILITARY**

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According to major public opinion polls, the U.S. military has garnered strong public confidence since the end of U.S. military involvement in Vietnam. Two reasons for this phenomenon are acknowledged: (1) a high degree of professional competence and (2) an appropriate level of political subservience. Professional competence refers to public perception regarding the military's ability to satisfactorily accomplish assigned missions. Political subservience refers public perception regarding the military's willing acceptance of civilian directives despite institutional desires. This intent of this paper is (1) to review how public confidence increased as the current civil-military model developed; (2) discuss associated benefits; (3) to highlight the potential for public confidence to suffer as reduced resources impact the current civil-military model.





## PUBLIC CONFIDENCE AND THE U.S. MILITARY

We gather tonight knowing that this generation of heroes has made the United States safer and more respected around the world. For the first time in nine years, there are no Americans fighting in Iraq. For the first time in two decades, Osama bin Laden is not a threat to this country. Most of Al Qaida's top lieutenants have been defeated. The Taliban's momentum has been broken. And some troops in Afghanistan have begun to come home.

These achievements are a testament to the courage, selflessness, and teamwork of America's Armed Forces. At a time when too many of our institutions have let us down, they exceed all expectations.

—President Barack Obama, January 24, 2012  
State of the Union Address

The U.S. military is currently among the highest regarded public institutions in America. According to a 2011 Gallup Poll, 78% of the public held a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the military, fifteen points ahead of small business, which was the nearest public institution. This poll also showed that the Presidency, the U.S. Supreme Court and even Congress held only limited public confidence in comparison to the military as an institution.<sup>1</sup>

The military hasn't always enjoyed such a high level of public confidence. Following the withdrawal from Vietnam, the military was held in low regard by an American public that was skeptical of the military's credibility as a fighting force. Only after a focused effort to transform the military, with demonstrated success in successive combat operations, did public confidence grow for the military. In order for today's military to retain a high level of public confidence, it must maintain this level of competence while facing the challenges associated with post-war drawdown and budget cuts.

This paper will discuss two primary reasons for the high level of public confidence attained by the military: first, the gradual development of professional competence through organizational, materiel and personnel changes; second, the public perception of a politically subservient military and the current model of civil-military relations. It will then highlight benefits associated with a high level of public confidence. Finally, this paper will highlight the potential for public confidence in the military to suffer as reduced resources impact the current civil-military model.

### Investing in Competence: The All-Volunteer Force (AVF)

How did the advent of the all-volunteer force, coupled with institutional changes and equipment procurement initiatives, result in a more combat-ready military? In 1973, as U.S. combat operations ended in Vietnam, the military was at an important historic crossroads in its history. Public confidence waned for a military that faced serious readiness concerns.<sup>2</sup> The hollow military of that era suffered from lack of discipline, racial discord, low morale, and an epidemic of drug and alcohol abuse.<sup>3</sup> Military equipment fleet readiness was greatly reduced across the force. Extensive equipment requirements for both U.S. and the Army of South Vietnam (ARVN) forces as part of President Nixon's "Vietnamization" program adversely affected military readiness worldwide. Additional provision of equipment to Israel in support of the Yom Kippur War further decreased equipment availability to the U.S. military.<sup>4</sup>

Military doctrine lacked the currency to focus combat capability into a more synchronous force in line with emergent threats.<sup>5</sup> The Soviet military took full advantage of the time during which the U.S. was occupied with the conflict in Vietnam, to grow rapidly into a near-peer military competitor. This development, as well as

lessons from the 1973 Yom Kippur War, convinced civilian and military leaders that an investment strategy to rebuild comprehensive military readiness was in order.<sup>6</sup>

Public support for the military declined as combat operations in Vietnam were depicted through the media as ineffective. By 1968, following the Tet Offensive, the American public doubted the Government's prediction of a U.S. victory in Vietnam.<sup>7</sup> The strategic victories promised by successive presidents and senior military leaders never came to pass. Political justifications for investing American blood and treasure in Vietnam became less and less believable, while public outcry intensified, much of it focusing on the military draft system. Allegations that sons of wealthy parents were able to avoid military service and those draftees saw more combat duty than those who chose to enlist created outspoken public criticism of the draft policy.<sup>8</sup> Proponents of selective service argued that an all volunteer military would lose its connection to the American people, become too professionalized, and potentially lose tolerance of civilian control. Members of Congress voiced complaints that an all-volunteer system "could not provide enough good men to meet the nation's recruiting needs."<sup>9</sup> Despite this pressure to keep the draft intact, President Nixon supported the recommendation from his commission on the all volunteer force and abolished the draft in 1973.<sup>10</sup>

Military leadership understood that simply terminating the draft policy was not sufficient to create an effective all-volunteer force. Changing the culture of the military was required at all levels to ensure ultimate success. General Creighton Abrams, US Army Chief of Staff in 1973 understood this dilemma, and stated during public testimony to Congress:

The Army is and always will be people. Our people are really good. It is a rare man who wants to be bad, but a lot of men are not strong enough to

be good all by themselves and a little help is enough. It does not make any difference where they come from. If we have faith in them and encourage them and keep standing for the right ourselves, the Army will get back into the shape the country needs and has to have.<sup>11</sup>

To begin this transition, ensuring that quality recruits were selected to fill the ranks was a top priority. Newly introduced testing methods such as the implementation of the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), and focusing on the recruitment of high school graduates assisted recruiting young men and women who were better prepared for military service. Incentives such as the Montgomery GI Bill and increased pay (for enlisted members and officers alike) added to the military appeal as a profession and assisted in the retention of military members.<sup>12</sup> Opportunities opened up for women and minorities, ensuring a force of volunteers more reflective of American society as a whole.<sup>13</sup> As enlistment benefits and overall quality of life improved, there was a corresponding improvement in recruitment, and parents became more positive about encouraging their children to consider military service.<sup>14</sup>

Along with the transition to an all volunteer force, the Army's development of the Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) in 1973 greatly impacted combat readiness throughout the ranks. This organization published the first version of Army Field Manual 100-5, Operations, in 1976, which was the first of a series of Capstone documents meant to formalize combined arms operations in the future fight.<sup>15</sup> TRADOC fortified this initiative with revised training standards and professional schooling for both officers and non-commissioned officers. Standardizing educational requirements for officers and NCO's at all levels added depth to the technical competence and overall professional military ethic among military leaders.

Major combat equipment development and acquisition initiatives were initiated as well. The “Big Five” combat systems, (M1 Abrams Tank, M2/3 Bradley Fighting Vehicles, Blackhawk and Apache Helicopters, and the Patriot Air Defense Missile System) were all successful acquisition programs that greatly increased the tactical prowess of ground combat forces.<sup>16</sup> National Training Centers were established across the country for both active and reserve forces alike which allowed brigade-sized units to conduct maneuver training using this new equipment. The ability to conduct collective maneuver training coupled with reinvigorated equipment acquisition programs, resulted in enhanced performance by military units leading to a more competent force.<sup>17</sup> By 1983, the military’s investment in personnel, training, equipment and doctrine was about to realize dividends for its efforts.

The results of the Army’s investment in the AVF did not come overnight. In fact, seven years after the introduction of the all-volunteer force, public confidence in the military bottomed out, largely in response to a failed military operation. In 1981, Operation Eagle Claw, an attempted rescue mission of 52 American hostages held in Iran, ended disastrously with the deaths of eight military members.<sup>18</sup> Rather than impressing the public with a show of daring and skill, the attempted military rescue served only to further demoralize the American public still reeling from its vulnerability to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.<sup>19</sup>

Operation Desert Claw was the low point for the post-Vietnam military as events thereafter demonstrated a significant change in the military’s competence and provided the public with a reason to trust in the abilities of the military. Successful operations in places such as Grenada, Panama, and Iraq acted as building blocks to developing

public's confidence in the military, helping to diminish the shadow of a strategic reversal in Vietnam.<sup>20</sup> As success in these operations showed the professionalism and competence of the military, public confidence increased. This public confidence rating reached a high mark of 85% following Operation Desert Shield/Storm.<sup>21</sup> This level of public confidence resulted from two decades of work developing the military into a professionally competent combat force.

The military conducted Operation Urgent Fury on the Caribbean Island of Grenada in October of 1983. During this Joint operation, in a matter of days, the U.S. military defeated a small Cuban military contingent, restored a legitimate government and rescued 720 American and foreign hostages. The public viewed this successful operation as a decisive victory for a military that was still recovering from the negative shadow of Vietnam sparking a gradual turnaround in public confidence for the military.<sup>22</sup>

The U.S. military reinforced this newfound level of public confidence through its success in Operation Just Cause in Panama. In December 1989, over 25,000 U.S. forces deployed into Panama with the objective of removing an accused drug trafficker, President Manuel Noriega, from power. Following less than a month of tactical operations, the military accepted the surrender of Noriega on January 3, 1990. Noriega was brought back to the United States for trial and eventually sentenced to forty years in jail on a drug trafficking conviction.<sup>23</sup> Although regime change was not a traditional combat mission, the military showed its ability to accomplish the assigned mission in support of U.S. foreign policy objectives.

Indeed, after Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in August, 1990, the U.S. led a coalition representing 40 nations during operation Desert Shield-Desert Storm.

Specified military objectives prior to this combat operation included the removal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait, and a clear exit strategy for U.S. forces.<sup>24</sup> These political objectives did not call for the removal of Saddam Hussein from power. In February 1991, following nearly a month of air strikes, the U.S. led coalition conducted a 100 hour ground offensive, quickly defeating Iraqi forces in its path. This decisive operation achieved all previously stated objectives, despite leaving Saddam in power, and public confidence spiked following this overwhelming display of battlefield success.<sup>25</sup> Throughout the period from Urgent Fury through Desert Storm, the AFV remained a source of pride for America.

The military's success in a variety of noncombat operations since the conclusion of the Vietnam War has built strong public confidence. The military's command and control structure, logistics expertise and a wide range of ready equipment makes it a viable consideration for the Government when faced with time-sensitive support requirements. For example; during the period of 1991 through 1999, despite a period of postwar troop reductions approaching 40%, the military supported local civil authority through its participation in 54 domestic support operations, including drug interdiction, peacekeeping and disaster relief. Support of these non-combat operations were in addition to limited combat operations during the same period.<sup>26</sup> Despite more requirements and fewer personnel to task, the military dutifully answered this call to service, putting its best "boot" forward in support of these operations. Perhaps as a result, the military's "traditional" role of conducting combat operations has now grown into a mission set that includes response in support of domestic support operations.<sup>27</sup>

The military's response to domestic support operations required the reprioritization of its budget from training and readiness to these non programmed requirements. Despite any concern for the budget, the military derived several benefits through its conduct of domestic support operations. Included among these are a positive image, real-world training opportunity during peacetime and interaction between military and local civilian leaders in support of a common cause.<sup>28</sup> All of these benefits enhanced the readiness and demonstrated the competency of the military to address domestic concerns on short notice.

### Political Subservience

The American public has historically been wary of the potential for military leaders to abuse their authority, to use their command power to assert their own political will and force a change in government or policy, in the vein of the Julius Caesar and other dictators. Yet in the post-Vietnam era, the military has embraced an apolitical approach to policy and strategy. Both the President and members of Congress, as elected officials, are guided by political considerations—partisan politics, reelection concerns, etc... By contrast, *under the current model of civil-military relations*, leaders of the military, though subject to political processes (for example, Senate confirmation is required for senior military leader positions), are not primarily guided by political concerns; they are generally perceived to stand aloof from politics, serving the national interest first. Under the current, dominant model of civil-military relations, the military engages civilian leaders as *instruments* of policy, willing to accept and abide by civilian directives, sometimes despite conflicting institutional goals. This approach has been crucial to relieving any fears of a military junta and building the public's trust.<sup>29</sup>



One may conceptualize the relationship between the military and its civilian leadership as existing on a continuum between two extremes: “director” on one end and “instrument” on the other. In the director role, military leaders are more autonomous and assertive in how the military is employed. Senior military leaders actively influence policy decisions that affect the military, and may use various means (the press-on or off the record, political hearings, etc.) to resist or protest unwelcome requirements from the civilian leadership. To be clear, this is not a question of legality. Military leaders may undertake these actions while still adhering to their oath of office, obeying the law and supporting and defending the constitution. Examples of military leaders approaching policy in something close to the “director” role include Curtis LeMay, Hyman Rickover, and Douglas MacArthur.

On the other hand, the “instrument” role describes a military whose senior leaders act in a professional advisory role; they opine on policy when asked; their judgment is strictly circumscribed by military (not political, budgetary, etc.) concerns; and they accept and support policy decisions from their elected leaders. In truth, it is unlikely that any military leader operates at the extremes of the director-instrument continuum. But the *public* posture of the military in the post-Vietnam era has leaned heavily toward the instrument role. I argue that this has been crucial to building the public’s confidence. First, as mentioned above, an apolitical force has diminished public fears regarding the abuse of military power in domestic politics. Second, and perhaps more significantly, the military’s embrace of the instrument role has shifted accountability for the inevitable setbacks (or failures) of military operations to the civilian leadership. The public sees the military as serving civilian masters. When military

operations go awry, responsibility generally rests with the President and his advisors. Since the early 1980's, the *choice* of mission, rather than the execution of the mission, has drawn scrutiny. For example, after the death of 18 servicemen in Mogadishu in October, 1993, the public's ire turned not to the Army, but to the Clinton administration. "Why were they there?" was asked more often than "Why did the mission go wrong?"<sup>30</sup>

The cost of the instrument role is that it has made the military more subject to the errors of its civilian leadership. But the benefit is that it has largely protected the military from the reputational consequences of bad decisions. Given that the military has succeeded in most of its missions over the past thirty years, the instrument role has had a positive impact on public confidence. It follows that moving away from the instrument role will decrease public confidence.

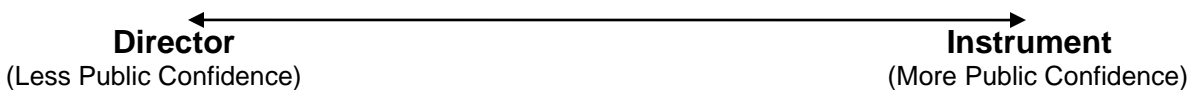


Figure 1: Continuum of Military Involvement in Policy

During the Vietnam War, when public confidence in the war faltered, military leaders exercised a stronger hand in policy, and policy decisions were publicly fought out. Tension between the military and civilian leadership was evident through outspoken dissent. Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, in comments relating to military requests for 206,000 additional ground troops in Vietnam stated to the President, "the Joint Chiefs of Staff don't know what they are talking about."<sup>31</sup> In response, as troop levels continued to be an issue with senior military leaders and the bombing campaign in Vietnam was curtailed, General Westmoreland, Commander in Chief Vietnam, and his Naval Counterpart, Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp, Commander in Chief Pacific, both

publicly commented that if bombing would have continued, essentially “the war would be over.”<sup>32</sup> These comments were meant to discredit policy directives that many senior military leaders of the time thought were short-sighted and limited the military’s ability to achieve victory. Public confidence levels for the military were reflective of the how the public viewed this open conflict between the military and its civilian leadership.

Today’s military culture trends much closer to the instrument role as senior military leadership have a much different relationship with their civilian leadership. Public comments by military leaders that discredit civilian policy are not supported by the military as an institution. Although discordant episodes do occur, their frequency and the method in which they are handled have enabled the military to remain well-regarded as an American institution. For example, In July 2010, Army General Stanley McChrystal was quickly removed from his role as commander of US forces in Afghanistan, and retired from the active force for disparaging comments he and his staff made concerning President Obama.<sup>33</sup> His position as a senior military leader in a wartime setting did not condone his unprofessional behavior.

In contrast, in August of 2012, General Petraeus, the outgoing CENTCOM commander, reinforced the military’s acceptance of its subordinate role in policy-making. When asked by President Obama to provide input on an acceptable timeline for the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, General Petraeus provided his professional advice on this important subject and then awaited a final decision. President Obama subsequently opted to approve a different course of action than that prescribed by General Petraeus. General Petraeus chose to accept this decision by President Obama in lieu of openly disavowing the decision. Unlike his predecessors in

Vietnam, General Petraeus professionally accepted this decision and implemented plans to support the early withdrawal of surge troops from Afghanistan. Later, during a congressional proceeding meant to confirm now retired General Petraeus as the next CIA director, he was asked why he didn't resign in regard to this lack of support from the President. General Petraeus replied, "Because I have sworn an oath to the Constitution and to obey the orders of president of the United States."<sup>34</sup> This professional display of allegiance by a senior military leader further upholds the military's Instrument role. It also epitomizes the strict interpretation of the oath of office that underlies this model.

There are other approaches. Consummate political operators like General Curtis LeMay, who built the Strategic Air Command and had a tremendous influence on US nuclear and grand strategy in the 1950s and early 1960s, are noticeably absent from the recent cohorts of senior military leaders. General LeMay maintained a confrontational relationship with his civilian leadership during both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. This may have undermined his input as a military advisor, but it did little apparent harm to the effectiveness of the Air Force.<sup>35</sup> Leaders like General LeMay demonstrate that there are viable alternatives to the "instrument" role. Still, contentious behavior towards its civilian leadership from senior military leaders became the exception rather than the rule. A less controversial example of military leadership having a strong hand in policy is General Colin Powell, the former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Indeed, in the line of Chairmen over the past thirty years, General Powell stands out for his influence and political engagement. His vision for the role of the US military in the post-Cold War era was highly influential both inside and outside the military. He created a model for US engagement that still shapes the debate over

when and how the US should use force. Yet Powell's influence, like LeMay's, was to some extent predicated on his successful direction of the military in conflict.

I argue that both the increased competence and the subservient policy role of the military have built public confidence in recent decades. Yet the two pieces are intertwined. Military leaders' place along the director-instrument continuum depends on demonstrating competence. The move away from a "director" military occurred as a chastised military recovered from Vietnam. The failures of that war and the lost confidence of the government and the public resulted in a retreat from the stronger engagement in policy and politics that had characterized the post-WWII military. Even if the military had desired to have a stronger hand in policy, it is unlikely that the country would have granted it. It was necessary for the military—especially the Army—to rebuild and reconceive itself. Competence emerges from internal improvements and external tests (warfare). The perception of competence affects both the Military's appetite for shaping policy and pursuing its goals through political means. I will return to this dynamic in the final section.

Military leaders today avoid open discord with their civilian masters. As stated earlier, public confidence in the military reached an all time high following Operation Desert Storm, which changed the focus of civil-military relations. Professional competence assisted the military in gaining strong public confidence, and fulfillment of its constitutionally directed role of political subservience has helped to maintain this strong confidence level.<sup>36</sup> The military has now changed its focus from building to maintaining its hard-earned public confidence level. This is accomplished by continued demonstration of institutional competence and is reinforced through a professional

relationship between senior military leaders as advisors, and their civilian leaders as policy decision-makers.

The public views the military as a servant of the nation, focused on defense of the homeland rather than self-interest. The military has cultivated a concept of duty and service that does not change according to the political affiliation of the administration. This separation of the military from the politics that often characterize other governmental institutions has allowed the military to bolster its reputation in the public eye and solidify its place among all public institutions.<sup>37</sup> The military is respected for competently assuming its role as an advisor to the civilian decision-making process and acting in support of decisions made by its civilian authority. Standing ready to support the decisions of its civilian leadership reinforces its role as a willing public servant regardless of personal reservations. Time and again, the military and its leadership have shown itself to be a faithful subordinate to civilian control. Examples include the repeal of Don't ask, Don't Tell, troop reduction timelines for the Afghanistan War and deep military budget cuts following operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In 2011, President Obama repealed the military "Don't Ask, Don't tell policy," that was enacted under the Clinton Administration in 1993. At this time, the military worked within presidentially directed guidelines to assess the impact of such repeal and then subsequently enact the policy change with as little negative impact to the force as possible. The public positively viewed this example of the military working together with the president to implement an emotionally charged policy revision. This change to military policy fell in line with emergent public opinion concerning the gay population within society and further reinforced the public perception of military professionalism

and competence. Unlike the open resistance by senior military leaders to President Clinton in 1993, today's military leadership worked with the presidential administration to enact the policy change.

Recently, as the defense budget for the period 2013 through 2022 was being slashed by nearly \$500 billion, the military's senior uniformed leader, General Martin Dempsey, stood next to President Obama and publicly supported the fiscal year 2013 budget reduction plan.<sup>38</sup> Supporting the civilian leadership, despite any reservations a military leader may have concerning the policy, reinforces the positive image presented by the military. In each of these instances, senior military leadership appeared subordinate in its role as a public servant and willing in its acceptance of presidential directive. Senior military leaders showing their respect for civilian leadership decisions reinforces public confidence for the military as an institution. Today's senior military leaders take pride in their current relationship with their civilian leadership and do not risk that relationship through undermining behavior as was more common prior to the AVF. Contentious attitudes as those taken by Generals McChrystal and LeMay are the exception rather than the rule.

### Benefits

Understanding that the military has garnered a high-level of public confidence leads to the question: how does the military benefit from it? There are several associated benefits. In this section, I highlight three: (1) budgetary consideration, (2) recruiting, and (3) institutional morale.

When resources are plentiful, the budgetary benefits of high public confidence are limited. Policy makers make fewer hard choices about how to allocate limited funds, so the popularity of the military is less relevant to the resource allocation process.

However, in times of constrained resources, the military's popularity is a huge political asset. Political leaders are not inclined to do things that are unpopular with voters. When budgets are tight, members of the legislature must make more trade-offs between military expenditures and other programs, and the political risks of undercutting the military enter into that calculation. This dynamic is particularly relevant today. The public's confidence in the military does not guarantee the armed forces immunity from significant reductions. The military faces a reduced budget in 2013, the first in nearly a decade. With wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan ending, and the U.S. reducing outlays across the Government, the military will sustain a commensurate level of budget reductions. At the time of writing, these reductions amount to an estimated 500 billion dollars over the next decade.<sup>39</sup> As problematic as this may seem, the crucial question is whether the reductions will cause a material decline in readiness, or require a shift in strategy or posture. This remains unclear. According to the proposed FY 2013 defense budget, key procurement initiatives will largely remain intact, or at most, suffer programmed delays due to the proposed cuts. The larger point is that at the margins of the debate over how to allocate public funds, public confidence gives the military a measure of deferential treatment. In an austere environment, this can be of tremendous value.<sup>40</sup>

Strong public confidence also reinforces military recruiting. With few exceptions, military recruiting requirements for all of the services over the last several decades have been met, and the overall quality of the force high.<sup>41</sup> Recruiting is supported by strong public confidence as American families entrust their sons and daughters to the military institution. Having a family member join a respected institution fosters a sense of pride



for the American public. Admittedly, military recruiting will become very selective as the force requirements are reduced and the U.S. population continues to increase in size. In fact, only a small percentage of America's youth, currently less than 20%, are considered eligible for military service based on physical, legal or mental limitations.<sup>42</sup> Given the low number of eligible youth, strong confidence enables accessibility to quality recruits, which remains of utmost importance to a downsizing military.

A somewhat intangible benefit from strong public confidence is institutional morale. This aspect of public confidence has helped the military to overcome institutional setbacks such as recent events at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, a dysfunctional wounded warrior medical care system or increased suicide and sexual assault rates.<sup>43</sup> The public maintains its confidence in the military and shows support through its acceptance of military personnel in light of instructional setbacks. Instead of being spit on or demeaned, today's veterans are publicly greeted with a thanks and a handshake.<sup>44</sup> This level of acceptance from the general American population solidifies the military's self-esteem at the individual level and reinforces collective morale. High institutional morale reinforces higher productivity, better overall discipline and heightened leader-subordinate relationships.<sup>45</sup> This doesn't erase mistakes from the public's memory, but it allows the military to shift the focus to its core competencies.

### Risks to Public Confidence

This paper briefly discussed the way in which competence and the military's orientation toward civilian leadership interact with each other. In this section, I explore how this interaction may play out in the future. It explores two risks to strong public confidence for the military in a resource-constrained environment through the potential

tasks to the two drivers of confidence discussed above: (1) the risk of a decline in competence and, (2) the risk of a shift away from political subservience.

The advent of the AVF has led to the confident and capable military institution operating around the world today.<sup>46</sup> With the current level of public confidence maintaining a very high level, there is limited growth potential and a greater risk for decline. The old adage stating, “you can please some of the people some of the time, but not all of the people all of the time,” applies to the military’s level of public confidence. Regardless of demonstrated competence, it seems that there will always be a small percentage of the population that will not support the military. In 1991, following a quick and decisive victory during Operation Desert Storm, the military had demonstrated utmost competence, but public confidence for the military peaked at 85%.

As the military draws down and resources dwindle, the military’s capabilities will not be adequate to provide the same level of coverage against potential threats as before. Current strategic thought emphasizes “reversibility” as a mitigation of this risk. This thinking posits that although military budget reductions will result in cuts to end-strength, a greater reliance on reserves and postponed modernization programs, the military will quickly regenerate to face emerging threats.<sup>47</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the validity of the assumptions that underlie reversibility as a concept. The military may sustain competence in a resource-constrained environment through selective recruiting, commitment to retaining its training and doctrine institutions, and the promotion and retention of its best leaders. These actions will help the military retain and build upon the combat experience of its veterans, and facilitate reversibility as required for future combat operations. Yet there is an inescapable gravity to any

resource reductions. At some point, doing the same with less is no longer feasible. You must either do less with less (as the Army did in the 1990s drawdown, eliminating offensive nuclear capabilities, for example), or do worse with less (becoming less competent across the spectrum of requirements).

Unfortunately, there are no clear “bill-paying” capabilities in the current military—no obvious areas to eliminate outright. Military leaders will therefore prioritize where they posture combat capability to remain prepared for the most likely sources of future conflict, and accept risk in other areas. If, as has happened repeatedly in the past, these choices result in a force that is misaligned with requirements (Korea, Vietnam, Iraq in the early stages of the insurgency) the military will struggle to achieve success. Such difficulties will reduce the public’s perception of the competence of the military, and therefore undermine public confidence in the military as an institution. This is not an extreme prediction. Indeed, it follows an inescapable logic. First, reduced resources increase the risk of a mismatch between the military’s capabilities and the requirements of the mission. Second, such mismatches increase the risk of failing to achieve mission objectives within the time and at the cost expected. This poor performance diminishes the perceived competence of the force. Finally, the decline in perceived competence reduces the public’s confidence.

This raises the question; how does the risk of decreased competence affect the military’s engagement with civilian leaders? Political subservience in a period of declining resources could negatively affect the future civil-military relationship if senior military leaders move away from being instruments of its civilian leaders, and move toward being directors. Culturally, the current military prides itself in accepting every

mission when directed. However, in a resource depleted environment, multiple contingency requirements or non-programmed demands such as domestic support operations could place the military's ability to resource combat readiness and training requirements at risk. This would stress relationship between military leaders and their civilian leadership. Policy decisions counter to advice given by military leaders, or deeper reductions in resources could drive senior military officials to open discord with their elected leadership. Senior military leaders may not readily accept policy decisions affecting military readiness and respond by publicly second-guessing decisions or openly professing discord through the media. In recent comments to Congress, Leon Panetta, the Secretary of Defense, stated that the initial \$450 billion reduction will "take us to the edge, but any more than that would hollow out the force and badly damage capabilities for the future," appear to be a move in this direction.<sup>48</sup> Yet even the existing reductions may lead to difficult dilemma.

Military leaders confronted with a policy decision that—in their view—puts the military at significant risk of failing to meet the expectations of political leaders and/or the public have two choices: they can accept the decision and take the competency risk; or they can pursue other means to challenge the decision.

Attempts to influence military policy decisions through political means, would strain the professional relationship between the military and its civilian leadership. Actions such as making demands for additional resources, lobbying for policy adjustments or attempting to redirect missions to other "suitable" respondents are within the realm of possibility for a stressed military institution, but they may be seen as self-serving. A politically active military risks losing public confidence.

## Conclusion

The civil-military relationship can be protected if in these situations, military leaders anticipate policy risks and professionally advise its civilian leadership of mission-related concerns. It is not the military's place to turn down directed missions, only to provide insight on capabilities and requirements. It remains up to the civilian leadership to decide on what use of the military, if any, is best for the country. Supporting its leadership in this manner will demonstrate military subservience and work to retain public confidence.

The transformation following the Vietnam War has developed the military into a professionally competent and politically subservient force. These two aspects of the military have garnered today's military the highest levels of public confidence on record. However, both of these aspects of today's military are at risk due to impending pending budget cuts. The military's overall readiness posture could decline if required downsizing is not properly managed and competence could suffer. Additionally, senior military leaders could respond negatively to tension created by diminishing resources. Abandoning political subservience through open intervention in the policy-making process will work counter to the current civil-military relationship and decrease public confidence that took decades to build. Remaining apolitical will remain the lynch pin for the military to retain strong public confidence.

Understanding how professional competence and political subservience have built strong public confidence, and the corresponding impact on the civil-military relationship will assist today's senior military leadership in determining how best to manage risk associated with diminished resources for future operations.

## Endnotes

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<sup>5</sup> John F. Shortal, "20<sup>th</sup> Century Demobilization Lessons," 11.

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