A PRIMER ON U.S. CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

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The field of civil-military relations involves the study of interactions among the *civilian public* of a state, the *civilian government* of that state, and the *military* of the state (see Figure 1). In a democratic republic, such as the United States, the public delegates governing authority to the government, which in turn delegates authority for the legitimate use of force to the military. Peter Feaver notes “most of democratic theory is concerned with devising ways to ensure that the people remain in control even as professionals conduct the business of government.”¹ Thus, in an ideal world, there are “two hands on the sword.”² As Frank Hoffman describes, the civilian hand determines when “to pull [the sword] from the scabbard and employ it” and thence guides its use. This is the “dominant hand” of policy, the purpose for which the sword exists in the first place. The military hand “has a stronger role in sharpening the sword and wielding it in battle.”³ Put another way, “the claim of democratic theory is that even when civilians are less expert, they are still rightfully in charge.”⁴

![Figure 1: The Civil-Military Relations Triad](attachment:image)

In reality, this nested delegation leads to the fundamental challenge of civil-military relations. Feaver summarizes this challenge as “the civil-military problematique”: how “to reconcile a military strong enough to do anything the civilians ask them to with a military subordinate enough to do only what civilians authorize them to do.”⁵ One can think of civil-military

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⁴ Feaver 2003, p. 6
⁵ The author would like to thank Lindsay P. Cohn for suggesting the triad concept and providing the triangle illustration.
outcomes, in the most general sense, as falling along a continuum between two extremes. At one end, the military is so weak it collapses on the battlefield and is unable to assure the security of society. On the other end, the military is so powerful it overthrows the civilian government. Of course, there are many possibilities between these extremes. Feaver elaborates, “Because the military must face enemies, it must have coercive power, the ability to force its will on others. But coercive power often gives the holder the capability to enforce its will on the community that created it.”7 Feaver notes that while the traditional fear is this coercive power will be used in a coup, coercive power also creates “the possibility that a parasitic military could destroy society by draining it of resources,” or “a rogue military could involve the polity in wars and conflicts contrary to society’s interests and expressed will,” or the military could “resist civilian direction and pursue its own interests.”8

As the preceding discussion suggests, in studying civil-military relations it is important to understand the difference between normative arguments—discussions of what ought to be—and descriptive arguments—discussions of what is. Reasonable people can disagree on particular aspects of the ideal civil-military relationship in the United States, depending on their ideology and values. Empirical evidence can, however, help us sort through the reality of the existing relationship. Another important distinction is between empirical data that simply represent facts—for example, the percentage of military personnel who identify as Republican—and empirical studies that attempt to investigate a causal relationship—for example, that military training makes individuals more Republican. The former is simply a matter of data availability and accuracy, while the latter requires not only data but also appropriate methods for analyzing the relationship between different variables.9

Some aspects of American civil-military relations are relatively settled from a normative perspective. For example, most agree the relationship between the military and the civilian government is properly one of military subordination. Other aspects of civil-military relations are more controversial. When does military dissent cross a line and threaten civilian control? Is there an operational sphere over which the military should have relative autonomy? Should a democratic society rely on citizen-soldiers, or create a professional “warrior caste”? To what degree should military culture represent society’s values, particularly in terms of diversity and inclusiveness? What role should retired officers play in partisan elections? Aside from such philosophical disagreements over these normative issues, disputes over the validity of various

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7 Feaver 2003, 5
8 Ibid
9 You may be familiar with the phrase “correlation does not equal causation.” When social scientists say this, they are generally referring to concerns such as selection effects, endogeneity, and omitted variable bias, all of which complicate the identification of the causal relationship between two correlated variables. For example, if we find military officers are more likely to identify as Republican than the general population (identifying Republican is correlated with being in the military) this could be a result of a) military training causing individuals to identify Republican, b) individuals who already identify Republican being more likely to join the military, or c) some other factor (such as geography, race, or gender) that is correlated with both military status and partisanship.
types of data and methods of analysis mean observers may not agree on how closely the civil-
military reality resembles any of these normative visions.

Disagreements over these issues have led to some fairly serious civil-military clashes, despite the
United States’ relative success in “solving” the civil-military problematique. From time to time
throughout U.S. history, certain circumstances—political, strategic, social, technological, etc.—
have changed to such a degree that the terms of the existing civil-military relationship have
become inadequate. The resulting tension has led the parties to renegotiate the balance in order to
restore equilibrium.

Many argue America has been in such a period of disequilibrium, with varying degrees of
intensity, since the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s. The change in the security
environment occasioned by the collapse of the Soviet Union led to a lack of consensus regarding
what the U.S. military was expected to do in the new security environment and questions about
what peacetime demobilization would look like in the all-volunteer force. This recent period of
friction is in keeping with Michael Desch’s “threat environment theory,” which suggests civil-
military relations are more likely to be troubled when external threats to society are low. Desch
writes:

[In] states facing indeterminate threat environments, such as low internal and low external
threats … Civilian and military ideas may not remain in harmony. Hence, we should
expect low-level civil-military conflict to emerge. The problem is likely to be one of
coordination rather than insubordination … conflicts will pit one civilian-military
coalition against another, rather than simply civilians against the military.10

During this period, observers worried the U.S. military had become more alienated from civilian
leadership and civilian society than at any time in American history.11 In particular, analysts
expressed concern the U.S. military had become politicized and partisan, resistant to civilian
oversight, and too influential in inappropriate areas of American society.12 For example, Richard
Kohn argued (repeatedly) that U.S. civil-military relations had eroded to the point where crisis
loomed.13 He expressed concern that the American military “has grown in influence to the point of
being able to impose its own perspective on many policies and decisions,” which manifests

10 Michael C. Desch. Civilian Control of the Military: The Changing Security Environment (Baltimore, MD: Johns
Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 15-16
11 Tom Ricks “The Widening Gap Between Military and Society,” The Atlantic, Jul 1997 is a (very readable) classic
of this “civil-military gap” genre.
12 Mackubin Thomas Owens, “Understanding Civil-Military Relations During the Clinton-Bush Era,” Derek Reveron
M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies, Project on US Post-Cold War Civil-Military Relations, Working Paper 13,
Harvard University, June 1997; and “Coming Soon: A Crisis in Civil-Military Relations,” World Affairs, Winter
2008.
itself in “repeated efforts on the part of the military to frustrate or evade civilian authority when the opposition seems likely to preclude outcomes the military dislikes.” The result was an unhealthy civil-military pattern that “could alter the character of American government and undermine national defense.”

While Kohn acknowledges civil-military tensions are not new, he argues the traditional foundations of American civil-military relations—reverence for the Constitution, a small peacetime force, reliance on citizen-soldiers, and a military ethic of subordination—are eroding, and current conditions are such that the threat of military insubordination is much greater than in past. Kohn argues the military is “increasingly disconnected, even in some ways estranged, from civilian society,” while at the same time becoming a “recognizable interest group,” “larger, more bureaucratically active, more political, more partisan, more purposeful, and more influential than anything similar in American history.” According to Kohn, the erosion of civilian control gives rise to “toxic” civil-military relations, which, he argues, damage national security in at least three ways: “by paralyzing national security policy”; “by obstructing and in some cases sabotaging American ability to intervene in foreign crises or to exercise international leadership”; and by “undermining the confidence of the armed forces in their own uniformed leadership.”

While some observers blamed the civil-military tensions of the 1990s on President Clinton’s personal relationship with the military, things did not markedly improve under his successor in the years after 9/11. Illustrative of civil-military tensions were clashes between the uniformed services and President George W. Bush’s first secretary of defense, Donald Rumsfeld, over efforts to “transform” the military from a Cold War force to one better able to respond to likely future contingencies, and the planning and conduct of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. These tensions peaked with the so-called “Revolts of the Generals” in the spring of 2006, which saw a number of retired Army and Marine Corps generals publicly and harshly criticize Secretary Rumsfeld.

With Rumsfeld’s departure and the apparent success of the “surge” in Iraq, some expressed hope harmony might return to U.S. civil-military relations. To be sure, Rumsfeld’s successor as secretary of defense, Robert Gates, did a great deal to improve the civil-military climate. But

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14 Kohn 2002, p. 9
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., p. 23.
17 Ibid., pp. 21-22.
18 Ibid., p. 12.
19 See, for example, Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn (eds) Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap
subsequent personnel decisions by Gates, in addition to a public disagreement on Afghanistan strategy between President Obama and General Stanley McChrystal and the latter’s relief after a Rolling Stone article revealed a command climate that openly disparaged civilian leaders, make it clear the state of U.S. civil-military relations remains contentious.

Whether or not they realize it, military officers and federal civil servants take part every day in interactions that shape American civil-military relations. In this primer, we will discuss prominent normative and descriptive analyses of each of the three key relationships—between civilian government and military, between military and civilian public, between civilian public and civilian government. The primer will cover prominent academic theories—including the works of Samuel Huntington, Morris Janowitz, and Peter Feaver—as well as more practical applications to recent American civil-military history. The objective of the primer is to enable national security professionals, military and civilian, to critically evaluate arguments relating to civil-military relations and to be aware of the implications of their own actions.

**The Relationship Between the Military and the Civilian Government**

The relationship between the military and the civilian government has been the leg of the civil-military triangle that has received the most attention from political scientists. In particular, analysts have focused on “civilian control”—the civilian government’s ability to ensure it gets the military policy it wants, despite the fact the military is physically more powerful than the civilian government in that it directly controls the instruments of violence. There is a temptation to believe “civilian control” as such is not an issue in the United States—that if the United States does not face the prospect of a military coup d’etat then all is well in the realm of civil-military relations. But this is a straw man. Lindsay P. Cohn writes that a true understanding of “control” extends beyond which party—civilian or military—has formal authority to include “the concepts of governance, influence, and obedience.” In particular, “The literature on political control of the military agent is largely in agreement on three points: civilians must have the institutions and authority to issue orders, they must not be subject to undue influence in the formulation of the orders, and they must be obeyed when they issue orders.”

In his classic work, *The Soldier and the State*, Huntington identifies three responsibilities of military leaders in relation to the civilian government. The first is the “representative function,”

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21 For example, Gates’ decision to fire two service secretaries and a service chief, to recommend against re-nominating the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff for a second term, and to force the retirement of a combatant commander.


25 Ibid., p. 385
the professional requirement “to represent the claims of military security within the state machinery.” Don Snider interprets this as the responsibility to “express their expert point of view on any matter touching the creation, maintenance, use, or contemplated use of the armed forces.”

The second responsibility is to exercise the “advisory function.” This is the professional imperative “to analyze and to report on the implications of alternative courses of action from the military point of view,” which Snider interprets as to provide “candid professional military advice to elected and appointed civilian leaders, regardless of whether the advice was solicited or regardless of whether the advice is likely to be welcomed.” Such advice does not include policy advocacy, which both Huntington and Snider consider to be beyond the legitimate role of military officers. The third responsibility is to exercise the “executive function.” Huntington writes this responsibility requires the professional military “to implement state decisions with respect to state security even if it is a decision which runs violently counter to his military judgment.”

Kohn picks up this thread of the executive function, arguing “civilians have the authority to issue virtually any order and organize the military in any fashion they choose.”

But in practice, the relationship is far more complex. Both sides frequently disagree among themselves. Further, the military can evade or circumscribe civilian authority by framing the alternatives or tailoring their advice or predicting nasty consequences; by leaking information or appealing to public opinion (through various indirect channels, like lobbying groups or retired generals and admirals); or by approaching friends in the Congress for support. They can even fail to implement decisions, or carry them out in such a way as to stymie their intent…..We are not talking about a coup here, or anything else demonstrably illegal; we are talking about who calls the tune in military affairs in the United States today.

This suggests a disconnect between normative ideals of civilian control of the military and the civil-military bargaining that occurs in practice. We now turn to an overview of the academic theories that examine the ways in which civilian control is likely to vary in practice, and the ways the civilian government can attempt to maximize control.

28 Huntington 1957, p. 72
29 Snider 2008, p. 267
Civilian Control in Practice

The “classical” literature on civil-military relations, epitomized by the works of Huntington and Morris Janowitz, focuses on ideological and ethical factors. Both authors suggest military professionalism is the key to ensuring civilian control. The aspect of this literature most likely to be familiar to military officers is Huntington’s theory of “objective control,” a system in which civilian and military spheres are distinct, and civilians grant military officers significant autonomy over operational and tactical decisions in exchange for the military’s willingness to stay out of politics and policy decisions. Huntington argues objective control maximizes military professionalism.

More recent work by Peter Feaver has shifted the focus from internal controls on military behavior (in the form of indoctrinating a professional ethic of subordination) to external controls in the form of monitoring and punishment. Feaver suggests the civil-military relationship can be modeled with the “principal-agent” framework familiar to economists who study contract theory and organizational economics. The civilian principal and military agent may have divergent preferences (generally not over the fundamental aim of national security, but over the means by which national security is to be achieved). At the same time, the military has more information about its activities, and expertise on military issues, than does the civilian principal. The challenge is for the civilian principal to ensure the military “does what it has contracted with the principal to do, how the principal has asked it to, with due diligence and skill, and in such a way as to reinforce the principal’s superior role in making the decisions and drawing the lines of any delegation.” Feaver suggests the civilian cannot achieve this by relying on military professionalism alone—instead the civilian principal must create a system in which it is able to monitor the military’s behavior and punish misbehavior accordingly.

In terms of achieving control, Cohn summarizes the relationship between different methods of control by turning to sociologist Max Weber, who argues that in terms of motives for obedience, “selfish gain is the weakest, but it can be strengthened by ideals or affinities, and one or both of

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33 Huntington 1957
34 In the classic economics formulation, the principal (a factory owner) hires an agent (employee) to work in the factory producing widgets. The principal would like the agent to produce as many widgets as possible for as low a wage as possible. Conversely, the agent would like to make as much money as possible for doing as little work as possible. Agent behavior that is in accordance with the principal’s wishes is known as “working,” while agent behavior that is not in accordance with the principal’s wishes is known as “shirking.” There is uncertainty over how the agent’s effort translates into widget production, so the principal cannot tell exactly how much effort the agent put forth. The principal therefore tries to find a way to either hire a hardworking agent and/or monitor the agent’s effort so he can be paid accordingly. The aspects of the principal-agent framework that transfer to civil-military relations are those of preference divergence and information asymmetry. See Feaver 2003, Chapter 3.
35 Feaver 2003, 68
36 Feaver 2003
these in conjunction with a belief in the legitimacy of the control relationship will yield the most stable situation.”

Cohn puts these factors together in more concrete terms as follows:

The strength of government control over its agents should increase when there are institutions supporting civilian authority, civilian leaders competent and confident in defense policy making, an agent culture of subordination to legitimate authority, an effective system of principal monitoring and punishment, and low average preference discrepancies between the government and the agent organization.

Civilian authority is complicated in the American case by the separation of power between the executive and legislative branches. As the constitutional scholar Edwin Corwin once famously observed, the Constitution is an "invitation to struggle for the privilege of directing American foreign policy" between Congress and the President. This tension has important implications for civil-military relations. What does it mean for the military to be subordinate to the civilian government when the civilian government is divided on military policy? While the President and secretary of defense control the military when it comes to the use of force, including strategy and rules of engagement, Congress controls the military directly with regard to force size, equipment, and organization, and indirectly regarding doctrine and personnel. Those who neglect the congressional role in American civil-military relations are missing an important element.

We will next turn to two questions concerning more nuanced aspects of the relationship between the military and the civilian government. First, what is the proper role for military advice and dissent? Second, remembering the two sides of the problematique, which pattern of control best ensures military effectiveness?

Military Advice and Dissent: Professional Supremacists vs. Civilian Supremacists

As noted earlier, Huntington asserts that military officers have a responsibility to represent and advise, but also to execute orders they disagree with. This is a nice theoretical distinction, but the line between advice, dissent, and disobedience can be blurrier in practice. Feaver describes a divide between “professional [military] supremacists,” who “argue that the primary problem for civil-military relations during wartime is ensuring the military an adequate voice and keeping civilians from micromanaging and mismanaging matters,” and “civilian supremacists” who

37 Cohn 2011, 385
38 Ibid., 387
“argue that the primary problem is ensuring that well-informed civilian strategic guidance is authoritatively directing key decisions, even when the military disagrees with that direction.”

Civilian supremacists argue the uniformed military in the American system should not possess a veto over policy. Indeed, civilians even have the authority to make decisions in what would seem to be the realm of purely military affairs. Feaver calls this “the right to be wrong.”

Eliot Cohen describes military input in policy making as an “unequal dialogue.” It is “a dialogue, in that both [the civilian and military] sides expressed their views bluntly, indeed, sometimes offensively, and not once but repeatedly—and unequal, in that the final authority of the civilian leader was unambiguous and unquestioned.” Scholars in this school note that the record illustrates that military judgment is not necessarily superior to that of the civilian decision makers, as will be discussed below with regard to the Iraq conflict.

By contrast, during the 1990s some military officers explicitly adopted the “professional supremacist” view that soldiers have the right to a voice in making policy regarding the use of the military instrument—indeed, they have the right to insist their views be adopted. Over the past several decades, the military has “pushed back” against civilian leadership on numerous occasions. This pushback has manifested itself (to use Feaver’s principal-agent formulation) in various forms of “shirking”: “foot dragging,” “slow rolling” and leaks to the press designed to undercut policy or individual policy-makers. Such actions were rampant during the Clinton presidency and during the tenure of Donald Rumsfeld as secretary of defense. Such pushback is based on the claim that civilians are making decisions without paying sufficient attention to the military point of view.

Feaver and others have suggested the extreme wing of the “professional supremacist” school has been encouraged by a serious misreading of an important book by H. R. McMaster, Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam. The subject of Dereliction of Duty is the failure of the joint chiefs to adequately challenge Defense Secretary Robert McNamara during the Vietnam War. Kohn writes many serving officers believe the book effectively makes the case “that the Joint Chiefs, lacking a proper understanding of their role and not having the courage to oppose the Johnson administration’s strategy of gradualism that they knew would fail, should have voiced their

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42 Feaver 2003, p. 65
44 See Feaver 2003
opposition, publicly if necessary, and resigned rather than carry out the strategy.

46 But according to Kohn, who advised McMaster in the early stages of the project, the book says no such thing. While McMaster convincingly argues the chiefs failed to present their views “frankly and forcefully to their civilian superiors,” including members of Congress, he “neither states nor suggests that the chiefs should have opposed President Lyndon Johnson’s orders and policies by leaks, public statements, or by resignations, unless an officer personally and professionally could not stand, morally and ethically, to carry out the chosen policy.”

48 Feaver has called this misreading “McMasterism” in order “to distinguish it from McMaster’s own, more nuanced, argument.” He writes, “McMasterism argues that (1) in these matters, civilians are actively trying to suppress military opinion; (2) military opinion is right, or more right, than civilian opinion; and (3) the military should ensure not only that its voices are heard but also that its voices are heeded.”

49 Evidence suggests McMasterism is increasingly widespread among officers, many of whom believe they should be advocates of particular policies rather than simply serving in their traditional advisory role. For instance, according to a survey of officer and civilian attitudes and opinions undertaken by the Triangle Institute for Security Studies (TISS) in 1998–1999, “many officers believe that they have the duty to force their own views on civilian decision makers when the United States is contemplating committing American forces abroad.” Kohn summarizes Ole Holsti’s interpretation of the findings:

When “asked whether … military leaders should be neutral, advise, advocate, or insist on having their way in … the decision process” to use military force, 50 percent or more of the up-and-coming active-duty officers answered “insist,” on the following issues: “setting rules of engagement, ensuring that clear political and military goals exist …, developing an ‘exit strategy,’” and “deciding what kinds of military units will be used to accomplish all tasks.” In the context of the questionnaire, “insist” definitely implied that officers should try to compel acceptance of the military’s recommendations.

52 A recent and widely disseminated example of McMasterism is Marine Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Milburn’s “Breaking Ranks,” which argues “there are circumstances under which a

49 Feaver 2011, p. 94 n. 15
50 Ibid., emphasis added.
51 Kohn 2002, p. 32.
military officer is not only justified but also obligated to disobey a legal order.” In particular, Milburn writes an officer “[is obligated] to disobey an order he deems immoral; that is, an order that is likely to harm the institution writ large—the Nation, military and subordinates—in a manner not clearly outweighed by its likely benefits.” In another recent work, “A Failure of Generalship,” Army Lieutenant Colonel Paul Yingling suggests today’s general officers lack “moral courage,” and that those who contributed to “tell-all books” after the conflict should instead have “[made] their objections public” much earlier in the conflict.

Some have attempted to moderate the extreme “McMasterism” tendencies in the professional supremacist school by creating rules to guide military officers’ use of dissent. For instance, Leonard Wong and Douglas Lovelace propose a range of actions, “beyond blind obedience, resignation or retirement,” available to senior military leaders when they are confronted with decisions by civilian leaders that military officers believe are flawed. Wong and Lovelace identify two variables: the degree of civilian resistance to military advice and theseriousness of the threat to national security the policy embodies, which should guide the officer’s choice of action. According to these authors, when the degree of civilian resistance to military advice is low and the magnitude of the threat is low, the options for the military are acquiescence or compromise. When resistance to military advice is low but the threat is high, options involve frequent interaction between the uniformed military and the civilians, working to achieve consensus, and conducting cooperative analysis. When the degree of civilian resistance to military advice is high and the magnitude of the threat is low, the options for military officers include declining advancement or assignment, requesting relief, waiting the civilians out, or retiring. When both civilian resistance to military advice and the level of the threat are high, the authors suggest options including public information campaigns, writing articles, testifying before Congress, joining efforts with others, and resignation.

Snider accepts the idea of broadening the choices available to uniformed officers when faced with what they believe to be flawed policy decisions by civilians, but questions whether the two variables employed by Wong and Lovelace alone provide adequate guidance for a military officer who is considering dissent. For Snider, the imperatives of military professionalism and the “trust” relationship between the military profession and other entities within American society and government also must play a role. Snider suggests three trust relationships that “can be qualitatively rated along a continuum ranging from ‘Fully Trusted’ as the ideal to ‘Not

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54 Ibid., p. 102, emphasis in original
57 Ibid., pp. 284-287 see in particular Figure 1 on p. 284
Trustworthy’ as the most opprobrious.” The three relationships are: 1) between the military profession and the American people; 2) between the military profession and the peoples’ elected representatives, both in the executive and legislative branches; and 3) between the senior leaders of the military profession and their subordinate leaders.

Snider suggests officers must conduct a moral analysis of how the “other” in each trust relationship involving the military profession—the American people, civilian leaders, and junior leaders within the military profession itself—perceives and understands acts of dissent on the part of the military profession’s senior leaders. Such a moral analysis, he argues must address at least five considerations. The first is the “gravity of the issue to the nation (and thus to the profession’s clients).” The second is the “relevance of the strategic leader’s professional expertise to the issue” that might impel dissent. “Does the issue fall squarely within the scope of the dissenter’s expertise as a military professional?” The third consideration is the “degree of sacrifice involved for the dissenter.” “Is the dissent motivated solely by a disinterested desire to serve the nation, even in the face of personal risk and sacrifice, or is there a self-serving subtext, such a desire to further [the dissenter’s] own professional or political ambitions?” The fourth consideration is the “timing of the act of dissent.” Was it timed to “undercut the actions or policies being dissented from?” Finally, is the act of dissent congruent “with the prior, long-term personality, character and belief patterns of the dissenter?” Does the dissent strike those who know the dissenter as being uncharacteristic or atypical? Snider goes on to argue a complete assessment would require the dissenter to examine all five considerations in the light of the three trust relationships.

By contrast Feaver, firmly within the civilian supremacist camp, writes that even resignation in protest is out of bounds, and “would do much to undermine healthy civil-military relations if it ever became accepted practice among senior officers.” He suggests a “dissenting senior officer” can pursue three options, “all well-grounded in democratic civil-military norms.” These options include “the right and the duty to speak up in private policymaking deliberations”; the “obligation to offer their private military advice” “when asked to do so in sworn testimony in congressional hearings”; and “the right … to clarify the public record when senior civilians misrepresent the content of their advice in public … provided it does so through one of the two courses of action described above.”

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59 Ibid., p. 266
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid., p. 269, emphasis added
62 Ibid., emphasis added
63 Ibid., emphasis added
64 Ibid., emphasis added
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
U.S. military operations in Iraq have brought new life to the civilian vs. professional supremacy discussion, with many arguing they illustrate the dangers of civilians ignoring military input. This view, however, does not match the historical record. For instance, while Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld did not foresee the insurgency and the shift from conventional to guerrilla war, neither did his critics in the uniformed services. In December 2004, Tom Ricks reported in the Washington Post that while many in the army blamed “Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld and other top Pentagon civilians for the unexpectedly difficult occupation of Iraq,” one close observer—U.S. Army major Isaiah Wilson III, an official historian of the campaign and later a war planner in Iraq—placed the blame squarely on the army. In an unpublished report, he concluded senior army commanders had failed to grasp the strategic situation in Iraq and therefore did not plan properly for victory; army planners suffered from “stunted learning and a reluctance to adapt”; and army commanders in 2004 still misunderstood the strategic problem they faced and therefore were still pursuing a flawed approach.

While it is true Rumsfeld downplayed the need to prepare for post-conflict stability operations, it is also the case that in doing so he was merely ratifying the preferences of the uniformed military. Only recently has the uniformed military begun to shed the “Weinberger Doctrine,” a set of principles long internalized by the U.S. military that emphasize, among other things, the requirement for an “exit strategy.” But if generals are thinking about an exit strategy they are not thinking about “war termination”—how to convert military success into political success, which is the purpose of post-conflict planning and stability operations. This cultural aversion to conducting stability operations is reflected in the fact that operational planning for Operation Iraqi Freedom took eighteen months, while planning for postwar stabilization began half-heartedly only a couple of months before the invasion.

It should also be noted the most cited example of prescience on the part of the uniformed military—General Eric Shinseki’s February 2003 statement before Congress suggesting “several hundred thousand” troops might be necessary in postwar Iraq—was no such thing. As John Garofano has observed, “no extensive analysis has surfaced as supporting Shinseki’s figures, which were dragged out of him by Senator Carl Levin only after repeated questioning.” Garofano notes that in fact the figures were based on a “straight-line extrapolation from very

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68 For a detailed analysis of Iraq surge decision making, see Feaver 2011
70 On Rumsfeld and the plans for the Iraq War, see Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq (New York: Pantheon, 2006); and Thomas Ricks, Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq (New York: Penguin, 2006).
different environments.” To the extent Shinseki was correct, it was for the wrong reasons. His focus was on humanitarian concerns rather than on the critical society-building work the U.S. military had to implement in Iraq. Garofano concludes the oft-made charge against Rumsfeld—he punished Shinseki for “being right”—is not supported by the evidence. War planning “comes down, as it did in Vietnam, to analysis, getting it right, and providing clear alternatives that address or confront policy goals.” This the uniformed military in general, and Shinseki in particular, failed to do.

*Patterns of Civilian Control and Military Effectiveness*

It is important to remember there are two sides to the civil-military problematique; in addition to a military subordinate to civilian control, society also desires a military strong enough to protect it from threats. Thus an important test of a pattern of civilian control is how well it contributes to the effectiveness of a state’s military. How might civil-military relations affect military effectiveness? At the extreme, civilians might intentionally keep the military weak, starving it of funds and personnel, in order to prevent the military from amassing too much power. Even in today’s constrained fiscal environment, few would argue this is the case in the United States. More subtly, the pattern of civilian control chosen by the government may affect a state’s ability to effectively build military capacity and connect political goals with military means.

Some scholars argue that attempts to pursue Huntington’s “objective control”—which is so dominant in American practice that Cohen dubbed it the “normal” theory of civil-military relations—frequently result in strategic failure. As noted above, “objective control” implies a clear line of demarcation between civilians, who determine the goals of the war, and the uniformed military, who then conduct the actual fighting. But Cohen argues civilian leaders cannot simply leave the military to its own devices during war because war is an iterative process involving the interplay of active wills. What appears to be the case at the outset of the war may change as the war continues, modifying the relationship between political goals and military means. The fact remains wars are not fought for their own purposes, but to achieve policy goals set by the political leadership of the state, as Clausewitz asserted. Cohen points out that storied democratic war leaders such as Winston Churchill and Abraham Lincoln “trespassed” upon the military’s turf as a matter of course, influencing not only strategy and operations but also tactics. Cohen analyzes only a few cases and does not prove objective control always harms military effectiveness. But he does illustrate that neither does civilian intervention (what Huntington would call “subjective control”) necessarily reduce military effectiveness, and that indeed it may be beneficial in some instances. Civilian “meddling” may limit the disjunction

72 Ibid.
75 Cohen 2002
between operational excellence in combat and alignment with policy, which determines the reasons for which a particular war is fought.

In practice, the combination of the dominant position of the “normal theory” of civil-military relations in the United States and the U.S. military’s focus on the non-political operational level of war means that the conduct of a war may be disconnected from the goals of the war. As an essay published by the U.S. Army War College’s Strategic Studies Institute puts it, the operational level of war has become an “alien” that has devoured strategy.

Rather than meeting its original purpose of contributing to the attainment of campaign objectives laid down by strategy, operational art—practiced as a “level of war”—assumed responsibility for campaign planning. This reduced political leadership to the role of “strategic sponsors,” quite specifically widening the gap between politics and warfare. The result has been a well-demonstrated ability to win battles that have not always contributed to strategic success, producing “a way of battle rather than a way of war.”

The political leadership of a country cannot simply set objectives for a war, provide the requisite materiel, then stand back and await victory. Nor should the nation or its military be seduced by this prospect. Politicians should be involved in the minute-to-minute conduct of war; as Clausewitz reminds us, political considerations are “influential in the planning of war, of the campaign, and often even of the battle.” 76

The task of strategy is to bring doctrine—concerned with fighting battles in support of campaigns—into line with national policy.

Risa Brooks also analyzes how a state’s civil-military relations affect its ability to formulate successful strategy. 77 Brooks argues good strategic assessment requires information sharing and strategic coordination between civilian and military, as well as a military competent to assess its own (and others’) capabilities and a clear decision-making and authorization process. 78 Brooks hypothesizes the quality of strategic assessment will vary with civil-military preference divergence and with the civil-military balance of power. In particular, she suggests strategic assessment will be of the highest quality when preference divergence is low and the civilians are dominant. It will be worst when preference divergence is high and civilian and military share

78 Ibid., p. 43
power, with no party clearly dominant. The quality of strategic assessment will be “fair” when the military dominates.79

As one of her case studies, Brooks analyzes the quality of strategic assessment with respect to post-conflict planning for the 2003 Iraq War.80 She argues this was a case of “mixed” results as the civilian side was clearly dominant, but preference divergence was high as a result of military resistance to Rumsfeld’s transformation efforts:

Underlying disputes over policy and strategic issues induce political leaders to employ oversight mechanisms to ensure military compliance with their initiatives … while these tactics mitigate problems in information sharing … and provide for a clear authorization process … the safeguards are also often counterproductive to strategic coordination. They truncate political-military dialogue and limit the range of perspectives represented in the advisory processes.

In other words, Brooks suggests that when civilians are too heavy-handed in their monitoring and punishment of military behavior, they may stifle civil-military dialogue, resulting in faulty strategic assessment.

Kohn, whose concerns about a potential civil-military crisis were discussed earlier, has explicitly called into question the effectiveness of the American military with regard to the planning and conduct of operations other than those associated with large-scale conventional war. He notes that despite its massive advantage in technology and resources, the U.S. military “failed to defeat insurgencies or fully suppress sectarian civil wars in two crucial countries, each with less than a tenth of the U.S. population, after overthrowing those nations' governments in a matter of weeks.”82 Kohn attributes this lack of effectiveness to a decline in the military’s professional competence with regard to strategic planning. In particular, he argues, the U.S. military has failed to adapt to a changing security environment in which “the challenges to global stability are less from massed armies than from terrorism; economic and particularly financial instability; failed states; resource scarcity (particularly oil and potable water); pandemic disease; climate change; and international crime…”83 He observes this decline in strategic competence has occurred during a time in which the U.S. military exercises enormous influence in the making of foreign and national security policies, suggesting that the problem is something other than a lack of military voice in the civil-military relationship.

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79 Ibid., p. 7
80 Ibid., Chapter 7
81 Ibid., pp. 226-227
83 Ibid., pp. 73-74
Bringing in the Civilian Public

We next turn to the civilian public’s relationships with the military and with the civilian government. While these are two distinct relationships, we consider them together as they overlap in important areas. Members of the military are drawn from, and have personal connections to, the general public. This same public is responsible for holding the government accountable for military policy. Some scholars and journalists argue the degree to which they do so is directly related to the degree to which they feel connected to the military. The military may also play role in mediating the relationship between civilian public and civilian government through public relations efforts and the involvement of individuals connected to the military in domestic politics.

In particular, we consider the following questions. Who serves? Does the civilian population pay adequate attention to military policy? What role should the military (including retired and “part-time” personnel) play in domestic politics?

Who Serves?

Who serves in the United States military? Is military service an obligation of citizenship or something else? To what extent should the military establishment represent the diversity and ideology of the broader society? These questions regarding military service have been answered differently by American society at different times under different circumstances.

Through most of its early history, the United States maintained a small peacetime establishment of “regular” forces that mostly conducted limited constabulary operations. During wartime, the several states were responsible for raising soldiers for federal service, either as militia or volunteers. This was, in part, due to the fear a standing army in peacetime was a threat to liberty. While there was limited federal conscription during the Civil War and a more extensive draft during World War I, conscription became the basis for U.S. military manpower only from the eve of World War II through the early 1970s. Despite the end of conscription in 1973, the bones of this system are still in place today, as evidenced by the continued requirement that military-aged male citizens register with selective service.

The U.S. military has now been an all-volunteer professional force for over four decades, and has maintained a sizable peacetime active duty capacity since the end of the Cold War twenty-five years ago. As one might expect, studies indicate the current all-volunteer force (AVF) is more representative of society in some respects than in others. For example, the force is younger and more male than the population at large, but the racial breakdown of the force is similar to that of society as a whole. Compared to the draft-era force, the AVF is “more educated, more married,

84 See the Federalist and Anti-Federalist Papers
more female, and less white.”

A study of military recruits before and after 9/11 indicates the majority of enlisted recruits come from the middle class. The only income quintile noticeably underrepresented is the bottom quintile.

The force continues to evolve, with debates over the degree to which the AVF should represent the diversity and values of the society it protects. For example, should combat roles be opened to women? Should we be concerned that survey evidence indicates the military is more politically conservative than society? Is an AVF inherently undemocratic?

The primary mechanism by which the government, on behalf of society, controls the composition of the force is through the method by which individuals are selected for service. It is important to note this question is not as simple as “draft or no draft.” In an all-volunteer system, society, through the government, must make decisions about the size of the military, the qualifications for service, the length of enlistments, and the penalty for leaving service early. Similarly, a conscript system could involve universal service, mandatory service for some segment of the population, or a draft lottery in which members of the eligible segment of the population are selected for service at random. One could have a standing conscript military, or one in which conscripts are only called up in the event that additional manpower is needed in a conflict. To attract certain types of individuals to the military (for example, computer scientists, or women, or Democrats) the government could use voluntary mechanisms—altering its marketing message, or targeting recruitment and retention incentives—or use compulsion, forcing certain groups into service. Though in the U.S., the latter method would raise questions of constitutionality.

Debates around who serves generally concern three factors: civilian control of the military, military effectiveness, and ideology.

Civilian Control of the Military: Going back to the terms discussed in the previous section, some argue a military that is more representative of society will have interests more aligned with civilians’ thus decreasing the civil-military preference gap and facilitating civilian control. Eric Nordlinger writes, “in the absence of significant differences between civilians and soldiers, the civilians may quite easily retain control because the military has no reason (i.e., opposing beliefs or conflicting interests) to challenge them.”

This assumes, however, that joining the military institution does not somehow alter these individuals’ interests. There is an inherent tension between having members of the military view themselves as “just like everyone else,” and thus

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87 Eric A. Nordlinger, Soldiers in Politics: Military Coups and Government (Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1977), p. 11
likely to share the interests of the civilians they serve, and creating force that sees itself as a profession distinct from society, but subordinate to society’s wishes.

Military Effectiveness: Huntington worried American liberalism, with its emphasis on the importance of the individual, is inherently anti-military and that attempts to make the military “conform or die” would result in military failure during the high-threat, long-duration Cold War.\textsuperscript{88} Some argue diversity discourages groupthink and encourages innovation. Others argue certain types of diversity harm military effectiveness by disrupting small group cohesion.\textsuperscript{89}

The third factor is ideological. Some argue regardless of the effects on civilian control and military effectiveness, it is right for the military to reflect certain aspects of society’s composition and values, or that exclusion from the military constitutes a civil-rights violation. For example, a Congressional Research Service report notes “Women’s rights supporters contend that the exclusionary policy prevents women from gaining leadership positions and view expanding the roles of women as a matter of civil rights.”\textsuperscript{90} “Some carry the argument further to say that women cannot be equal in society as long as they are barred from full participation in all levels of the national security system.”\textsuperscript{91} Another component of the ideological argument is that having a more diverse military, with personal connections to a broader segment of society, will improve democratic feedback mechanisms by creating stronger incentives for the civilian public to hold the government accountable for foreign policy. We examine this issue in more detail in the next section.

Civilian Attention to Military Policy

It is up to the citizenry, as represented by the civilian government, to determine the appropriate role of the military in society and in foreign policy. Is the military establishment’s purpose to fight and win the nation’s wars or to engage in constabulary actions? What kind of wars should the military prepare to fight? Should the focus of the military be foreign or domestic?

The answers to these questions have shifted over time, as has the degree to which the public weighs in on these debates. Throughout most of its history, the United States Army was a constabulary force. It permanently oriented itself toward large-scale conflicts against foreign enemies only in the 1930s. The end of the Cold War and the attacks of 9/11 have suggested new answers, e.g. a focus on “irregular warfare” (counterinsurgency and counterterrorism) as well as

\textsuperscript{88} Huntington 1957, 143-162; Feaver 2003, 16-20
\textsuperscript{91} Burrelli 2012, p. 11
an openness to the use of the military in domestic affairs, e.g. disaster relief in response to emergencies such as Katrina, domestic law enforcement during the Los Angeles riots, or border security.

In his 2015 Atlantic article “The Tragedy of the American Military,” James Fallows argues Americans have a “reverent but disengaged attitude toward the military—we love the troops, but we’d rather not think about them.”

Outsiders treat [the military] both too reverently and too cavalierly, as if regarding its members as heroes makes up for committing them to unending, unwinnable missions and denying them anything like the political mindshare we give to other major public undertakings … A chickenhawk nation is more likely to keep going to war, and to keep losing, than one that wrestles with long-term questions of effectiveness.

Fallows suggests the driver behind the American public’s neglect is that “the distance between today’s stateside American and its always-at-war expeditionary troops is extraordinary.” With no risk to themselves or their loved ones, “the public, at its safe remove, doesn’t insist on accountability.” Fallows quotes retired Admiral Mike Mullen, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as saying of the AVF, “I would sacrifice some of that excellence and readiness to make sure that we stay close to the American people. Fewer and fewer people know anyone in the military. It’s become just too easy to go to war.” Fallows concludes, “because so small a sliver of the population has a direct stake in the consequences of military action, the normal democratic feedbacks do not work.”

Academic studies have found mixed support for the hypothesis that conscription increases the degree to which the public will restrain military policy. Horowitz and Levendusky, using a survey experiment, find that Americans are less willing to commit troops to defend a third-party country from aggression when they believe those troops will include draftees. The effect is especially large on those of draft age. Other cross-national studies of the relationship between conscription and likelihood of conflict have reached conflicting conclusions, with some finding that conscription makes conflict more likely, and others that it makes conflict less likely.

92 James Fallows, “The Tragedy of the American Military,” The Atlantic Jan/Feb 2015, p. 74
93 Ibid., p. 76
94 Ibid., pp. 75-76
95 Ibid., p. 78
96 Ibid., 79
97 Ibid., 88
An alternative explanation for the American public’s perceived lack of interest in military policy is that this is actually a return to normal after the spike in military participation and foreign policy interest produced by WWII and the early years of the Cold War. For example, the Pew Research Center analyzed Gallup Poll data on what the American public viewed as the “most important problem in presidential years” and found that while foreign policy and security issues outweighed economic issues from 1948 – 1972, the reverse was true from 1976 – 2000, with both types of issues cited equally in 2004.\textsuperscript{100} Of course, this switch also accords with the switch to the all-volunteer force, so further studies would be needed to attempt to determine what drives the American public’s lack of attention to foreign and military policy.

\textit{Military Involvement in Domestic Politics}

What role does the military play in mediating the relationship between the civilian public and the civilian government? Some military veterans (particularly retired flag officers), reservists, and Guard members walk a delicate line between their legal status as normal citizens with the right to participate in politics, and being seen to speak for the military establishment. What level of political participation is appropriate?

Recent research by Jim Golby et. al. suggests military officers see a clear distinction between the appropriateness of participating in politics while in uniform vs. after retirement. “Although 70 percent of officers said it was inappropriate for members of the active duty military to criticize senior civilian leaders in the government, only 20 percent thought it was inappropriate for retired officers to do so.”\textsuperscript{101} The authors suggest retired officers’ participation in politics is problematic. “[I]t is not clear that the political support of retired officers is based purely on military expertise … According to the FEC data on the contributions of retired four-star officers, retired officers were more likely to support candidates from the party of the president who appointed them to four-star rank.”\textsuperscript{102} They also worry “that these veterans use public esteem of the professional and nonpartisan military to give greater weight to their own partisan political views … this straddling of nonpartisan professionalism and partisan political activity can, over time, erode Americans’ trust in the military.”\textsuperscript{103}

Despite these concerns, the authors note:

\textsuperscript{100} Pew Research Center, “Eroding Respect for America Seen as Major Problem: Foreign Policy Attitudes Now Driven by 9/11 and Iraq,” in conjunction with the Council on Foreign Relations, 18 Aug 2004, Part One: The Importance of International Affairs to the American Public (pp. 5-7)
\textsuperscript{101} James Golby, Heidi Urben, Kyle Dropp, and Peter D. Feaver, “Brass Politics: How Retired Military Officers are Shaping Elections,” \textit{Foreign Affairs} website, 5 Nov 2012.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.
There aren’t a lot of policy options available to influence the activity of retired military. It would be inappropriate—and beyond that, unconstitutional—to put any formal restrictions on what they can and cannot do once they have retired from active military service. Retired military are fully citizens and should enjoy their full rights as citizens. But citizens regularly restrain themselves in the interests of serving the public good.104

Similar issues are raised by the political activities of “part-time” military officers, those in the Reserves or Guard. These officers are not under any special restrictions on their political activity, or subject to the UCMJ, while off duty. But partisan activity in which these individuals strongly identify as service members raises questions about the perception of military politicization, as well as about maintaining good order and discipline when they return to their units.105

Conclusion

This primer on civil-military relations has presented a brief overview of some key aspects of the academic and policy debates surrounding American civil-military relations. It examined normative theories of the “civil-military problematique” as well as a discussion of how this dilemma has been approached in practice. The primer focused on three key relationships: between the military and the civilian government, the military and the civilian public, and the civilian public and the civilian government.

We conclude with several key takeaways for practitioners:

- Civilian control of the military comprises more than the absence of a coup or outright disobedience. Military officers, civil servants, and political figures must also consider the role of military advice and dissent in shaping civilian policy preferences and options.
- The relationship between the composition of the military and outcomes such as civilian control, military effectiveness, foreign policy restraint, and accordance with democratic values, is far more complicated than is frequently portrayed.
- Those with a connection to the military, even those not currently in uniform, may be perceived differently than “average civilians” when participating in domestic politics, and this may reflect on the institution, for better or worse.

104 Ibid.
105 Lindsay P. Cohn Warrior and Jessica D. Blankshain, “Some thoughts on the problem of politicians in the National Guard,” posted on Tom Ricks’ Best Defense blog at foreignpolicy.com, 11 Dec 2014