The pit and the pendulum

Civil-military relations in an age of austerity

BY CHARLES D. ALLEN

IN EDGAR ALLAN POE'S SHORT STORY "THE PIT AND THE Pendulum," an unnamed protagonist avoids a fatal fall only to find himself in deadly danger from a swinging blade. Today's senior military leaders are in similar straits, though it's not their lives at risk but rather the American people's trust in their armed forces.

The pit is the prospect that the U.S. military might be ill-prepared when the call comes to ward off enemies, foreign or domestic. Twice in memory this has happened; today's military leaders are haunted by the Vietnam War and the Sept. 11 attacks.

The pendulum is the prospect that Congress' inability to pass defense budgets will hamstring the military's ability to act effectively when need arises. In the past four years, lawmakers have managed only continuing resolutions; through this year, at least, there is the further complication of sequestration. Senior military leaders are hard-pressed to sustain a force that can safeguard U.S. security interests.

In January, this dilemma brought the Joint Chiefs of Staff to a rare act: letters to key lawmakers, signed by all seven members, decrying across-the-board cuts to defense legislated by Congress and signed into law by President Obama.

It is not my intent to argue for defense's share of the federal budget or to provide an economic analysis of the cuts' effect, but rather to offer observations on an often overlooked and underexamined aspect of civil-military relations. In an era when a chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

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AIR FORCE

Members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and other senior military leaders testify about the potential impact of sequestration during a hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee.

argues that the country's biggest strategic problem is the national debt, where does duty lie for the military's top officers?

THE LONG VIEW

Effective civil-military relations require senior military officers to be as adept at advising on national policy and long-range military strategy as they are at leading operational missions. This is even more salient as daunting fiscal reductions arrive on top of ambiguous and changing national security requirements.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff comprise seven four-star officers: the chairman, vice chairman, the chiefs of each of the armed services, and the newest member, the chief of the National Guard. They are not the war-fighting combatant commanders, who are charged with developing and executing military strategies to support national policy and security strategy in their assigned regions and functions and therefore have short- to near-term perspectives on defense issues and no direct role in developing service budgets. Instead, the Joint Chiefs are responsible for the long-term health of their respective services. Certainly, they support the immediate needs of the combatant commanders — their duties under Title 10 of the U.S. Code include manning, training and equipping the forces — but they must remain focused on mid- and long-term capabilities for military forces writ large.

The advice of the JCS comes in many forms, including that most unusual set of letters signed on Jan. 13 by all seven members. Delivered to the chairmen of the Senate and House Armed Services committees, these "28-star letters" presented the chiefs' grim assessment of the potential impact of sequestration-related budget cuts.

Letters to Congress signed by all of the Joint Chiefs are a rare and relatively recent phenomenon. My quick search only found four:

- In 1995, in the midst of the massive post-Cold War drawdown, the chiefs asked the House National Security Committee to avoid "breaking faith" and to forgo legislation to reduce retirement pay for military veterans.
- In 1999, the chiefs pressed the House Appropriations Committee to support the F-22 fighter, attesting that lack of program funding "puts in jeopardy our military modernization plan."
- In 2006, they petitioned the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to support the Law of the Sea Treaty to guarantee "navigation and overflight rights and high seas freedoms that are essential for the global mobility of our armed forces."
- In 2011, the chiefs asked the Senate Armed Services Committee to allow the Defense Department to increase healthcare fees for veterans, citing the need to be better stewards of taxpayers' money.

This year's letters began: "The readiness of our Armed Forces is at a tipping point. We are on the brink of creating a hollow force due to an unprecedented convergence of budget conditions

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and legislation that could require the Department to retain more forces than requested while underfunding that force's readiness. We ask for legislative action that adequately resources readiness while granting the Department the authority and flexibility to shape the force to new budget realities."

The Joint Chiefs obliquely acknowledged the gamesmanship between the executive and legislative branches of our federal government and within the political parties of both houses of Congress. While the letters communicated the military's corporate judgment, subsequent Senate and House Armed Service committee hearings allowed each chief to describe the status of his forces and impending actions forced by Congress' inability to pass budget appropriations legislation. As with the rest of the nation, the JCS clearly saw the fiscal impasse that was not supposed to happen. Their "For Official Use Only" letters were direct communication to Congress that, one would hope, would serve as a catalyst for resolution of a national crisis.

Proper civil-military relations exist when consensus is formed within DoD and presented by its senior leaders — the defense secretary and the JCS chairman — to the president, who is the military's commander in chief and the nation's chief executive. The JCS were firmly behind the administration's 2014 defense budget submission. But there is another element of civil-military relations: the oversight powers granted to Congress over the military, and its existence is an inherent tension in our constitutional form of government.

Were the recent engagements by the members of the JCS with Congress a violation of civil-military relations, or part of its healthy execution?

CREDIBILITY

The credibility of the advice and reporting of the Joint Chiefs is under great scrutiny in recent years, thanks to mixed reviews about the military's preparedness on and after 9/11, and its operational strategies in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In January 2012, Obama, his new defense secretary, Leon Panetta, and JCS Chairman Gen. Martin Dempsey released the new Defense Strategic Guidance in a joint press conference. In the ensuing budget discussions, the JCS were challenged by Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis., who said, "We don't think the generals are giving us their true advice." Dempsey immediately took offense. "My response is: I stand by my testimony," he told reporters. "This was very much a strategy-driven process to which we mapped the budget." In quick succession, the service chiefs declared that they as well had been involved in developing the new strategy and that in their professional judgment, the military had the ability to support it. Rather than being co-opted, they endorsed the new guidance in congressional testimonies and public statements as establishing priorities for strategic focus, and, more importantly, reducing requirements (such as conducting long-term stability operations) to maintain a panoply of military capabilities.

These recent engagements contrast with actions by the Joint Chiefs of the mid-1960s, when Defense Secretary Robert McNamara persuaded most of them to refrain from giving Congress their honest (and negative) assessments of President Lyndon Johnson's Vietnam War strategy. In "Dereliction of Duty," then-Maj. H.R. McMaster detailed how the chiefs — all except Gen. Wallace Green, the Marine Corps commandant — allowed Johnson to distort and misrepresent their views to Congress.

"The president's deception depended on the tacit approval and silence from JCS," McMaster wrote.

The offending service chiefs did not provide their assessments and concerns to Congress when they had both opportunity and obligation.

In our current situation, skeptics, cynics and scholars will argue, not unconvincingly, that the chiefs' petition for sustained resources is normal and expected behavior, inasmuch as the leaders of any large bureaucracy naturally seek to protect resources and to maintain autonomy. But political scientist Samuel Huntington wrote that there is a clear hierarchy between the two: "The military are always happy to have more resources, but if they have to choose between more resources and more autonomy, they will choose more autonomy."

This was proven true in our contemporary environment. Military leaders acknowledged the pressing fiscal circumstances of a struggling economy and the magnitude of mandatory government spending programs, and then sought to fashion budget cuts rather than have them imposed.

Indeed, military leaders had long heeded the chants of "fiscal train wreck" and the dire warnings from former Comptroller General David Walker. In his final year as chairman of the JCS, Adm. Mike Mullen gave an address to the Business Executives for National Security group in which he argued that the national debt was the biggest threat to national security.

Exercising prudence, Mullen and other senior military leaders had already begun working to retain control of their own fiscal destiny by cutting costs. DoD leaders have planned, programmed

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plate that pre-coordinates the necessary assets to facilitate the projection of American power into East Asia in the face of enemy A2/AD capabilities. This is all well and good, but it is hardly an acceptable basis for American regional defense strategy. How America ought to deploy its power in order to delink military and economic competition, encourage the peaceful rise of China and foster Asian regional stability remains an open question, one which can only be addressed by the prudent development and employment of land power.

RETURNING TO REALISM

After a decade of nation-building and revisionist adventures, America seems to be returning to a realist foreign policy. Prudence is once again the supreme virtue, security and stability the guiding lights. The hinterlands in the arc of instability, where transnational terrorism networks go to regroup, are the purview of special operations and drones; the bulk of American military power is being refocused on missions of central national importance. Chief among these is ensuring the peace and prosperity of East Asia. With the renewed focus that the "rebalance toward Asia" implies must come new thinking. Dominance in the air and on the sea may demonstrate the extent of American power, but it also creates a zero-sum security environment. In the world of Air-Sea Battle, America and China may find themselves locked in a security competition that serves the interest of neither state.

By contrast, land power represents a flexible tool that is uniquely suited to the Asian security environment. The Navy remains the essential guarantor of global commerce and the freedom of the seas, and the Air Force gives policy-makers an unparalleled set of global strike options. But only the Army and Marines can provide a security commitment to America's partners in Asia that does not simultaneously threaten China itself. Land power is the only avenue by which America can enhance regional security and stability, deter Chinese militarism and encourage Chinese commitment to the global status quo. It is land power, and land power alone, that can bring America's Asia policy back to reality. **AFJ**

and revised concepts for Joint Force 2020. Force reductions of 80,000 soldiers and 20,000 Marines are already in the works, as is a rethinking of the balance of active and reserve component force structure.

As sequestration approached, military leaders did not argue for more resources, but for an amount commensurate with existing laws, policies and the new strategic guidance. In place of across-the-board funding reductions of defense discretionary programs required by the sequestration legislation, they sought only autonomy in determining force structure and funding priorities to achieve national security objectives.

In Dempsey's phrasing, the service chiefs have three "rheostats" they can adjust: end strength, modernization and readiness. In their testimony to Congress, various service chiefs described how sequestration would impact these areas. The Army announced cuts in training for 80 percent of its units, even those pending deployment, and proffered charts showing potential cuts to jobs and dollars in each of the 50 states. The Air Force projected cutting 200,000 flying hours, which would hurt readiness. The Navy made perhaps the biggest statement by asking and receiving approval to delay the deployment of the carrier Harry S. Truman to the Persian Gulf, thereby failing to meet, for the first time in years, U.S. Central Command's requirement for two carriers in the region. (Deputy Defense Secretary Ashton Carter's statement to the House Armed Services Committee made explicit the feeling within DoD: "All this is purely the collateral damage of political gridlock.")

The chiefs' efforts to shape the cuts show that they are not merely clamoring to protect the status quo — or, as Rep. Duncan Hunter put it, "adding drama to the sequester debate." Nor are they, as some contend, inappropriately offering the "gold watch" of readiness as sacrifice — with the easy inference that Congress would risk national security if it does not halt sequestration. Instead, they are making a responsible effort to meet the requirements put forth in Title 10.

THE SOLDIER AND THE STATE

On the 50th anniversary of Huntington's seminal work "The Soldier and the State," a formidable collection of scholars reviewed the evolution of "American Civil-Military Relations." Among the nine conclusions rendered by the editors, Col. Suzanne Nielsen and Don Snider, is that Congress and the executive are co-equals in the control of the military. While most readers may focus on war-fighting aspects, the critical interface is really between the military profession as an institution and its civilian masters as they determine, develop and sustain force capabilities.

Effective civil-military relations are contentious and messy. Military leaders (combatant commanders and Joint Chiefs of Staff) have long years of experience and deep expertise upon which to render their best judgment and advice to civilian leaders. This includes providing real options to decision-makers, describing their risks, and recommending plans to execute the national military strategy.

Modern U.S. history offers several examples of conflicts among presidents, Congress and the military, especially in the aftermath of major military operations, which resulted in some form of resolution. In the mid-1950s, President Dwight Eisenhower reshaped the strategy for the Cold War and restructured the American military, contending with dissension from Army leaders on what they thought was a flawed security policy. In his 1961 farewell speech, Eisenhower warned against the military-industrial complex with its congressional advocates. After Vietnam and during the buildup under President Reagan, the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 increased the power of the combatant commanders at the expense of the service chiefs. At the end of the Cold War and after Operation Desert Storm, a new president, Bill Clinton, sought to overturn the ban on gays serving in the military. Clinton met with substantial resistance from the JCS, led by the highly respected Gen. Colin Powell. The result was the "don't ask, don't tell" compromise, written by Congress into the defense authorization act and signed into law by Clinton in 1993. In each of these cases, military leaders offered their voice to executive branch and congressional overseers; messy and contentious debates still require engagement. Candid

and straightforward advice has to be heard for it to be considered.

Senior military leaders must present risk to civilian authorities, but ultimately, of course, civilians get to decide. Once military leaders have provided their most compelling assessments for strategies and plans (ends-ways-means), it is ultimately the civilian commander in chief, in consultation with the national security team, who decides what to do. The "how to" resource also relies on the engagement of military leaders with congressional members who provide oversight and are the decision makers for funding. During the Feb. 13 sequestration hearing to the House Armed Services Committee, Dempsey asked, "What do you want your military to do? If you want it to be doing what it's doing today, then we can't give you another dollar. If you want us to do something less than that, we're all there with you and we'll figure it out."

The authorities of the executive and legislative branches as outlined in the U.S. Constitution are the core of civil-military relations.

Invariably, especially in times of austerity, the military is given less money than it wants. Its actual funding comes from Congress through the National Defense Authorization and Defense Appropriations acts signed into law by the president. Once the strategy and resourcing decisions are made, military leaders must implement the decisions as if their own. These leaders owe their best efforts to service members and defense employees involved in the execution. Additionally, military leaders must be willing and able to re-engage with civilians when new information or conditions arise that affect the execution of decisions.

The essence of the profession of arms is the trust between the American public (through its elected officials) and its military members, who swear fealty to the Constitution; their loyalty is to neither a person nor a political party. Senior military officers must provide their best military judgments to help civilian leaders make difficult strategic decisions. Irrespective of political ideologies, they must give what is needed to hear, rather than what civilians may want to hear. This perhaps best describes the intent of the 28-star letters to Congress: to provide cautions on the impact of sequestration and a call to action for the sake of national security.

As senior military officers, the chiefs provide assessments and recommendations to principal advisers (the defense secretary and the JCS chairman) for the president on military matters. Thus, they engage in national security conversations and debates out of the public eye. The need for private and privileged communications within the executive branch is well-established. Under Title 10, service chiefs are obligated to provide Congress with their opinions when different from the corporate consensus. One should note that the JCS letters to Congress were official documents directed to committee chairman and not released publicly by the Pentagon. The challenge for senior military leaders is to not be pawns in the political theater that is the milieu of our system of government. Military officers must be loyal to two masters: the Office of the President and to Congress. For their advice to have weight, it must be considered truthful and apolitical. When the inevitable conflicts of opinions happen, the masters should consider Vince Lombardi's practice of "praise in public, criticize in private." Rather than reprimand in the media, defense civilians should exercise restraint and consult with military members behind closed doors when appropriate.

A closing thought: Effective civil-military relations sustain the connectedness of those who serve with those whom they serve. The U.S. military profession, charged with tremendous responsibilities for the security of the nation, is a part of American society. This connection is most important to demonstrate during the era of fiscal austerity, during which the military must share the burdens as well as the benefits of citizenry. The civil-military divide is real; the "other 1 percent" who serve in uniform cannot be impervious to efforts to reorder our fiscal house.

Cuts in spending will come. But no sharpened pendulum blade should sever our civil-military bonds. Nor should we fall into the pit of failure to protect our nation and break the trust of its people. **AFJ**

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The U.S. and other nations are also expanding the emphasis on SOF because they generally do their jobs with small footprints, making them far less likely to compel a national commitment on the scope, cost and duration of a Vietnam, Iraq or Afghanistan.

These strategic trends were vividly illustrated in the striking dissimilarities between two multinational military conferences held last May: NATO's conference in Chicago and U.S. Special Operations Command's International SOF Conference in Tampa, Fla. The NATO conference focused on shrinking and disengaging conventional forces from Afghanistan, while the ISOF conference discussed the increasing, and increasingly integrated, efforts by SOF from around the world.

SOF's emergence should not obscure its limitations. Its operators are quick to recognize their reliance on general-purpose forces. They are not, for example, equipped for the heavy lifting on intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance missions; projecting maritime power; deterring nuclear strikes; or seizing, defending and controlling large swaths of territory. Widespread reductions in general-purpose forces therefore affect SOF performance.

Nor can SOF remain the lead service when a major theater conflict demands a massive response, as happened in 1950, when North Korean forces streamed south, and in 1990, when Iraq invaded Kuwait.

NORSOCOM's standup is best understood as emblematic of a global, strategic trend to address several modern-day realities. New conventions are needed to address pre-eminent, contemporary threats. Funding constraints are compelling the world's democracies to cooperate in security efforts. And international SOF organizations utilizing networked mechanisms will be patrolling territory formerly covered by large-standing conventional forces.

In years hence, the actions NORSOCOM is taking are likely to be viewed as the signature response by a nation to the state of affairs in the early 21st century. **AFJ**