

Post-9/11 Civil-Military Relations

Room for Improvement

Thomas Sheppard and Bryan Groves

Abstract

Civil-military relations between the president and his key military leaders carry significant implications for strategy making and war outcomes. Presidents and their national security team must prioritize properly developing that relationship. Civilian leaders must understand the various biases military leaders may harbor in different scenarios, while military leaders must present the president with genuine options, serving as professional advisors in the “unequal dialogue.” It is essential the next president bridge the civil-military gap—thereby facilitating greater understanding and trust. Stronger bonds of confidence between principals and agents result in more effective organizations, as does the ability to figure out what works, why it works, and how to implement it.



The year 2016 will mark a major transition for the US military. If Pres. Barack Obama sticks to his timetable—and all indications are he will—the last American forces will vacate Afghanistan by the end of that year, ending the longest war in American history. What will follow in Afghanistan is uncertain, but recent events in Iraq and persistent enemy elements in Afghanistan and Pakistan paint a pessimistic picture. It is a real possibility that the blood and treasure poured into Afghani-

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Report Documentation Page

*Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188*

Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.

1. REPORT DATE 2015	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2015 to 00-00-2015		
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Post-9/11 Civil-Military Relations: Room for Improvement		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER		
		5b. GRANT NUMBER		
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER		
6. AUTHOR(S)		5d. PROJECT NUMBER		
		5e. TASK NUMBER		
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER		
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Air Force Research Institute, Strategic Studies Quarterly, 155 N. Twining Street, Maxwell AFB, AL, 36112		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER		
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)		
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)		
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited				
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES				
14. ABSTRACT Civil-military relations between the president and his key military leaders carry significant implications for strategy making and war outcomes. Presidents and their national security team must prioritize properly developing that relationship. Civilian leaders must understand the various biases military leaders may harbor in different scenarios, while military leaders must present the president with genuine options, serving as professional advisors in the ???unequal dialogue.??? It is essential the next president bridge the civil-military gap???thereby facilitating greater understanding and trust. Stronger bonds of confidence between principals and agents result in more effective organizations, as does the ability to figure out what works, why it works, and how to implement it.				
15. SUBJECT TERMS				
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified	Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 26
				19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON

stan for more than a decade will result only in renewed civil war, the resurgence of the oppressive Taliban government, and the country once again serving as a haven for terrorists.¹ What lessons American policy makers will take away from the long-standing conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq—and what the full consequences of those conflicts will be—remain to be seen.

That discussion brings us to the other major transition scheduled for 2016. In November of that year, even as the last American troops depart Afghanistan, the American people will select a new president. Whoever this leader is, he or she will inherit the fallout from America's ventures in the Middle East and South Asia and have to deal with the lessons learned from both wars. Some of those lessons are political, diplomatic, and economic, while others more directly concern the military. Thus, it is essential the next president learn from the predecessors' mistakes to build a more effective civil-military partnership. The next commander-in-chief will have to build on the American experience in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, and elsewhere to determine how to use American military forces in the future and how to best manage his or her relationship with those forces. The issues of the global war on terrorism to this point relate not only to America's foreign policy but also to the crucial, complex, and often-troubled relationship between the US military and its civilian superiors.

Pres. George W. Bush and President Obama started their tenures as commander-in-chief with somewhat rocky relationships with the military—though for different reasons. Each struggled to understand the issues that were most significant to military leadership and the unique culture of the armed forces. Both further eroded their relationships with the military through strategic mismanagement. To a degree, they learned from some of their mistakes to improve the military relationship, but the damage from unfortunate early missteps could not be entirely undone.

The military was hardly blameless in either administration, but a better understanding of the mentality and culture of those in uniform and more attention to cultivating harmonious civil-military relationships on the part of both presidents would have reduced tensions and averted some of the errors in Afghanistan and Iraq. While these wars have theoretically ended, the next president will inherit the ongoing war against extremist forms of Islam, including renewed hostilities in Iraq against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). In this article, we con-

duct a comparative historical analysis of civil-military relations under presidents Bush and Obama. We conclude that the slow start both presidents experienced and the setbacks President Obama continues to experience may not be entirely preventable but can be mitigated by adopting certain policies.

To mitigate these slow starts to presidents' civil-military relationship—especially problematic during wartime—the country should implement a mix of policy prescriptions. First, during military conflicts, Congress should conduct biannual hearings to evaluate progress of policy objectives, military strategy, and the linkage between the two. The president and Congress should also gauge evolving national interests, public support, and prospects for success. Second, the president should adjust policy or strategy throughout military operations, based in part on the biannual hearings' findings. The president should also direct his national security adviser to use a multiple advocacy approach. This structured approach will help ensure the president makes critical decisions with an accurate picture of the related trade-offs. Third, and most important, increased civil-military interactions should become a regular facet of government. Implementation of these recommendations will improve three features of the post-9/11 civil-military landscape that have been lacking. First, it will improve the civil-military principal-agent relationship. Second, it will clarify wartime strategy and insure its connection to a coherent policy. Third, it will provide the best opportunity for successful war outcomes.

Contemporary American Civil-Military Relations

The standard for American civil-military relations has been a thoroughly apolitical military. For much of the past, officers refused to comment on political issues and refused to allow their personal views to interfere with carrying out orders. Gen George Marshall, the epitome of an officer before and during World War II, declined to even vote in elections, for fear of hindering his ability to carry out any and all orders of his commander-in-chief, regardless of political party or stance.² Gen John J. Pershing, Marshall's mentor in the service, wrote to Gen George Patton that he “must remember when we enter the army, we do so with the full knowledge that our first duty is toward the government, entirely regardless of our own views . . . [the latter of which] are in no sense to

govern our actions.”³ Such sentiments did not long outlive World War II. With the creation of a permanent military establishment at the outset of the Cold War, the military evolved into one of many interest groups, vying for government funds and public support.⁴ Never completely the ideal apolitical arm of the executive branch, the military leverages its expertise, prestige, and usefulness not only with the president but also with Congress and the American people to secure its goals. Military leaders openly compete for funds and use the media and congressional testimony to press for their vision of what American strategy and military policy should be.⁵ Moreover, in sharp contrast to Marshall’s studied apoliticism, the officer corps of the military now largely identifies with the Republican party; therefore, the president’s party affiliation cannot but affect the health of the civil-military relationship.⁶

In the last two decades, another factor has exacerbated these problems: the willingness of military officers—usually retired but sometimes still in uniform—to publicly criticize the administration or seek to bypass the president and appeal directly to Congress or the American people in lobbying for their causes.⁷ At worst, such behaviors can force a president’s choice or leave him feeling “boxed-in” by undermining alternatives. None of this portends the slightest threat of a coup or suggests a presidential candidate needs the military’s blessing to reach the White House. What it means is that, at this stage, the relationship between the president and the military is now particularly strained. This is not to say that harmonious civil-military relations are impossible. However, presidents must pay particular attention to asserting their authority while cultivating mutual respect with the officer corps.⁸ This was a reality that, by all appearances, both Bush and Obama failed to fully appreciate. The activism of some senior military leaders caught both presidents off guard.⁹ Moreover, both presidents failed to properly manage their relationship with the military and left their officers floundering with vague mandates, flawed strategies, and a lack of necessary resources to complete assigned missions.¹⁰ Future presidents would do well to assert their authority as commander-in-chief while taking a much more active role in planning and executing military operations, but they must also relate to the military in such a way as to engender respect and trust.¹¹

Civil-Military Relations in the Bush Administration

There was ample reason for optimism when George W. Bush took the oath of office, if for no other reason than he was unlike his predecessor. Bill Clinton began his presidency with a disastrous relationship with the military and enjoyed only minor improvement during the next eight years. Perceiving him as a draft dodger and a representative of the worst of the 1960s' culture, military officers viewed their commander-in-chief with distrust. His ostentatious disinterest in all things military- and foreign policy-related only worsened the situation—as did his moral shortcomings.¹² The officer corps responded by publicly challenging President Clinton's policies, particularly on the question of homosexuals in the military, and few in the American public doubted their distaste for the man in the White House.¹³ Over time, Clinton's skill at managing foreign affairs improved, but it came too late to make any real dint in the civil-military discord his administration cultivated.¹⁴

Senior military officers, with considerable justification, felt certain that President Bush would build a more harmonious civil-military relationship. His father had enjoyed a remarkably agreeable relationship with the military, and the younger Bush espoused deep respect for those in uniform and their service to the country. Bush openly touted his high regard for America's men and women in uniform on the campaign trail and promised increased funding for national defense under his administration.

Given such statements, few in the military could have been prepared for their treatment at the hands of Bush's secretary of defense, Donald Rumsfeld. Even in selecting Rumsfeld for the post, Bush set the precedent of avoiding personal oversight of the Department of Defense (DOD), seeming to have largely deferred to Vice President Dick Cheney in naming Rumsfeld—after his first two choices, FedEx founder Frederick Smith and former Senator Dan Coates of Indiana, proved undesirable. Bush even deferred to Cheney in spite of Rumsfeld's earlier strained relationship with Pres. George H. W. Bush.¹⁵ Rumsfeld took over the DOD convinced—not without cause—that it was mired in the past and wasting the resources entrusted to it by the American people. He sought to build a more modern, more efficient, and—above all—more subordinate military establishment. Unfortunately, his demeanor and refusal to recognize that the military was working to implement the very changes he desired, even as he publicly and privately berated officers, poisoned

civil-military relations under the Bush administration.¹⁶ At one point, he tactlessly called the bureaucracies at the Pentagon “a threat, a serious threat, to the security of the United States of America.”¹⁷ While many in the military concurred that the Pentagon’s bureaucracy needed improvement, the implication that America’s own military posed a security threat needlessly tainted civil-military relations and prevented a partnership between Rumsfeld and reform-minded officers that could have been far more effective in restructuring the Pentagon.¹⁸

For his part, President Bush brought a hands-off approach to the White House and did little to defend the military from Rumsfeld’s attacks.¹⁹ The first president to come into office with a master of business administration degree, Bush preferred to focus on the big picture and grant his subordinates incredibly broad latitude in managing their own departments. Moreover, he preferred to put individuals of starkly contrasting attitudes and viewpoints in positions of authority so he could receive advice on all sides of an issue. His attitudes in this regard were not unprecedented; arguably, the two most successful presidents of the twentieth century, Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan, both appointed people with ideologically contrasting viewpoints into their administrations and tended to delegate generously to their subordinates. However, Bush seems to have lacked either of these predecessors’ abilities to manage leadership conflict effectively or to minimize internecine bickering. Stronger personalities tended to dominate in the administration, silencing opposition and, thus, arguably negating the whole point of bringing a variety of perspectives to the table. Nowhere was the Bush administration’s internal dysfunction more apparent than the DOD, where Rumsfeld quickly came to “dominate the formulation of national security policy.”²⁰

If these issues were deeply troubling to those in uniform, in Bush’s mind they were of secondary concern, for the simple reason that he entered office just as committed to a primarily domestic policy as his predecessor had. Bush began his presidency with an agenda of cutting taxes, promoting “compassionate conservatism,” and generally maintaining domestic harmony. The events of 11 September 2001, changed all that.²¹ Bush instantly became a wartime leader, a mantle that would endure throughout his administration and be passed to his successor for the entirety of his eight years in the White House as well.

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Americans demanded a strong response. Bush heartily shared this mind set, vowing to track down al-Qaeda operatives and dismantle the organization. However, this would obviously be a different kind of war than any the United States had engaged in before. Historically, the US Army greatly preferred conventional wars against states, waged in specified territorial areas. The exceptions—numerous wars against the Native Americans, the Filipino insurrection, and the Vietnam War—had occasioned loud complaints from military officers and were usually forgotten in institutional memory as soon as the conflicts ended. The enemy in this contest sprawled across numerous states and had no identifiable central location. The closest thing was Afghanistan, where the Taliban government harbored al-Qaeda's shadowy leader, Osama bin Laden, and offered safe haven to terrorists.

Senior leaders, civilian and military, failed to grasp the complexities this new kind of enemy presented. Moreover, these leaders did not take time to consider the potential difficulties of waging war on states to defeat stateless organizations. Afghanistan posed problems: the country's lack of infrastructure and the fact it had endured decades of warfare created few good targets for bombing campaigns. Nevertheless, after an initial attempt at bombing the Taliban into submission, the United States turned its attention to an invasion that it assumed would be relatively easy. Although some estimates called for 60,000 troops, the initial invasion consisted of 110 Central Intelligence Agency operatives and 316 special forces personnel, working in conjunction with the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance.²²

The initial invasion of Afghanistan succeeded beyond anyone's wildest dreams. Vast technological superiority—and heavy use of Northern Alliance forces—enabled the United States to topple the Taliban and seize control of the country in a matter of days and without a single American death.²³ In the heady atmosphere that followed the invasion, civilian and military leaders alike assumed their role in that often-troubled country was complete and prepared to move on to the next mission.²⁴ Even as American troops tracked al-Qaeda figures in Afghanistan, the administration's attention was already focused elsewhere. Within days of the 9/11 attacks, key members of the Bush administration, including Rumsfeld and apparently President Bush himself, began looking to topple Saddam Hussein in Iraq. The seemingly easy victory in Afghanistan convinced administration officials that Iraq would likewise be an easy

target and that the military could oust Hussein quickly and then step aside to allow a liberal democracy with a strong pro-American foreign policy to rise in Bagdad.²⁵

From a civil-military relations standpoint, the build up to the invasion of Iraq was an unmitigated disaster. President Bush himself remained aloof from the planning process, and Rumsfeld—with his allies in the administration—consistently disregarded advice that challenged their vision of winning the war on the cheap. Officers who pressed for more troops for the invasion were silenced. Military and civilian leaders alike invaded the country with no plan for postwar Iraq, assuming Iraqis would be too ecstatic at their liberation to cause trouble for American forces and that an orderly, law-abiding society would flourish even in the temporary absence of a government. Although American troops never found the promised weapons of mass destruction, Americans might have forgiven Bush except for the total lack of planning in the postwar nation.²⁶

As in Afghanistan, the initial ease of victory belied serious problems that awaited the US-led coalition in the aftermath of regime change. Although the Army had plans on file for the overthrow of Hussein's regime, senior Bush administration officials declined to consult these, instead favoring their own, more optimistic, expectations of how the end of the war would play out.²⁷ Disaster followed in the form of a vicious insurgency. Most of the blame for this has been laid at the feet of Bush's civilian appointee in Iraq, Paul Bremer. In disbanding the Iraqi army, Bremer created a ready supply of well-trained young men to fight against American troops while eliminating potential guards for vast stockpiles of weaponry—making such stockpiles easy pickings for new enemies in the country. Moreover, Bremer's efforts at de-Ba'athification destabilized the country, denied the Iraqi people essential services, and created a mass of unemployed, angry citizens who might otherwise have helped establish an interim government.²⁸

Military and civilian leaders alike bear responsibility for the miserable state of planning prior to the Iraq invasion, but the military as a whole is somewhat absolved in light of Rumsfeld's practices throughout his tenure at the DOD. Rumsfeld never indicated any real desire to hear unfiltered advice from the military, even behind closed doors. All indications point to his preference for "yes-men" who would back him on whatever he had already decided to do. He largely disregarded the

Joint Chiefs of Staff—supposedly the primary source of military advice for the DOD—and ostentatiously excluded senior military leaders from the planning process.²⁹ Officers who challenged Rumsfeld's views saw their careers come to a halt. Gen Eric Shinseki, when directly asked how many troops would be needed in Iraq while under oath before Congress, gave the number of “a few hundred-thousand.” Rumsfeld very publicly blasted Shinseki and reduced him to a lame duck for the remainder of his term as Army chief of staff. Marine lieutenant general Greg Newbold saved the Pentagon the trouble of giving him a similar treatment; Newbold resigned, forfeiting an almost certain appointment as Marine Corps commandant rather than oversee the invasion of Iraq as Rumsfeld and Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz planned to run it.³⁰ Practices such as these gutted the effectiveness of the civil-military relationship under Rumsfeld. The DOD—and, by extension, the president himself—lost the ability to receive expert advice from the military, since officers feared to challenge what Rumsfeld wanted to hear, and those officers who could have critiqued Rumsfeld's plans were systematically shut out.

President Bush continued his practice of ignoring relations between Rumsfeld and the military, but the rapidly deteriorating situation in the DOD was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. Meanwhile, the easy victories in both Afghanistan and Iraq had given way to vicious insurgencies, and American forces teetered on the edge of disaster in both countries. Still, Bush felt it was politically inexpedient to oust his secretary of defense during his first term, and Rumsfeld remained with the administration through the 2004 election. Very early in his second term, Bush wisely, if belatedly, decided it was time for a change. His choice to take over DOD was as inspired as Rumsfeld's appointment had been ill advised. Robert Gates was serving as president of Texas A&M University at the time of his appointment, but he came into office with an extensive background in government. A former Air Force officer and director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Gates was also well aware of the situation on the ground in Iraq, having been part of the Iraq Study Group that evaluated the state of the conflict.³¹

Gates enjoyed a far more harmonious relationship with the military than his predecessor had, though, crucially, this relationship did not come at the expense of the new secretary's willingness to assert his authority. Gates routinely overruled the military on a host of issues, espe-

cially when it came to transitioning from conventional war to counter-insurgency (COIN) and curbing out-of-control spending in the DOD. However, Gates asserted his authority in the midst of an entirely different relationship than had Rumsfeld. Gates consistently communicated his tremendous respect for the military and worked in collaboration with them to implement reforms. While he ordered the transition to a more COIN-focused strategy—and fired one officer who stood in the way—he did so on the basis of the advice and experience of a cohort of officers led by Gen David Petraeus.³²

His improved relationship with the military notwithstanding, Gates came into office without any illusions about his responsibility: he was to salvage the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, both of which teetered on the brink of defeat.³³ Although he had been part of the Iraq Study Group that recommended a reduction of American forces in the region, once he joined the Bush administration he became an outspoken champion for what may well have been its defining moment: the *surge*.

In 2007, generals continued to insist that Iraq would stabilize soon enough if they stuck to their current strategy. President Bush again chose to discount the military's advice, though this time with much more promising results. Overruling key officers, notably several on the ground in the theater of war, Bush ordered a surge in Iraq.³⁴ In addition to a substantial increase in troops, he ordered a shift in strategy that included a much heavier focus on protecting Iraqi civilians—even at risk of heavier US casualties—and drew troops out of (relatively) safe bases to interact with the population.³⁵ The crucial takeaway from the surge, however, is not that Bush overruled his officers but the way he overruled them. He listened carefully to their advice, weighed the various options, and made clear decisions. There was no question in what he was ordering and what direction he was taking the conflict. That should not detract from the reality that Bush based his decision on the advice of those within the military; it was a civilian decision to back the views of some military commanders over others.³⁶ With the surge came a change in command, as Gen David Petraeus assumed full authority over American troops in Iraq. Petraeus oversaw not only a change in strategy in Iraq but also a dramatic change in the American military's understanding of its future. Backed by Bush and Gates, he spearheaded a revolutionary focus on COIN as a core aspect of Army doctrine, giving it equal weight to waging conventional interstate war.³⁷

The Bush administration's backing of Petraeus and his allies within the armed forces did not negate the fact that the surge and shift to COIN was a result of civilian supremacy. There was a significant faction within the military that hotly opposed Petraeus's strategic vision and elements of the surge. However, the military as a whole dutifully fulfilled its orders. Fred Kaplan dubbed Petraeus and his allies "The Insurgents," but it is also worth noting there was no effective COIN within the ranks of the military. In part, this is a reflection of genuine professionalism of the armed forces, but it is also worth noting that President Bush acted in the context of a relationship managed by Robert Gates—not Donald Rumsfeld—and that while his final decision did not please everyone, he did include the senior ranks of the officer corps in the decision-making process. Moreover, in time, the surge proved remarkably successful.³⁸ For all its false starts and open tensions, the Bush administration ended with fairly strong civil-military relations. It fell to Bush's successor to pick up where he left off.

Civil-Military Relations in the Obama Administration

From the first shots in 2003, Obama was an opponent of the Iraq War, and he won the election of 2008 in part on promises to end the conflict.³⁹ That said, like Bush, President Obama came into office more concerned with domestic issues than foreign affairs. His primary focus was on the financial crisis that struck just weeks before the election and on implementing his promised health-care reform program. Nevertheless, having inherited two ongoing wars, Obama could only distance himself from foreign affairs so much. His main desire seems to have been to end both conflicts as quickly as possible—even against the judgment of the military. In retaining Robert Gates at the DOD and appointing Hillary Clinton as secretary of state, Obama included two decidedly hawkish leaders in his cabinet, and both secretaries voiced perspectives amenable to the military in Obama's first term.⁴⁰ For his part, Obama has consistently demonstrated a willingness to respect and maintain amicable relations with those with whom he disagrees, and partisan claims that he snubs and demonstrates hostility toward the military are, at best, greatly exaggerated.

Nevertheless, severe strains on the civil-military relationship, nearly rivaling those at the nadir of Rumsfeld's tenure, have marked the Obama

administration's tenure. Robert Gates paints an unflattering picture of a divided administration, with himself and Secretary Clinton constantly clashing with cabinet members hostile to their—and the president's—foreign policy agenda and deeply mistrustful of the military. President Obama has had ample reason to feel frustrated by the military as well. He felt undermined by officers who went public with the debate over what to do in Afghanistan and, not without reason, felt that many in uniform have undermined his authority throughout his administration. Conflicting ideologies and cultures have tainted civil-military relations under Obama, making the relationship an especially difficult one to manage.

On the campaign trail, candidate Obama cast the war in Iraq as particularly detrimental to the country because it drew precious resources away from the ongoing fight in Afghanistan.⁴¹ Upon taking office, however, President Obama proved equally reluctant to pour resources into the Afghan war. In a marked shift from 2007, the military now enthusiastically pushed for a surge, while the new president sought any alternative he could find to increasing troop strength in the region.⁴² The military ultimately got its way; Obama ordered an increase in troop strength of 30,000, while requesting an additional 10,000 from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. However, the whole affair had a deleterious impact on civil-military relations. Obama forever after believed he had been boxed-in by the military, which failed to provide him with the series of options he believed it was their duty to give. More seriously, repeated leaks by the military made the entire debate a public one, undermining the president's ability to give the military anything less than its full demands. Obama and his civilian advisers felt betrayed by the whole affair, tainting subsequent interactions between the White House and senior military leaders.⁴³

Meanwhile, the president's insistence that there would be a full review of the situation in Afghanistan one year hence, and his decision to dilute US goals from the destruction of al-Qaeda to simply stabilizing the nation clearly signaled to the military that he intended to get out of that country as quickly as reasonably possible. Of course, this message was not primarily intended for military consumption; Obama wanted the American people, and especially congressional Democrats, to know he was committed to ending the war in Afghanistan.⁴⁴ Notwithstanding the fact that he has been largely stymied in this goal for his entire ad-

ministration, at the time it soured relations with senior military leaders early on in his administration. Troops in Afghanistan have felt pressure from the White House and believe the president is rushing them out of the country, while jeopardizing gains made at great sacrifice.⁴⁵

Calling an end to any war is, of course, the president's decision, and the military by and large accepted its mandate to stabilize Afghanistan as quickly as possible. However, the entire affair fed an underlying resentment—by the administration and the military—in civil-military relations that has only grown in Obama's response to repeated crises in the Middle East and South Asia. There is a culture clash between the Obama White House and the military that has made healthy civil-military relations extremely difficult. At best, Obama has worked to keep his options open on a variety of foreign policy issues.⁴⁶ At worst, he has demonstrated a lack of any coherent strategy and an unwillingness to make decisions.⁴⁷ Neither of these shortcomings is particularly appealing to those in uniform. Military officers overwhelmingly tend to prefer clear, well-defined strategic goals and sufficient resources to achieve those ends. Military culture values clear objectives, a plan for pursuing them, and clarity on what actions US forces can and cannot take to carry out that plan. Civilian leaders, Obama in particular, prefer to have a variety of options on the table and to take their time evaluating a host of political factors before making a final decision; in fact, civilian leaders generally prefer not to make any "final" decision but to keep options open to adapt strategy and tactics.⁴⁸

These differing cultures need not always lead to alienation, even if friction will always be present. Constant dialogue and genuine trust between civilian and military leaders can mitigate these tensions.⁴⁹ Unfortunately, mutual trust and sympathy have been sorely lacking in the Obama administration. Many senior military leaders are predisposed to resent or doubt President Obama due to party affiliation and ideological disagreements. It does not help that the administration coincides with sequestration, creating deep and devastating budget cuts in the DOD budget. Although sequestration resulted from congressional inaction, Obama said and did precious little to avert the crisis, injuring his standing with the military.⁵⁰ Furthermore, the top brass has doubts about Obama's strategic vision, and there seems to be a significant set of officers who question his competence as commander-in-chief.⁵¹ Obama has made a number of public political promises, notably not committing US troops against

ISIL, that have left the military feeling constrained, unable to form a strategy for confronting the threat amid their commander-in-chief's increasingly restrictive public statements.⁵²

On a deeper level, too many military leaders sense a lack of respect from the president and reciprocate his perceived disdain. President Obama has further suffered from a substantial contingent within the military that bitterly resent him and dislike many of his civilian appointees. Gen Stanley McChrystal, the senior commander in Afghanistan, lost his job after a *Rolling Stone* article detailed a pattern of rampant disrespect among McChrystal's inner circle for several civilian leaders, including Vice President Joe Biden. McChrystal does not seem to have personally participated in this behavior, but he made no effort to quash it, which his subordinates seem to have interpreted as tacit approval.⁵³ Meanwhile, prominent officers continue to try to shape policy outside the White House through congressional testimony and well-timed leaks, actions that can only strain the president's trust in his officer corps.⁵⁴ Just before his recent resignation, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel enjoyed only a 26-percent approval rating among the military and civilians in national-security related posts.⁵⁵ In the final days of 2014, one poll found that only 15 percent of active-duty members of the military approve of their commander-in-chief.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, retired officers have a ready audience in the news media to critique the president and his policies.

A lack of communication has exacerbated the strained state of civil-military relations, for which President Obama must bear a good deal of the blame, given his failure to communicate his trust in the military and willingness to allow many in his administration to openly perceive the military as the enemy. The feeling is too often mutual. Obama, according to Gates, can feel ill at ease around military officers.⁵⁷ His initial resentment toward those in uniform for boxing him in on the surge in Afghanistan never fully dissipated; many civilian appointees within the Obama administration continue to see all branches of the armed services as hostile entities bent on undermining the president's authority.⁵⁸ Seemingly trivial missteps, like failing to set aside a latté to salute a Marine, seem to imply a lack of regard for military protocol and men and women in uniform in general.⁵⁹ The reaction to such incidents is overblown and mostly partisan, but a president with a strained civil-military relationship should at least seek to minimize avoidable slights.

Even when President Obama and the military concur, differing expectations of what the civil-military arrangement should look like have led to tension. While Secretary Gates and a majority of the officer corps favored the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” legislation, the manner in which Obama handled the repeal left the military feeling rushed to implement a major change without adequate time to prepare or to identify potential difficulties. While both the president and the military pursued and achieved the same goal of allowing homosexuals in the military to serve openly, the situation still left feelings of mutual frustration and resentment and a sense that the other side was the enemy.⁶⁰ Clashes when goals differ are inevitable, but clashes where both parties are pursuing the same goal indicate a serious communication issue. Whatever shortcomings the military is guilty of in respecting civilian control, it is the president’s job to facilitate communication, and Obama has struggled in this regard.

Despite all the tensions, the essential acceptance of the reality of civilian authority has never been overtly challenged under the Obama administration, nor has the president allowed his differences with the military to taint his personal interactions with leading officers. Obama has consistently pressed his military advisers to give him candid advice—behind closed doors, not via the media—and continues to treat every officer he engages in person with courtesy, respect, and even warmth. For all the criticism he has received in the media, his tenure as commander-in-chief includes notable accomplishments, not least of which was the wildly successful raid that killed Osama bin Laden.⁶¹ Moreover, Obama’s handling of foreign policy, while by no means masterful, has succeeded well beyond the military’s fears.⁶² Although he was maligned in the media for his supposedly weak response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, American sanctions are now beginning to take a serious toll on Vladimir Putin’s government. Obama has likewise proven more flexible than the military realized by adapting his strategy to now include boots on the ground against ISIL. In addition, the tensions aroused by repealing Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell and lifting the ban on women in combat have largely dissipated.

The Future of Civil-Military Relations

Given the cross-case analysis presented above, there appear to be three major problems affecting civil-military relations since 2001. First, civil-

ian micromanagement and military shirking have led to problems in the principal-agent relationship, deteriorating trust and weakening military autonomy, compliance, and effectiveness.⁶³ Second, wartime military strategy has often been ill-formed or incoherent. Third, a lack of proper decision making strains the civil-military relationship. Of course, there are ways to address each of these problems, mitigating—if not solving—the adverse effects the problems pose for American civil-military relations in future administrations.⁶⁴

Addressing Principal-Agent Problems

To address principal-agent problems, the next president can start fresh, resetting the civil-military relationship. The next president should meet with senior military officers and clearly outline his or her views on civil-military relations. The president should communicate, both publicly and behind closed doors, respect for the men and women in uniform. The president must insist on unfiltered advice from the military and promise to respect that advice even if it is not always followed. Crucially, the next president should not follow Secretary Rumsfeld's example in discouraging contrary advice or President Bush's example of allowing such practice within the new administration. Such adversarial behavior alienates the service and prevents civilian principals from receiving sound advice. Rewarding officers for *privately* speaking their minds—even if their advice is ultimately rejected—will enhance the autonomy, professionalism, and effectiveness of the military.

A strategic, generational program to provide greater opportunities for civil-military interactions would also be helpful in improving principal-agent issues. Trust cannot be established overnight, once a national emergency has occurred. Therefore, such a program should facilitate regular contact and collaboration between incoming and potential future presidents and generals. The idea would be for a deliberate outreach from the executive and legislative branches across the senior levels of civilian and military sectors. Doing so in a proactive manner, instead of after years of war, would foster better understanding and cooperation during crisis—when it matters most.

One approach would be to introduce current and rising military leaders to the president-elect during the transition period. While this could be a productive start, if it were the only solution, it would be too late in the process to be effectual. Another method would involve extend-

ing to general officers and select colonels regular congressional and executive branch invitations to various functions—not just committee hearings or interagency planning groups. Constructive areas for greater civil-military joint participation include team-building exercises, crises simulations, and war games/planning. The military regularly conducts the latter, but the number of civilians participating is minimal to none and could be increased significantly. Formal interactions are best for learning each other's strengths and weaknesses, while informal relationship building reinforces formal interactions and solidifies bonds of trust. Thus, a combination of these activities would be best.

These proactive strategies, taken to scale, would be very helpful should an ambitious congressman or senator be elected president. He or she would be better equipped to select military leaders not solely based on recommendations or reputation but also on personal knowledge. Had President Obama had the right mix of these interactions with the military, perhaps he would have had a greater reservoir of relationships from which to pick his general for Afghanistan. If so, he may have chosen differently, and that might have made a critical difference in preventing the principal-agent problems he later faced. Alternatively, perhaps he would have resolved not to go along with the military's scheme for a surge and COIN strategy had he interacted with some rising military officers who saw Afghanistan in a different light than those whose legacies were riding on achieving military victory at any cost. If Obama had benefited from these types of exposure repeatedly and early enough in his political career, he might have had a more realistic impression of the reality on the ground and avoided casting Afghanistan as "the good war" during the 2008 presidential campaign. Doing so opened the door for the military to leverage him for its preferred option. Of course, these are counterfactuals and one cannot know the outcome for certain, but given the implications, it is worth considering these as among a menu of appropriate interventions. Increased trust-building opportunities between military leaders and politicians are necessary, but they are not the only relationship of import. Military leaders, for instance, often have strained relationships with congressional and executive branch staff, including the National Security Council.⁶⁵

Given this, a third way to address principal-agent problems is to increase exchange assignments across the public sector. These are typically opportunities in which officers and career civil servants swap places for

a year at a time, but stints of several months at a time could also be undertaken. Military officers serve in interagency positions, while civil servants attend military staff or war colleges or serve in the Pentagon. Conceivably, civilians could also serve in an operational- or strategic-level military headquarters, anywhere between division and combatant command level. These cross-fertilization opportunities have increased in the last few years, yet they are encouraged more for military officers than for civilians, are still relatively few in number, and do not include civil servants being afforded opportunities at military headquarters—arguably more valuable in gaining military appreciation than attending a formal school for 10 months.

Cabinet secretaries, congressional leaders, and military officers should create more such opportunities and incentivize them for civilian progression—as they are for military advancement. Pegging such experiences to promotion, choice assignments, or service in congressional leadership and professional staff is a related way to incentivize participation. A similar model designed to encourage joint perspectives and overcome interservice rivalry derives from the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act, which requires a three-year joint assignment for promotion to general officer or flag rank. Legislation could require a similar type cross-sector experience for civil servant advancement to the senior executive service.

Additionally, while the post-9/11 environment has facilitated increased opportunities for mid-level officers and civilians to work together to accomplish common objectives, senior-level interactions are generally of a different nature. The latter tend to be a discussion that ends in civilian direction and military compliance or shirking. Ultimately, that is a large part of the fixed dynamic at that level. However, systematic interactions where public servants from civilian and military domains share common hardships, goals, and equal footing would break down barriers and bridge gaps that do exist—such as those demonstrated by Rumsfeld's and Obama's leadership of the military. The Bridging the Gap project, led by Duke University professor Bruce Jentleson and others, is one model in this regard. It hosts short conferences of a few days to a week in length. Likewise, the Program for Emerging Leaders run by National Defense University's (NDU) Center for the Study of Weapons of Mass Destruction facilitates such interactions. At NDU, the interaction involves repeated workshops over a three-year span. Bridging the Gap brings academics and policy makers together, while the Emerging

Leaders Program brings mid-level officers and civilian leaders together. Both use crisis simulation to bridge gaps and to prepare current and future leaders for American foreign policy contingencies. Proliferating these types of programs should translate into greater civil-military understanding and cooperation for the next generation of our country's leadership. In the meantime, greater supply of and participation in shorter, three-day to weeklong engagements that target current senior leaders on both civil and military sides would be useful.

Two-way exposure and learning are necessary and will help future leaders understand the language and culture of the other side. Similar institutionally driven solutions, like the examples described above, are necessary to drive a common national security perspective instead of one dominated by being a member of the civilian or military realm. Broad, deep, varied, and repeated civil-military interactions will help create the requisite political savviness necessary for future military leaders. Meanwhile, such experiences will also inculcate civilians with a better understanding of the military's roles and its limits.

Closing the Gap between Policy Aims and War Strategy

Helping to solve the strategic gaps between policy aims and war strategy, Congress should require a formalized biannual review of all ongoing conflicts by the House and Senate Armed Services Committees. Each review would require an accompanying presidential report. The idea would be to give an opportunity for the administration to make its case for the current and proposed strategy (if different) and for Congress to seek testimony and ask questions, fulfilling its broad advice and consent role. By requiring such biannual reviews, the United States could avoid going down the wrong path for too long. Although some sessions could be closed door to allow for classified discussions, this mechanism would provide a transparent process in which the media and the American public could play their respective roles. General Petraeus and Amb. Ryan Crocker's congressional testimony about the Iraq surge and new COIN strategy and their related progress reports could serve as a model for this biannual review.

This paradigm would be particularly helpful given the challenges outlined here: principal-agent problems leading to mismatches between policy and strategy. Having the top general responsible for the war strategy and the top diplomat charged with in-country implementation of

American policy appear before the congressional committees would be a forcing function to produce a unified civil-military effort. The hearings would afford the president additional means by which to coordinate efforts among his military and civilian wartime leaders. Collectively the president (through his report), the commanding general, and the ambassador would have to convince the Congress, the press, and the American public that the endeavor was worthwhile, success was possible, and the strategy was the appropriate one to achieve the intended goal.⁶⁶ The more *real*, not simply pro forma, the hearings are, the more helpful they would be to the president.

Getting the policy-strategy linkage correct is important for utilizing the nation's resources in the most efficient and effective ways possible. This is vital since there are always significant opportunity costs associated with national choices about how to use national resources, including domestic and international political capital and prestige. Getting decisions wrong can lead to unnecessary mission creep and adversely affect the national debt and public opinion, souring the citizenry for future uses of force that might be more important. Fundamentally, the policy-strategy linkage in war gives the military the best chance for winning the war. Thus, it is crucial for the country to ensure its military endeavors are nested properly within the nation's broader political goals—not working at cross-purposes.

Addressing Poor Decision-Making Structures

Addressing the sometimes poor decision-making cycle of the civil-military dialogue, future presidents could stand to gain by implementing certain measures. When presented with a recommendation, it would be useful for presidents to understand how many, who, and how strong were the dissenters; what were the strengths and weakness of the alternative recommendations relative to the recommended approach, or a standardized metric; and what new information or “game-changer” dynamics would shift dissenters and “majority-opinion” policy advocates to supporting another approach.⁶⁷ This information would prevent presidents from wrongly assuming that they were being presented with a unanimous recommendation. Instead, presidents should be privy to the dissent, the reasons for it, alternative options, and trade-offs. Some of the debates will occur before they reach the president, but some should occur in front of the president. Requiring national security advisers to

be the honest brokers and custodians of this process could work well, as he or she typically sets the parameters on many of these interactions. A presidential decision-making process that formally incorporated these techniques and considered long-term implications may have led to better decisions, a synched policy and strategy, and better outcomes with regard to the Iraq War.

For instance, President Bush's initial judgment was based on heuristics of what was necessary in a post-9/11 world to protect the United States—namely preemptive strikes. Perhaps through better decision-making processes Secretary of State Colin Powell and others could have persuaded the president not to invade Iraq in the first place, leveraging the threat of American military action to build greater international pressure for a diplomatic solution similar to the Russia-US brokered accord on Syria. Perhaps if the invasion went forward, more troops could have been apportioned up front. A thorough dialogue might have overcome personal agendas to better incorporate the Department of State's post-invasion planning, including deliberating about how nuanced de-Ba'athification and disbanding processes could have culled only those loyal to the Hussein regime. While nearly impossible to prove, the contextual history suggests differently, and likely better outcomes were possible. At a minimum, it was within America's grasp to connect its policy aims with its war strategy if President Bush had better led and controlled his military and civilian agents—as occurred later in his presidency with the surge.

The histories of the Bush and Obama administrations make clear that civil-military relations between the president and his key military leaders carry significant implications for strategy making and war outcomes. Therefore, it is imperative presidents and their national security teams prioritize getting that relationship right.⁶⁸ Furthermore, it is important for this group of civilian leaders to understand the ramifications of using force and various biases military leaders may harbor in different scenarios.⁶⁹ For their part, military leaders must present the president with genuine options, serving as professional advisers in the unequal dialogue.⁷⁰ It is essential the next president bridge the civil-military gap, thereby facilitating greater understanding and trust. Doing so will pay important dividends—even for peacetime defense policies and deterrence. The nation will reap the greatest payoff, however, during wartime. Stronger bonds of confidence between principals and agents results in

more effective organizations, as does the ability to figure out what works, why it works, and how to implement it.

Conclusion

Our recommendations carry the potential to mitigate the primary problems of the post-9/11 civil-military landscape. They can foster the relationship necessary to eliminate most instances of shirking by the military agents, serve to link policy and strategy, and ensure a sound civil-military decision-making process. Together, they may or may not prevent the next US foreign policy debacle. However, they will pay important dividends—for peacetime defense policies, readiness, and deterrence and for wartime effectiveness. **SSQ**

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