THE CIVIL-MILITARY GAP NEED NOT BECOME A CHASM

By IKE SKELTON

When the United States won its independence from Great Britain, the American people had an underlying mistrust of large standing militaries, an attitude that continued down through U.S. history. This attitude was codified in Article I, Section 8, of the Constitution, which gives Congress the power to raise and maintain an army but places a strict term limit of 2 years on funding such an army. From 1776 through the Korean War, the U.S. Government called on citizens to take up arms to fight. Upon the conclusion of each war, the Nation would shrink the military back to peacetime levels, and military members would return home to their civilian lives, much the way George Washington did after leading the Continental

Michelle Obama promotes national initiative Joining Forces campaign to support and honor Servicemembers and their families

U.S. Marine Corps (Rhonda L. Martin)

Army against British forces. The 20th-century requirements of the Cold War changed that pattern of build-up/draw-down, but with large standing forces and conscription during peacetime.

In 1973, with the end of the Vietnam conflict and great public distaste for the Vietnam-era draft, legislation transformed the military into an all-volunteer force. This had an impact on civil-military relations. This new force would be composed entirely of individuals who made a choice to serve their country in peace and war, seeing military service as a career rather than a temporary job. Conscription had provided at least a rough bridge between the military and society. Most draftees ultimately returned to their civilian careers, but their military service gave the broader population a basic understanding of the military since individuals who would not have otherwise joined got a taste of the military life and mission.

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The idea of citizen-soldiers is not unique to the United States. In 1957, West Germany introduced compulsory military service, which remained in effect until June 2011. A German Defense Ministry spokesman recently stated, "From the beginning, conscription was seen as a constitutional means of averting the militarism of the past by creating 'citizens in uniform' to bind the armed forces to the rest of society. Everyone had to serve."[1] Without conscription, the tie between the military and society could weaken since fewer civilians would serve any time in the military. Most Americans no longer need to worry about family members or friends being drafted and thus are less likely to feel that the military in any way impacts their lives.

The military is a subset of society. Although they are still citizens, Servicemembers have some different values, such as a sense of duty, contribution to something larger, service to the country, and leadership. They are also held to higher standards in terms of physical courage in times of war. Society admires civilians who act bravely under duress, but such behavior is *demanded* of Servicemembers. A difference in values, knowledge, and experience between the military and society is inherent in the system and is not detrimental in and of itself. However, if the military and society move farther apart, that could have grave consequences for the military as the two sides struggle to communicate and understand one another. Columnist Richard Cohen described it well in arguing that the all-volunteer force "enables [the United States] to fight wars about which the general public is largely indifferent."[2] Thus, it is in the best interest of every American to work toward and maintain good civil-military relations to ensure that the military will have the support of the American people when it conducts operations on their behalf. However, good relations alone cannot achieve this end, and the reality is that the turbulent events of the past decade have taken a further toll on civil-military relations. It is the burden of political leadership, both the Commander in Chief and Congress, to explain to the public what the military is doing and why it matters.

Top Air Force officials testify on fiscal year 2012 budget before Senate Appropriations Committee Subcommittee on Defense

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

Three key points should be understood about the state of civil-military relations in the United States today. First, there is a civil-military gap that is serious and growing. Second, there are two sides to the gap. Both the military and society have contributed to its creation and expansion, and both have a responsibility to work to narrow it. And third, there are steps that individual citizens, both military and civilian, can take to initiate change on their respective sides to pave the way for closer civil-military relations in the future.

Reducing the Gap

The civil-military gap has caught the attention of senior military officers and informed observers. Admiral Michael Mullen, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, addressed this issue in numerous speeches and articles, including at a conference on military professionalism hosted by the National Defense University in January 2011. He cautioned that "Our audience, our underpinning, our authorities—everything we are, everything we do, comes from the American people. And we cannot afford to be out of touch with them."[3]

The root of the problem is clear in the statistics: less than 1 percent of Americans are serving in the Armed Forces. Of those who have not served themselves, only a tiny percentage has direct connections to the military through family, friends, or coworkers. Under the draft, a wider cross section of society served in the military, and those who would not have otherwise joined were able to experience military life and carry it back to their civilian careers. Today, civilians who do not know anyone who serves are likely to feel disconnected because they do not understand what the military is, what it is doing, and how its activities affect their lives. As Cohen wrote, "The all-volunteer military has enabled America to fight two wars while many of its citizens do not know of a single fatality or even of anyone who has fought overseas."[4] This is largely the result of the mindset that

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when the United States is at war, the military is handling it, so there is no need for ordinary civilians to take an active interest or to contribute to ensuring success in the conflict.

Also, the pace and operational requirements of military life give Servicemembers less time to engage broader society. This limits the opportunity for civilians and Servicemembers to form personal connections that would foster communication and understanding between the two groups. The National Guard and Reserve are the men and women who deploy in service of the Nation, often multiple times, but then return to their civilian careers. Given their inherently greater involvement in civil society, the Reserve Components currently provide the strongest bridge between the two sides.

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The existence of this gap, however, demonstrates that the potential crisis in civil-military relations that was warned of in a 1999 study by the Triangle Institute for Security Studies is still a relevant concern today.[5] The authors of the study, Peter Feaver and Richard Kohn, predicted that if the civil-military gap continued to widen, the military would develop a culture distinct from that of the society at large.

The lack of communication and understanding between the military and society could be detrimental to the military, as it could result in decreased support for ongoing wars, as Richard Cohen suggests we are seeing now. Decreased public support for war efforts amid larger economic difficulties could lead to reductions in the defense budget, increased difficulty in recruitment and retention, and even cuts in military benefits, personnel, training, and equipment. As the American public becomes more disconnected from the military, it will be less willing to lend full support to military endeavors. One of the lessons from Vietnam is that it is difficult and perhaps impossible to sustain a war effort without the understanding and active support of the people.

The growing gap in civil-military relations could have negative impacts on retention, in terms of both quality and quantity. Many of the most talented people may choose to leave the military sooner than they otherwise would if they believe their hard work, dedication, and service are not valued by society. Ultimately, if the military has trouble attracting and retaining high-caliber, intelligent, and motivated individuals, it may become something less than it is today. That has not happened yet, but it is something to watch out for.

This underscores the importance of coming to grips with the growing gap because this worrisome trend cannot be halted or reversed without going to the source of the problem. As current conflicts draw down and force structure shrinks even a little at the same time the general population increases, the percentage of Americans serving will decrease. Accordingly, society will be less likely to show the military the respect and gratitude it deserves.

This leads to the second key point. There are two sides to this gap and both must be examined to understand the problem. Following from that, there is work to do on both sides to narrow the gap.

Today, many in the military, and especially in the Army, are worn out. Between

SSG Salvatore Giunta, USA, the first living Medal of Honor recipient since the Vietnam War, thanks fellow Soldiers during induction into Hall of Heroes at Pentagon

DOD (Cherie Cullen)

Soldiers wait to exit C–130 during Operation *New Dawn* taking troops on the first leg of return trip after completing deployment to Iraq

U.S. Air Force (Adrian Cadiz)

the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, recent involvement in Libya, and various humanitarian efforts, the military has been stressed and stretched. Servicemembers are spending a great deal of time away from home and thus are physically disconnected from life in the United States. When they are at home, they continue to carry a heavy work load to support those serving overseas, and at the same time they must catch up with their own families. Consequently, for many Servicemembers, the opportunities to interact with civilians are limited by the demands of military life. The Reserve Components are less hindered in their interaction, but since many Reservists are choosing to remain on Active duty, the demands of military life are stretching to affect the Reserves as well.

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This fatigue is exacerbated by the increasingly negative public opinion toward the wars in which the United States is involved. The attitude of the public is not only an abstraction; it can have a strong effect on individual soldiers. Servicemembers might not believe that society cares about their sacrifices. Those feelings might be intensified by calls for cuts in the defense budget. Feeling their service is not valued can lead individuals to withdraw further from civil society and seek the company of fellow Servicemembers *who understand*. This is not an unfamiliar problem. It was seen after the Vietnam War. Too many members of the Armed Forces adopted an "if they don't care about us, we don't care about them" attitude. Servicemembers must make a conscious effort not to fall victim to this mentality. To do so would adversely affect troop morale and intensify the problem.

On the other side, American society has a responsibility to reduce the gap. The feeling of being undervalued among Servicemembers stems from the fact that too much of the population takes the military for granted. In American society, there is a prevalent "out of sight, out of mind" mentality toward the military reminiscent of the sentiment of British society toward its military in the late 1800s. Rudyard Kipling captured this well in his poem "Tommy":

For it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' "Chuck him out, the brute!"

But it's "Saviour of 'is country" when the guns begin to shoot.

The problem of the civil-military gap is self-perpetuating. As Servicemembers spend less time actively involved in their communities, the American population will become even more disconnected from them and less likely to invest the time to understand and gain an appreciation for the military. The two sides feed off each other, creating a cycle that must be broken before it becomes detrimental to both the military and the larger society.

A worst-case scenario would be the two sides giving up on each other, which leads to the third key point. Individuals on both sides of the gap must be proactive and take steps to be a part of the solution. If neither side takes action, the gap could widen into a chasm. There are multiple ways for both sides to communicate and reach out.

Suggestions for the Military

Commissioned and noncommissioned officers set the tone for subordinate commanders and troops. This is an important but too often neglected dimension of the command

climate. These officers improve the climate through the examples they set. If leaders do not take time to become involved in the community, their subordinates are less likely to make doing so a priority. The words and deeds of leaders reflect their underlying attitudes, which in turn shape the attitudes and actions of the troops. If leaders speak negatively about civil society, they run the risk of reinforcing adverse or apathetic military attitudes toward the public. Commissioned and noncommissioned officers should set a tone of mutual respect between the military and society.

Setting the tone starts with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and carries all the way down. It would be beneficial if the Joint Chiefs required senior leaders, especially flag and general officers, to give a speech each quarter in a public forum. If reaching out to civil society is set as a priority at the highest level, then commissioned and noncommissioned officers will make the time to get involved in the community themselves and encourage or require their troops to do likewise.

Officers, general and flag officers especially, are in a position to impact society because they *are* the military leadership in the eyes of the public. If citizens see officers attempting to foster stronger ties between the military and the local community, they will be more likely to reach out in return and to respect and appreciate the work the military is doing. If military leaders are seen reaching out, it will send the message to the civilian community that the military values a good relationship between itself and society.

There are steps that officers and senior enlisted leaders can take to initiate change on the military side. At the outset, it is important that they are aware of the state of civil-military relations on the local level wherever they are stationed. They should then engage the community in two ways: first, through encouraging Servicemembers to play an active role in community life, and second, by inviting the community to get to know the military. To increase the presence of Servicemembers in the community, leaders should use their positions of authority to influence and encourage troops to get involved, whether it is joining a civic club, sending their children to an off-base school, or joining or coaching a sports team. The *type* of involvement is relatively unimportant. What matters is that the public sees Servicemembers and their families as active, contributing members of the community. Commanders should also make a point of ensuring that motivated and charismatic individuals are assigned to community liaison roles at the base. Such individuals could prove extremely effective in building a strong outreach campaign and helping individual Servicemembers get involved.

As for inviting the public to learn more about the military, commanding officers could ensure that their respective bases host events each year that are open to the public. They could be ceremonies honoring achievements of individuals, or a military version of "show and tell." Here, too, the precise nature of the events is of little importance. What matters is to foster a sense of inclusion among local civilians.

Another way to reach out to society would be to grant returning troops extra leave, requiring them to return to their hometowns to talk about their experiences. These talks could take place in high schools, town hall meetings, or civic organization luncheons. If Servicemembers return to their hometowns and talk about what they do and their pride in it, their visits could generate understanding and respect and address the general lack of knowledge most civilians have about the military. As an added bonus, it could be a good platform for recruiting.

Civilian spectators wait to view cockpit of a C–17 Globemaster III during air show at Joint Base Langley-Eustis, Virginia

U.S. Air Force (Camilla Griffin)

Suggestions for Civilians

The focus of improving relations from the civilian side should be on inviting the military into civilian life. Individual communities should make that effort. It could be as simple as inviting military personnel to speak about what the military is doing at high schools or civic clubs. Inviting Servicemembers to join civic clubs would make them feel like welcome members of the community. That could break down the public's tendency to view the military as a distinct group doing a distinct job separate from the rest of society. It would help individual civilians to understand the role their country is playing in the international arena and see that the wars and humanitarian efforts in which the Nation is engaged are being conducted by citizens like themselves. It would also allow the public to see the extraordinary talent military members exhibit in their work.

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Colleges and universities could increase the military presence through Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) units and recruiting. This would show the military that leaders in higher education welcome its presence on campus and encourage students to consider military service on completion of their educations. It would recognize the military as a legitimate career path that educated and motivated individuals should consider. It would lead students to see that the military is not a completely separate entity, but rather a group of individuals who were civilians before they decided to dedicate part of their lives to serving their country. This would not only increase the standing of the military in the eyes of civilians but also provide a larger recruiting pool for the Services to attract talented officers and enlisted personnel. Since the "don't ask, don't tell" legislation was repealed, there has been an increase in the presence of ROTC on private campuses. Yale and Columbia both welcomed ROTC back after the government moved to remove the discriminatory legislation.[6] This is a step in the right direction, but civilian leaders should continue to advocate for the presence of ROTC programs on university campuses and Junior ROTC programs in high schools across the county.

There are other ways that civilians can directly support the troops and their families, and there are many opportunities. For example, they can donate money or volunteer their time and talents to help nonprofit organizations seeking to improve the lives of wounded veterans or support the families of deployed troops. Some organizations provide services and programs to help wounded veterans adjust and raise awareness for the needs of injured Servicemembers. Others seek to involve civilians in providing support to deployed military personnel, their families, and troops returning home. Being wounded in combat can change an individual's life forever. Civilians should show their gratitude for such sacrifices by improving the care for these individuals and helping them gain access to education and jobs.

At a "Stand Up for Heroes" dinner, Admiral Mullen spoke to the importance of caring for wounded veterans, explaining that:

> *it takes leaders throughout the country, community leaders to join together to make sure that our returning veterans . . . who offer such great potential are . . . identified. . . . They have such a great future to offer our country, and we* [should] *join together to make sure that their future is the vibrant one that they both deserve and certainly can generate.*[7]

By donating to or volunteering with such organizations, civilians show those in the Armed Forces that their service and sacrifice are valued and that society is dedicated to ensuring that they receive the care and help needed to find employment and have productive lives.

However, it is important that civilians not wait until Servicemembers have been injured in combat to show compassion. Multiple nonprofit organizations allow citizens to "adopt" deployed troops. These organizations pair deployed registered Servicemembers with civilians who wish to support the individuals by sending letters and care packages. The idea is to ensure that personnel regularly receive mail from home, which makes them feel supported by the civilians they serve. This could increase the respect the military has for the civilian population since it demonstrates that civilians support deployed Servicemembers with whom they previously had no personal connection. Communication with adopted troops through letters and emails could also increase the public's general understanding of the military because it provides a way for civilians to learn about the great work that Servicemembers are doing and the hardships they face. A family, civic club, or school class could adopt one or more individuals. This would raise awareness and get more civilians involved in actively supporting the people who comprise the military.

NDU (Katherine Lewis)

Former Chairman Admiral Mullen addresses conference on military professionalism at National Defense University

Another important way civilians can show support is by helping the troops' families while they are deployed. Some organizations provide emergency aid to the families in their times of need. Others offer financial assistance, child care, auto and home repair, and more. Donating to such causes shows the military that civilians are ready to be there for military families when the troops are not present. Knowing that their families are being cared for can reassure deployed Servicemembers, allowing them to focus on their jobs and safety instead of worrying about things back home. Other organizations send calling cards to deployed Servicemembers who need assistance phoning home. Something as simple as donating a calling card shows support for military families, easing the hardship of long separations. Civilians should remember that it is not only Servicemembers who are sacrificing, but their families as well.

The White House Joining Forces initiative, introduced by First Lady Michelle Obama and Jill Biden, provides more information on how civilians can get involved supporting troops and their families.[8] The initiative allows civilians to donate to specific organizations, provides a medium to communicate with troops and their families, and allows civilians to learn about organizations that are working

U.S. Army (D. Myles Cullen)

Middle school student shares experiences participating in Partnership for All Student Success program

to support the troops with which they can get involved in their areas.

The Media Role

Journalists and the media make up a civil sector that could be particularly influential in improving civil-military relations because it provides a forum for the sides to learn about each other. Many civilians develop their opinions of the military from television and newspapers. Thus, journalists have a unique ability to inform and therefore shape public opinion. On a local level, the media tend to give coverage to the role the military is playing in that community. That is a good place for the military to showcase the achievements of its individuals and its involvement in the community. Thus, in cities and towns where bases are located, the media keep the public informed as to what the military is doing there.

But what about the media in communities that do not have a military presence? Do the media in such towns give coverage to the military? If so, what types of stories are run? How much coverage is given when a local Guard unit deploys? There is a connection between media coverage and what local civilians know about the military. In areas that do not have a military presence, civilians are unlikely to hear much about the military or feel that it has an impact on their lives. However, officers can use the media to their advantage in such communities. One way officers can do that is by engaging editorial boards to inform news organizations about the fine work our men and women in uniform are doing.

Americans should consider the role they want their military to play in the future

The military tends to make the national news only when there is a great success or major failure. However, the media also give ample attention to human interest pieces, which provide an avenue for raising public awareness of the individuals and organizations working to improve the lives of veterans. Such coverage can also highlight what still must be done. It would be extremely beneficial for journalists on the national level to give more coverage to organizations that seek to help wounded veterans and deployed troops and their families. That would raise public awareness of the long-term implications of the sacrifices Servicemembers are making. It would also encourage civilians to donate money or time to support these causes.

Americans should also consider the role they want their military to play in the future. That point was raised by then Secretary of Defense Robert Gates last May as he warned against large cuts to the defense budget. He stated, "If we are going to reduce the resources and the size of the U.S. military, people need to make conscious choices about what the implications are for the security of the country, as well as for the variety of military operations we have around the world if lower priority missions are scaled back or eliminated."[9] Cuts are being made, and civilians should think about the level of involvement in international affairs and the types of engagements they want the Armed Forces to be involved in. They should make their thoughts on these important issues known by contacting their Representatives and Senators, the civilian leaders who are in a position to make changes.

The Roman orator Cicero stated that gratitude is the greatest of all virtues. Today, the public may not show the military as much gratitude as it deserves. Society and the military must understand each other better if the civil-military gap is ever to narrow. Understanding will foster respect and therefore gratitude. Society must have greater exposure to the military in order to gain a greater understanding. Lack of knowledge often comes from lack of communication and vice versa. This is where both sides need to step forward. By reaching out to the community, Servicemembers can improve communication between the two sides, foster understanding of the military's role, and ultimately increase the appreciation American society has for the military and its mission. Civilians should welcome Servicemembers into their communities, support organizations that care for troops and their families, and take an active interest in defense policy and the defense budget.

The U.S. military was born from an all-volunteer force of 18th-century Minutemen, who took up arms to support a just cause while not surrendering their civilian identities. Civilians should remember that it is because of today's all-volunteer force that Americans do not need to worry about a husband, father, brother, or son being conscripted into military service. Servicemembers should respect the civilians they volunteer to serve while civilians should actively support the individuals who choose to serve so others need not make that sacrifice. The American people and members of the Armed Forces should be reminded that the military is composed of men and women who are both Servicemembers *and* citizens. **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] Alan Cowell, "The Draft Ends in Germany but Questions of Identity Endure," *The New York Times Global Edition*, June 30, 2011, available at <www.nytimes.com/2011/07/01/world/europe/01germany.html?_>.

[2] Richard Cohen, "A Stranger's War," *The Washington Post*, January 4, 2011, available at <www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/03/AR2011010304967.html>.

[3] Michael Mullen, speech at National Defense University Conference on Military Professionalism, Washington, DC, January, 10, 2011, available at <http://www.jcs.mil/speech.aspx?ID=1517>.

[4] Cohen.

[5] Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, Civil-Military Relations Study, Triangle Institute for Security Studies, available at <www.sanford.duke.edu/centers/tiss/research/cmr/civmilpublications.php>.

[6] Clyde Haberman, "Renewed Respect for the Military," *The New York Times*, May 31, 2011, available at <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/05/31/renewed-respect-for-the-military/>.

[7] Michael Mullen, speech delivered at the "Stand Up for Heroes" dinner, Washington, DC, June 16, 2011, available at <www.jcs.mil/speech.aspx?ID=1619>.

[8] Joining Forces, available at <www.whitehouse.gov/joiningforces>.

[9] Robert M. Gates, American Enterprise Institute Defense Spending Address, Washington, DC, May 24, 2011, available at <www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1570>.