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# The silent crisis

## The precarious state of U.S. civil-military relations

BY GREGORY D. FOSTER

If there is a crisis in civil-military relations, but nobody acknowledges it, is the relationship sound?

Torture. Atrocity. Cover-up. Stonewalling. Congenital secrecy. Unaccountability. Operational failure. Non-combatant casualties and mistreatment. Corruption. Abuse of authority. Censorship. Domestic spying. Politicization. Militarization. Profligacy and waste. Cost overruns. Sexual assault and harassment. Murder. Spousal abuse. Friendly fire incidents. Weapon failures and accidents. Religious discrimination and proselytizing. Environmental degradation. Racism, homophobia and hate crime. Whistle-blower retribution.

These behaviors are symptomatic of the crisis that now afflicts U.S. civil-military relations. Such behaviors are the prevailing norm, not the occasional exception or aberration, within the military today. Indeed, this crisis isn't a new development. It has been going on since at least the outset of the Clinton administration. Only now, amid a consuming "Long War" without apparent end, it has become more acute and potentially damaging than ever. Considering that this state of affairs has gone largely unacknowledged, if not altogether unnoticed, it is not surprising that the military would consistently rank at or near the top of annual opinion polls that seek to determine which societal institutions command the most trust and confidence from the American public. Or is the obverse possibly the case — that pre-existing esteem for the military, deserved or not, has blinded the public and cognoscenti alike to the onset of institutional disease?

Interestingly, throughout the Clinton presidency, a sustained, reasonably intense debate took place among academicians, journalists and even an occasional intrepid soul in uniform over the state of civil-military relations in this country. At first — principally a result of the politicization personified by then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell and the concomitant character impairment of commander in chief Clinton — there was considerable currency in the argument that a crisis was at hand. But that thesis soon gave way to a safer proposition unencumbered by the arguably alarmist, hyperbolic connotations of the term "crisis" — that a potentially divisive ideological, experiential and demographic gap had arisen between the military and society.

Curiously, regrettably, when George W. Bush ascended to the presidency, the major voices in that debate all fell silent. And so they remain today. In part, this was because the prevailing belief that a domineering secretary of defense, now departed, who countenanced little dissent epitomized firm civilian control of a military already more content and dutifully compliant in Republican hands. In part, this self-imposed silence also was a result of the fact that some of the more prominent commentators on the subject were all but willfully co-opted by the Bush administration. But in larger part, the sustained silence of the past seven years is attributable to persistently narrow — even shallow — conceptions of crisis and the bounds of civil-military relations by mainstream experts on the subject. Absent something so dramatic as a threatened coup d'etat, open combat refusals and disobedience to orders, or the disintegration of units in combat — all obvious measures of crisis that haven't occurred and aren't likely to — most of the purported experts have been content to focus on the presence or absence of civilian control and politicization within the ranks as the only considerations worthy of attention. As a consequence, many important questions that could have alerted us to the crisis we face have gone unasked.

The inquisitorial dog that has yet to bark — the questions we should have been asking all along but haven't — becomes clear only when we confront the heretofore unarticulated ideal state of civil-military relations, to wit:

- A strategically effective (not just militarily effective) military,
- whose leaders provide strategically sound (not just militarily sound) advice to,
- strategically competent civilian authorities, both executive and legislative, who are representative of and answerable to,
- a civically engaged, strategically aware public,
- all of this undergirded by a critical free press, a vibrant civil society and a properly subordinated military-industrial complex.

The questions, then, to which we need answers are these:

Is the military strategically effective? Is the military fulfilling the obligations expected of it as part of the civil-military social contract by being ...

... operationally competent — able to successfully accomplish whatever it is called upon to perform (from conventional warfare to counterinsurgency to peacekeeping to disaster response), without being disproportionately destructive, indiscriminately lethal, exorbitantly expensive, overly provocative or escalatory, or alienated from society?

... a source of sound (strategic) advice?

... politically (as well as ideologically, religiously and culturally) neutral — not involved in or influenced by partisan politics (or ideological, religious or cultural preferences) to a degree that compromises the objectivity expected of public servants?

... socially responsible — representative of society; affordable; morally superior, but not morally arrogant; able to exercise professional autonomy without alienation from society; willing to dissent responsibly without disobedience to proper authority?

Is the military contributing to or undermining the normative strategic aims a self-professed democracy such as the U.S. ought to be pursuing, including ...

... assured security, as embodied in America's security credo, the Preamble to the Constitution — not simply providing for the common defense, but also contributing to (or at least not diminishing) national unity, justice, domestic tranquility, the general welfare and liberty?

... the prevention (as opposed to the exacerbation) of resource-diverting, decision-forcing, policy-distorting crisis?

... the preservation of civil society — the values (e.g., civil liberties, due process) and institutions (e.g., the rule of law, popular sovereignty) that give democracy its name and enable society to function with civility?

Is the military contributing to or undermining the effective management of perceptions, at home and abroad, that are such important features of strategy in the postmodern media age — enhancing legitimacy and credibility, in particular, while minimizing arrogance and hypocrisy?

Is the military acting as a constructive instrument for the effective exercise of U.S. power abroad — not simply as coercive force, but also in the ability to elicit willing compliance born of respect from others through disciplined restraint, principled consistency, balanced reciprocity, leadership by example, and the coincidence of our words and our actions?

Are the military's leaders providing strategically sound advice?

Do they demonstrate critical, creative understanding of the strategic purposes, contributions and consequences of military operational employment and institutional conduct?

Do they demonstrate a willingness to speak up (and, when necessary, speak out) — especially in opposition to strategically flawed policies, initiatives and measures involving the misuse or abuse of the military?

Are the military's leaders, at all levels, civically literate — fully conversant, that is, with the principles and precepts expressed and implied in the Constitution they have sworn to uphold?

Are the civilian authorities who oversee the military strategically competent?

Do civilian authorities — executive and legislative — demonstrate critical, creative understanding of the larger strategic purposes, constraints, effects and implications of military operational employment and institutional conduct?

Are they militarily literate — fully conversant with military purposes, capabilities, constraints and effects?

Does adequate executive and legislative civilian control of the military — in the form of direction, oversight and final decision-making authority — exist, or is civilian subjugation to the military — characterized by military illiteracy, military advocacy and militarism — the prevailing norm?

Are the civilian authorities who are charged with overseeing the military representative of and answerable to a civically engaged, strategically aware public?

Are executive and congressional civilian authorities truly representative of the people, or are they part of a privileged, semi-permanent political class that has little in common with the general public?

Does the ideal of true civilian supremacy over the military — public oversight of legislative oversight of executive oversight of a willingly accountable, self-policing military — exist?

Is the public actively engaged in scrutinizing, seeking information on and expressing itself on military preparation, conduct and performance?

Is the foregoing complemented by ...

... a critical free press that is free to investigate and report on military policies and practices without fear of retribution; that provides an outlet for alternative, unofficial views; that seeks military transparency and accountability; and that doesn't censor itself?

... a vibrant civil society that provides protected avenues for political participation, especially to compensate for failures on the part of democratic representatives; that willingly and ably scrutinizes military policies and practices; and that safeguards the values that constitute the democratic ideal?

... a properly subordinated military-industrial complex that doesn't exert undue influence on public policy, decision-makers or operational requirements; that is fully accountable, capable, affordable and incorrupt; and that doesn't usurp properly governmental/military functions and responsibilities?

Asking these questions accentuates the breadth of civil-military relations, while answering them — even the few that can be explored here — exposes the many shortcomings that plague the current relationship. First, today's military not only isn't

strategically effective, it also borders on being strategically dysfunctional. Judging from recent operational experiences, it may not even be militarily effective. The military is ostensibly proficient at one thing: conventional combat operations against conventional foes. What the military isn't proficient at is what now is, and in the future will be, the prevailing norm: unconventional operations against unconventional adversaries who eschew our canonical way of war and preferred rules of engagement.

Irrevocably convinced that its supernal purpose is preparing for and waging war, not preventing war or securing and preserving peace, the military has steadfastly stuck to the received false truth that a war-fighting posture — doctrine, force structure, technology, training — and an accompanying war-fighting ethos — in the form of chest-thumping self-motivational "war fighter" talk — ipso facto equips it and its members to handle all "lesser" missions. The results speak resoundingly for themselves: a force that is inescapably provocative and escalatory; that, by its indiscriminate, disproportionate targeting and destruction, feeds widespread hostility toward the U.S.; that engenders instability, insecurity and violence where peace should result; that, in the stated interest of necessity, frequently compromises its expressed core values (not least including honor, integrity and moral courage).

The military's operational shortcomings are an outgrowth of intellectual and cultural failings that are deeply embedded in the institution. Ingrained anti-intellectualism, a predisposition for action over reflection, and a preference for the comforting simplicity of tactical and technical pursuits all contribute to a dearth of strategic thinking and advice by the military's leadership. Were it otherwise, mass-oriented, firepower-intensive, culturally insensitive hunt-and-kill operations would cease characterizing our counterproductive efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Were it otherwise, uniformed professionals would not have perpetrated the strategically catastrophic torture of detainees at Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo and elsewhere. Were it otherwise, the current troop surge in Iraq would not be glorified as a "strategy."

Complementing the disinclination to think and advise strategically is a disturbing degree of civic illiteracy among those in uniform. Why, otherwise, would individuals who have sworn an oath of allegiance to the Constitution willingly and unquestioningly be involved in denying due process to American citizens, infringing on rights of free speech and assembly, withholding information from Congress, or perhaps even dutifully marching off to undeclared wars? That the military should be expected to be both politically neutral — in practice, not just in principle — and socially responsible — not merely, pejoratively speaking, a test bed for social experimentation — has everything to do with the culture of the institution. As such, both today are immensely problematic. Political neutrality is regularly compromised. Witness the retired generals and admirals who now routinely endorse political candidates and sometimes are rewarded for their efforts with major ambassadorships or presidential medals of freedom. Witness the shameless use of military personnel, units and installations — and the equally shameless willingness of the military to be so used — as political props by the commander in chief. Witness the revolting generals, mute while on active duty, who called publicly for the resignation of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld after they had their pensions safely in hand. And witness the other forms of non-neutrality that have become increasingly prevalent within the institution: in-your-face religiosity; pronounced ideological conservatism and Republican political preference; entrenched, institutionally sanctioned homophobia; enduring sexism and racism.

Finally, besides the military's unrepresentativeness and gluttonous unaffordability, much could and should be said about the institution's attention to its obligations for social responsibility. Two matters in particular warrant mention here. The first is the widespread moral arrogance of many in uniform, who see themselves as morally superior to a decadent society, evidence to the contrary notwithstanding. The second is the failure of the senior uniformed ranks to serve as a responsible check and balance to manifold civilian strategic shortcomings — often hiding behind the principle of political neutrality to disguise cowardice and careerism. Add to these institutional shortcomings the critical failings of the other parties to the civil-military relationship, and the crisis at hand becomes more palpable:

- Strategically inept, militarily illiterate civilian officials, politically motivated and ideologically subservient, who subjugate themselves to military ways of doing business and thereby relinquish the discerning control they are charged with exercising.
- A largely disengaged, uncommitted public — "The military's at war; America's at the mall" — that, largely to assuage its own guilt for such disengagement, has placed uncritical, unquestioning trust in the military and its overseers.
- A press that, through its own self-censorship, lack of military experience and ideological bias, has largely failed to provide an effective counterweight to the military's suffocating penchant for secrecy and thereby exercise its critical function on behalf of the public.
- A fragmented civil society, represented most notably by a largely moribund antiwar movement, that has generally failed to serve as a necessary democratic surrogate for public indifference at the polls.
- A dominant and domineering military-industrial complex that feeds the military's technological obsession, perpetuates the war-fighting mentality, distorts the determination of military needs, subverts the policymaking process through campaign spending and lobbying extravagance, and nurtures corruption.

There is, indeed, a crisis at hand today in U.S. civil-military relations. Operating, though, like a lymphoma or termite infestation that destroys from within, it has been unacknowledged, if not altogether unrecognized. The continued failure to face up to this crisis promises but one result: America's strategic debilitation. If that happens, the words occasionally ascribed, with interpretive license, to Dante will come home to roost: "The hottest places in Hell are reserved for those who, in times of great crisis, maintain their neutrality."

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