



Former Chairman General Richard B. Myers speaks at military professionalism conference

Know Yourself Before the Enemy

MILITARY PROFESSIONALISM'S CIVIL FOUNDATION

By IAN BRYAN

General Richard Myers, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and principal military advisor to President George W. Bush from 2001 to 2005, received a collection of articles on civil-military relations from a long-time friend and professor to help him prepare for the job. In the 20 years between attending the Army War College and becoming Chairman, he had received no formal education to prepare for managing the civil-military relationship, neither at the CAPSTONE course for general officers nor at the Harvard Kennedy School program for senior executives. General Myers shared this

anecdote at a January conference on military professionalism organized by the Institute for National Security Ethics and Leadership at the National Defense University, held at the request of Admiral Mike Mullen, the current Chairman. That conference focused on the profession's connections with civil society.

With grave international and budgetary challenges facing our military, however, some officers might not agree that the profession should focus now on civil-military relations. Yet civil-military relations, starting with its constitutional underpinnings, is at once the most fundamental component of American military professionalism and the one most

overlooked. And it is the arena where our military leaders seem to fail most often, or at least most spectacularly.

This is not a topic just for generals. Officers of every rank routinely make decisions that affect the military's complex relationship with society. Moreover, an officer is far behind if he only begins developing civil-military sensibilities after donning a star. Military leaders need to earn trust and respect while gaining influence with civilian policy elites—politicians, political appointees, lawyers, bureaucrats, and the like—who have been immersed in the domestic political milieu throughout their careers.

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 JUL 2011	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2011 to 00-00-2011	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Know Yourself Before the Enemy: Military Professionalism's Civil Foundation		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) National Defense University, 260 Fifth Ave., Bldg. 64, Fort McNair, Washington, DC, 20319		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			
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 5
			19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON

Education across the Department of Defense inadequately prepares officers for this arena, giving little attention to the civil-military relationship and its constitutional underpinnings. Even among the select field grade officers whom I taught at the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies with an in-residence military Intermediate Developmental Education under their belts, few have studied or even read the Constitution that they swore to defend since high school or college, even though most are hungry to engage on the topic. We have failed to tend the foundation of American military professionalism.

Neglect of civil-military expertise among officers manifests in views incompatible with our oath, hindering representative government and undermining the societal trust prerequisite to provisioning a strong military. I have heard a well-known retired general officer imply, off the record, that the law is what the President and his administration say it is, notwithstanding the Constitution's contrary assertion. Officers have argued to me in private and in class, and one recently in print, that their personal sense of right and wrong trumps judgments made via our political process and the chain of command.

The profession has permitted a blind spot to form at the center of the officer's duty. This neglect of civil-military competence makes it more difficult for officers to serve effectively, leaving them less perceptive of the Nation's needs and wants. Civil society is of course where resources are provided and where military leaders must look to decipher parameters for sustainable action and to divine unclear objectives.

It will not be enough to bolt civil-military literacy onto an already constructed idea of officer professionalism framed around technical competence. Relations with civil society must undergird the American officer's professional identity. For if civil-military relations are unhealthy, then technical competence is unsustainable or may even work against the Nation's values and interests, particularly as military measures increasingly impinge on the homeland.

A profession's mores will coalesce around its members' sense of purpose, and

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the profession will resist anything that detracts from that perceived purpose. In military institutions, this means that only by understanding the domestic context that gives rise to the officer's authority and mission can he understand his role. Those in uniform agree that the military exists to bring force to bear in pursuit of the Nation's interests, but beyond that, consensus frays. An officer's conception of the military's role must begin with understanding society's values and how those values are expressed in the form and philosophy of a government that supplies and legitimates the officer's work. The officer will be a more trusted servant and thus more persuasive if his words and deeds reflect a grounding in, and a broad congruence with, the philosophy of American government and the bedrock American political compact, the Constitution.

Professionalism

Samuel Huntington penned a seminal study of civil-military relations, *The Soldier and the State*, in which he defined professions as possessing *corporateness*, *expertise*, and a *duty to society*.¹ Experts debate a profession's exact components, but Huntington's framework endures and captures the essence of most competing schemes. The framework provides a good vantage point for analyzing the military professional's relationship to civil society. The first of Huntington's three tenets of professionalism, *corporateness*, refers to the degree that military professionals perceive themselves as an institution with a set of values and standards separate from others and designed to promote the institution's purpose. Combat effectiveness demands institutional physical and psychological separateness from society that no other profession matches, transcending vocation to become a way of life. That divide is deeper still as the classically conservative and communal military outlook stands apart from the classically liberal and individualistic American society that it serves.

Corporateness is an avenue to professionalism's second component, *expertise*. Professionalism is sometimes used as a synonym for technical and leadership expertise that puts fire on the target, but the officer requires a broader conception of expertise. The officer's expertise can be divided among the management of three key relationships: relations with entities outside the United States that include training friends and fighting enemies;



internal military relations, including issues of command and doctrine; and civil-military relations. Officer professional development focuses on the first two.

Military expertise in managing all these relationships only serves the Nation when geared tightly to the third component of professionalism: duty. It is of little value for officers to absorb a vague duty to country. Officers need a sophisticated and even theoretical sense of duty that helps them answer to what end, by what ways, and with whom duty lies amid an ever-changing context. Democracy shifts much of the moral as well as political autonomy and responsibility from the government, especially the military, and places it on the society for which the military acts. This can only be so if the military is a faithful instrument of the elected leadership. Direction from higher authority, however, is never comprehensive at any level. The officer must constantly assume ideological and material values as he crafts advice and action. Such judgments should sprout from the American political compact that the officer has sworn to defend. It is an institutional failure that the military demands more attention from officers on the proper use of the Internet than it demands they spend on packing this professional foundation.

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A System of Law

The American political order centers not on geography or person but on a set of ideas about domestic political relationships. External security being secondary, the Founders rejected the protection of the world's most powerful nation, Britain, to pursue a system of diffuse political power that would permit a classically liberal society. Our country's founders sought a government that ruled through law, written and executed by elected representatives. The Founders built our system around a suspicious and realist conception of human nature where ambition would counteract ambition among the political branches of government. The preeminent law is the Constitution, setting forth a Federal Government of limited powers wherein no Federal officer may act without authority tracing back to that document, usually via statute. A standing military is not required by the Constitution and was created by legislation, and thus the Armed Forces are an entirely beholden creation of the political branches without any constitutional grant of independent political power. In fact, fear that a standing army would become untethered from its masters led many Founders to look to the state militias as a check against the regular army, inspiring the Second Amendment's proclamation that a well-regulated militia is necessary to the security of a free state.

Burdened by heavy responsibility and imbued with patriotism, officers want to use power for good. Like others in government, they focus on their technical function, security, and sometimes see law as an obstacle. Military officers find orders especially difficult to swallow when they imperil the men and women under their command without a justification the officer finds convincing. Some have concluded that the officer's duty transcends law, arguing that conscience and perceptions of national security imperatives should instead be the lodestar.

Our constitutional system, however, cannot abide a military that reserves for

itself the final say on anything. Concern for a standing military's political role is reflected in the constitutional debates and the document itself, not fear that political leaders might issue unwise or immoral orders, policy, or legislation. Moreover, safety is not the warrior's mission or even a preeminent military value. Military honor requires facing risk from the enemy, and U.S. Servicemembers swear to accept the risk inherent in serving a government of dispersed powers. Commanders are to care for their troops, but they must also put them at risk, and the commander does not get the final word on when or for what reasons that occurs. Where the question is between civil and military authority, the Constitution's weight falls entirely on the civil side. Officers taunt the public trust to suggest otherwise.

Trust

Without trust, military opinion would fall on deaf ears and society would rightly hobble the force with safeguards and oversight. Our national security apparatus already labors under myriad legislative restrictions and reporting requirements imposed partly because overzealous government officials have sometimes behaved as though they were ignorant of the American system. To navigate this uncertain political terrain, the officer needs grounding in the fundamentals of our government and the tools to conceptualize the military's role in society. The professional officer must work to inspire trust that he will limit his craft to the means and purposes authorized by proper civilian authority—executive, legislative, or judicial.

Trust in the military, although widespread today, is counterintuitive and inorganic to a representative government jealous of its liberty, and so trust needs constant care. The nonmilitia soldier is a danger to society by virtue of his access to and proficiency with weapons and the potential divergence of his interests from those of society, or so the Founders generally agreed. The military's privileged access to information about threats and capabilities, much of which it makes secret, likewise bequeaths power. Military information and the military opinion it stands behind influence national policy and the resources allocated to defense. The chief author of the Constitution, James Madison, began "Federalist No. 41" by acknowledging the danger that so worried his countrymen, warning that with regard to a standing



military, a wise nation will "exert all its prudence in diminishing both the necessity and the danger of resorting to one which may be inauspicious to its liberties."

The fear today is not a coup but, as President Dwight Eisenhower explained in his farewell address, that the military and its vendors will drive policy and become an end rather than a means, shaping the political landscape to their interests. Ignorance and complacency replace nefarious intent as patriotic men and women seek expedience and too conveniently see in their own interests the Nation's as well.



Signing of the Constitution by Howard Chandler Christy

Architect of the Capitol

While military officers are dedicated to their mission and country, they are susceptible to the same cognitive limitations that groups typically impose on their members. The Department of Defense, Services, and every subordinate military tribe see the Nation's interests from institutional perspectives. That each faction thinks it should have more control and a larger share of the budget is as certain as celestial motion. It is silly to think that military officers are not swayed by their institutional interests. Of course, elected leaders pursue institutional and personal advantage, too, but they have a popular and

constitutional mandate and are accountable to the voters.

President Abraham Lincoln defended his actions that arguably violated the Constitution during the Civil War by asking rhetorically, "Are all the laws but one, to go unexecuted, and the government itself to go to pieces, lest that one be violated?" But the President is elected to lead one of the three branches of government with a duty to interpret and preserve the constitutional system, which affords him greater legitimate leeway to act. The idea of Presidential powers expanding in a national emergency is controversial, but the idea of

extra-constitutional powers for officers is not controversial among those with a rudimentary understanding of the system. It is patently illegitimate for an unelected officer to make decisions for the Nation in contravention of his elected civilian masters.

Senior officer resignation would be a way to pressure the President and Congress short of disobedience. This might bring quick satisfaction but at a high price to long-term legitimate military influence. Modern voters respect military opinion, so politicians fear public conflict with officers. If political leaders suspect generals will wield resignation



Members of inaugural class of Joint Special Operations Forces Senior Enlisted Academy pose for graduation photo

USSOCOM Public Affairs (Victoria Meyer)



Service chiefs and Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff testify before Senate Armed Services Committee

U.S. Air Force (Scott M. Ash)

interests and how to pursue them in military hands have fared poorly.

Besides, the idea of a single military opinion on any issue is an illusion. Debates rage throughout the military on nearly every issue. For example, although the Department of Defense projected an image of unified military support for General Stanley McChrystal's 2009 call for more troops in Afghanistan, large factions inside the military advocated quite different approaches. Resignation over such issues would confuse the public, devalue military opinion, and rob us of experienced leaders.

Duty to What?

Obedience is important not only for subordinating the military to civilian authority but also for creating combat power. Military effectiveness demands concentrating power at key points in time and space. Orchestrating precise movements, especially with large organizations and in the face of mortal danger, places a premium on obedience. But obedience to what? That the American officer must be a faithful servant of the people through their elected representatives does not close the issue. Under the U.S. Constitution, obedience is only allowed to proper authority and lawful orders. The Congress's and Supreme Court's legislative and judicial authorities may clash with power claimed by the Commander in Chief, presenting the officer with a constitutional dilemma. Officers cannot delegate their constitutional duty to their legal counsel, and international or domestic crisis is hardly the time to start thinking in constitutional terms about professional duty. Officers should expect as much since they take an oath to the Constitution—and to no one else and to no other end.

Policy Responsibility

Much of what constitutes a sound civil-military basis for officer professionalism boils down to deflecting domestic political power and responsibility for policy success and failure that would come with that power. Paradoxically, this is not an abdication but the height of military duty, stemming from the institutional imperative to preserve influence and trust, and the national imperative to leave political authority in the hands of the people and their civil representatives. While an officer may be able to steer policy in the short term by leveraging information and prestige,

political responsibility will damage the military's long-term ability to secure the Nation's interests, potentially triggering a sustained cycle of institutional decline.

Averting policy responsibility can be especially tough when politicians want to turn policy over to generals and draft behind the military's popularity. President George W. Bush, for example, repeatedly asserted during 2007–2008 that he would do just as General David Petraeus advised in Iraq. Influence is good, but public military liability for policy is not. Getting out from under policy delegation and responsibility can be tricky, but officers need the acumen to recognize it, the wisdom to fear it, and the political skills to resist it. Deflecting the Nation's foreign and defense policy authority and responsibility is perhaps ironically the most legitimate purpose for which the officer can employ his domestic political advantages.

The military has ridden a wave of public esteem for decades, throughout controversial action in the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. Trust and respect strengthen the military in many ways, from recruitment to the sway accorded to military advice. This reputation and moral authority would not survive if the military acted as a political branch and took greater responsibility for policy.

Individuals and institutions seek power to promote their values and interests. Intellect, however, can provide the basis to restrain and channel this basic drive in order to serve interests beyond the self and institution. The officer corps has either taken this intellect for granted or failed to see its importance, leaving us with inadequate civil-military competence. Society's trust is always at stake, modulating the resources and autonomy delegated to those in uniform. Moreover, the officer needs civil-military expertise to comprehend the Nation's ends, to predict the domestic reaction to his ways and means, and to articulate military risks and opportunities. The civil-military foundation of officership is woefully underprioritized, and at least a more serious treatment in professional military education, starting with the Constitution, is justified. **JFQ**

NOTE

¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1957).

as a political weapon, then administration officials will simply not seek military advice, or they will choose pliant or like-minded uniformed advisors.

Although lawful and far more professionally honorable than disobeying legal orders, resignation nevertheless rests on an incorrect notion of the officer's role. The officer is not a policy advocate but an advisor, helping political leaders make informed choices. Civilian leaders should listen to military advice, but are always free to act contrary. Political leadership is better placed to blend society's diverse values, which is the essence of the politician's craft. Military advice has been rejected sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. History does not support the argument that the country would be better off if the military's advice were followed more often. History does suggest that countries placing authority for determining national

obedience is important not only for subordinating the military to civilian authority but also for creating combat power