“Paradoxes of Professionalism: Rethinking Civil-Military Relations in the United States.”

Risa Brooks

In 2009, President Barack Obama ordered a comprehensive review of the United States’ strategy for the war in Afghanistan that revealed some troubling dynamics in the country’s civil-military relations. During the review, top military leaders, including the commander of the International Security Assistance Force led by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, pushed for “a fully resourced counterinsurgency” and a controversial new troop commitment, arguing it was the best path forward.¹ Accounts of the review reveal, however, that U.S. military leaders seemed to underplay the political and strategic constraints that mitigated against a successful counterinsurgency, and that they were impervious to other options that might better advance Obama’s overarching goal of preventing foreign terrorists from attacking the United States.² They also seemed dismayed by public perceptions that they were boxing-in the president through appeals of support for their favored plans from allies in Congress and the

Risa Brooks is Allis Chalmers Associate Professor of Political Science at Marquette University.

For helpful comments and reactions, the author is grateful to Alice Friend, Jim Golby, Michael Robinson, Heidi Urben, Kori Schake, Lionel Beehner, and participants in the 2018 conference at West Point’s Modern War Institute, “Blurred Lines: Civil-Military Relations and Modern War.” The author also thanks the anonymous reviewers and editors for their excellent advice. All views expressed in the article are the author’s.

press, as well as in public commentary.\textsuperscript{3} Ten years later, McChrystal reflected that perhaps he should have avoided controversy and proceeded with fewer troops, but that he had no choice but to advocate for the deployment of more forces to Afghanistan. As he framed it, while the war was the civilian leadership’s responsibility, as a “technician” he needed the additional troops to achieve his operational objectives.\textsuperscript{4} McChrystal’s comments are striking, revealing how narrowly he conceived of his role in the strategic assessment process and his obligations to ensure the United States’ strategic and political success in the war.

A decade later, U.S. civil-military relations are again revealing some concerning features, this time related to civilian control of the military and partisan politics under President Donald Trump. Trump has ceded a remarkable degree of operational autonomy to U.S. military commanders and sanctioned a significant reduction in transparency in the conduct of the United States’ armed conflicts, raising serious questions about the adequacy of civilian oversight and control of military activity in his administration. Trump also often casts the military as his political ally, suggesting that the military backs him in electoral politics. His actions include direct references to servicemembers voting for him, and efforts to use the military as a backdrop in partisan speeches and settings.\textsuperscript{5} For their part, U.S. military leaders lack an effective approach for responding to these actions and as a result, risk enabling the military’s politicization. Military leaders are also facing problems related to the military’s apolitical stance in American politics.

\textsuperscript{3} Perry, \textit{The Pentagon’s Wars}, p. 247.  
Surveys reveal that a significant number of military personnel do not believe they should be apolitical or nonpartisan.⁶

These controversies reveal the limitations of contemporary norms of military professionalism. To be sure, these norms serve the military well in some respects, establishing a baseline for its commitment to nonpartisanship, principled deference to civilian authority and a capacity for operational and tactical excellence. Prevailing conceptions of military professionalism, however, are too underdeveloped and weakly conceived to meet today’s challenges to civil-military relations. Especially concerning are how those norms shape how military leaders engage with civilians in strategic assessment, their role in assuring civilian control of military activity, and their responses to challenges to the military’s apolitical ethos.

I explore these limitations of contemporary norms of military professionalism through an examination of Samuel Huntington’s seminal book, *The Soldier and the State.*⁷ The book and, in particular, Huntington’s “objective control” model have greatly influenced scholarship on civil-military relations for more than six decades.⁸ According to Huntington, objective control requires a clearly defined division of responsibility between the military and the civilian leadership. The

---

military focuses on cultivating expertise in the “management of violence” and avoids the civilian preserve of partisan politics and policy decisions. Civilian political leaders, in turn respect the military’s operational autonomy in the country’s armed conflicts. This approach, Huntington contended, was ideal because it ensured both military deference to civilian authority and the country’s military effectiveness in war.

Today, Huntington’s objective control approach underpins an influential set of norms that shape how U.S. officers are socialized to their roles as professionals. As Maj. Gen. William Rapp, a former commandant of the United States Military Academy and U.S. Army War College, put it, “Huntington’s 1957 *The Soldier and the State* has defined civil-military relations for generations of military professionals. Soldiers have been raised on Huntingtonian logic and the separation of spheres of influence since their time as junior lieutenants.” These norms constitute the bedrock conception of military professionalism within the U.S. military.

Despite the scholarly and normative influence of Huntington’s objective control model, however, the time has come to reconsider whether the approach represents a sound basis for military professionalism in the contemporary area, for two reasons. First, Huntington’s norms contain intrinsic weaknesses and fundamental contradictions that have important behavioral implications. Second, these weaknesses have become increasingly consequential in recent years, for at least four reasons. First, as stated earlier, military personnel are demonstrating greater receptivity toward engaging in partisan and political activity. Second, Americans increasingly view the military through a partisan lens, creating pressures on the military to behave in partisan ways. In addition, politicians may be more willing than in the past to challenge the convention of

maintaining an apolitical and nonpartisan military. Third, some policymakers and politicians are embracing Huntington’s objective control model with negative consequences for civilian oversight of military activity in the country’s armed conflicts. Fourth, Huntington’s model influences civil-military relations in ways inimical to the country’s strategic effectiveness, especially in conflicts where the political, strategic, and tactical levels of military activity cannot be easily divided into the separate spheres on which objective control is premised. Ensuring strategic effectiveness in the United States’ armed conflicts requires a better appreciation by scholars, analysts and military leaders of the weaknesses of contemporary norms of military professionalism.

This article begins by situating The Soldier and the State in the intellectual context in which Huntington was writing in the 1950s. The aim is to illustrate how Huntington’s arguments reflect the era in which he was working and his assumptions, and therefore to challenge the notion that objective control is inherent to the character of U.S. civil-military relations. The article then analyzes three paradoxes in Huntington’s model, arguing that it potentially generates tensions among military officers regarding their engagement in political activity; in how they conceive of their roles in assuring civilian control of military activity; and in how they understand their responsibilities in strategic assessment. Subsequent sections describe each paradox and then discuss its relevance for contemporary U.S. civil-military relations. I conclude with a call for scholars and practitioners to conceptualize a new framework for military professionalism.

Huntington’s Norms of Military Professionalism

In developing the objective control approach, Huntington sought to address a central dilemma of civil-military relations: how to ensure that the military would be subject to civilian control, while
maintaining its effectiveness in armed conflict. He proposed a clear division of labor and domains of authority between political and military leaders, which both sides would respect. Civilian leaders would decide when and how to use force in international relations, and military leaders would plan and execute military operations pursuant to civilians’ goals. This division of labor would then influence the military’s professionalism. Isolated from politics, military officers would become experts in the “management of violence” and cultivate an apolitical ethos that perpetuates their deference to civilian authority.

The objective control model makes several key assumptions and arguments, with four important implications for understanding the norms it supports.

First, the model assumes that the civilian and military spheres of activity are easily discernable. Consequently, a clear line exists between what constitutes political versus military activity. A division of labor and authority is both possible and desirable in civil-military relations.

Second, objective control promotes a modal form of interaction in the advisory process between political and military leaders. The model implies that clear boundaries in the content and format of exchanges between the sides are essential to ensure military effectiveness.

---

11. Feaver, “Civil-Military Relations.”
12. Huntington contended that only the officer corps (not enlisted personnel) makes up the military profession. For divergent views, see the articles in Joint Force Quarterly, Vol. 62, No. 3 (July 2011), https://ndupress.ndu.edu/portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-62.pdf.
Civilian leaders provide guidance to military leaders about what they hope to achieve in armed conflict and military leaders respond with their advice about military options. In the Huntingtonian conception, relations between civilians and the military in advisory processes are therefore essentially transactional, rather than collaborative.

Third, objective control assumes that separation between a liberal society (e.g., the United States) and the military is both necessary and beneficial for military professionalism, and therefore for the country to thrive. In Huntington’s view, military professionals exhibit a distinctive “military mind,” and therefore possess a worldview and disposition intrinsically distinct from their civilian counterparts. The merging of civilian and military identities and values inherent in the concept of the citizen-soldier was anathema to his conception of professionalism. To be a military professional was to exist apart from society, not just physically, but also psychologically and ideologically.

Fourth, Huntington’s apolitical professionalism requires that the military abstain from all that is “political.” “The antithesis of objective control is military participation in politics,” Huntington argued, and civil-military relations are at their best when the military remains “politically sterile and neutral.” Importantly, Huntington’s model does not distinguish among politics many aspects or types of political activity. In practical terms, the ban on military

involvement in politics extends from partisan behavior to public advocacy in support of military activity or policies pertaining to the armed forces. It also includes military leaders’ intellectual engagement with how political factors might bear on the efficacy of strategy or the conduct of war; Huntington required “the separation of political from military considerations during the professional officer’s analytical processes.”

Taken together, the core assumptions and arguments of Huntington’s objective control model support a distinctive normative framework governing military officers’ beliefs and actions within their own domain and in their relations with civilians. Those norms involve several proscriptions and prescriptions, especially for the officer corps: officers should abstain from engagement in anything remotely associated with that which is political in their activities and thought processes; they should focus on cultivating expertise in the area of pure military activity and protect their autonomy to do so; they do (and should) retain a singular worldview and values system as military professionals, which necessarily separates them both from their civilian counterparts in other state institutions and in society; and, especially as they assume senior leadership roles, they should readily offer politics-free assessments of military options after civilians provide them with definitive guidance about their goals in international conflicts.

*Putting Huntington’s Norms In Context*

It is the nature of a norm that it seems natural and inevitable to those in thrall to it. Rather than viewed as a social construct or a theory (that could be disproved), standards of conduct and

beliefs are seen as aptly reflecting reality or as constituting objective truths. Huntingtonian norms, in this sense may seem to their adherents to flow from the intrinsic nature of civil-military relations. Yet, viewed in the context of their historical and intellectual origins, Huntington’s argument and the norms it supports reflect the academic debates of the era in which Huntington worked and his core assumptions about the nature of professionalism.

Ironically, what scholars now consider the “normal theory” of civil-military relations was viewed as anything but that at the time The Soldier and the State was published. At first, the book provoked enormous controversy, in part, because of Huntington’s laudatory treatment of Prussian civil-military relations, which some considered a glorification of militarism. Also provocative was the book’s juxtaposition of what Huntington contended was a conservative military culture with a liberal societal culture and his argument that the former should be the role model for the latter. The book also reflected an iconoclastic view of civil-military relations—at odds with historical apprehensions about a standing military force and fears that the military’s professionalization might enhance its political influence.

21. In Supreme Command, Eliot Cohen refers to objective control as the “normal theory” and offers an influential critique of the roles that it confers on civilians. He does not discuss how the approach bears on military professionalism. See Cohen, Supreme Command, p. 248.
Far from reflecting a consensus view among military leaders, when Huntington wrote *The Soldier and the State* he sided with one camp in a debate that originated in the first half of the twentieth century about the nature of military professionalism. That debate was encapsulated in the views of two prominent officers, Gen. Emory Upton and Gen. John McCauley Palmer, whose respective adherents were known as Uptonians or Palmerians.26 Upton, who asserted that the military history of the United States revealed the perils of not developing a standing, professional force, pointed to the merits of the Prussian model of civil-military relations to support his argument that the U.S. military be given authority for military operations. In contrast, as Christopher Wingate explains,27 “Palmer rejected Upton’s conclusions that only full-time regular Army officers could be relied upon to effectively lead American armies. In the midst of World War II, Palmer argued that giving active duty professional soldiers a monopoly on military leadership was a dramatic and dangerous departure from American military tradition and that such a monopoly would lead to the establishment of the large standing Army so feared by the founders of the United States. Such a monopoly, said Palmer, would repudiate the type of Army founded by Washington in the early republic, one that relied upon citizen-soldiers closely tied to American society.”

Upton’s views about military professionalism profoundly influenced scholars in the early twentieth century28 and Huntington entered the debate in 1957 squarely in the Uptonian corner.29

27. Ibid., p. 16.
28. Ibid., p. 17.; and Bacevich, “Whose Army?”
The Soldier and the State echoes Upton’s themes, and Huntington himself references Upton’s influence on his thinking. As Wingate observes, “Huntington’s contributions to the historical understanding of the state of professionalism in early America were profound and further developed the theme of the sharp distinction between the military professional and the citizen-soldier of the early republic.”

In addition, the arguments that Huntington put forth reflect the prevailing view of the sociological concept of a profession in the era in which he was writing. At that time, scholars conceptualized a set of idealized norms and values that reflected a relationship of altruism and trust between the professional and the client. Scholars viewed professions positively, given the strong occupational identity, meritocracy, and competency they fostered among their members. As one sociologist put it, “this interpretation represents what might be termed the optimistic view of what professionalism and the process of professionalization of work entails.” By the 1970s, however, professions were seen by scholars in a more nuanced light. Although professions foster norms of competence and perform an important social good, as Julia Evetts observes, this generation of researchers contended that they also wielded influence in society and that they

served to protect the market position and elite social status of their members. Similarly, as the sociologist Andrew Abbott later showed, professions jockey for influence; they acquire jurisdictional control over occupational activity through a process of interprofessional competition. This scholarship thus supports a more multifaceted approach to understanding military professionalism than Huntington’s conception allows, in which jockeying for influence and efforts to protect status and jurisdictional boundaries are expected. Professions have come to be understood as a more complex phenomenon at odds with Huntington’s relatively sanguine view.

In addition, Huntington’s contention that military professionalism requires that its officers remain apolitical in all respects is questionable. Neither the theory nor the practice of professions requires that their members abstain from political engagement in the comprehensive manner that Huntington prescribes. Some forms of politics are natural to the maintenance and roles of a profession. Inherent in the concept of a profession is that its members serve the client and work to protect and advance its welfare. This negates individually self-interested political activity, but it does not require professionals to be apolitical. Indeed, protecting the welfare of society, and maintaining the standards and autonomy of the profession may necessitate some forms of political engagement and public advocacy. Huntington’s argument that professionalism requires abstention from all forms of political engagement is exceptional in this light.

In the 1960s and 1970s, scholars debated the merits of the “apolitical warrior” versus “the soldier-statesman” model. The latter approach contended that the fusion of military

35. Ibid., pp. 37–40.
considerations with other instruments of national policy rendered infeasible a Huntingtonian-style separation of the civilian and military domains.\textsuperscript{38} Writing in 1965, Raymond Barrett argued that rather than thinking about “civil military functions as separate,” they could better be conceptualized as “partners in policymaking.”\textsuperscript{39}

The most prominent critique of Huntington’s concept of military professionalism, however, appeared in Morris Janowitz’s classic \textit{The Professional Soldier}.\textsuperscript{40} Although agreeing that military officers should avoid partisan activity, Janowitz accepted that other roles for the military in politics were unavoidable and in some respects, appropriate.\textsuperscript{41} Rather than basing military professionalism on a reflexive apoliticism, Janowitz proposed that it could be instilled through the education of officers and supported with what he termed “military honor.” Sam Sarkesian and Robert Connor too claimed that the military was not an apolitical institution,\textsuperscript{42} arguing that its engagement in politics was both necessary and inevitable to address vital issues related to force structure and internal organizational problems, including scandals in the military ranks and deficiencies in military leadership. Sarkesian and Connor maintained that addressing

\textsuperscript{40} Morris Janowitz, \textit{The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait} (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1960).
such issues “demands a positive political role for the military profession. Further it requires a broad knowledge of politics and political realities, and a realization that the military profession is both a military and a political institution.”

Other scholars have grounded their criticisms of Huntington in empirical or historical research on U.S. civil-military relations. In 2003, Peter Feaver argued that U.S. civil-military relations during the Cold War did not align with Huntington’s predictions. According to Feaver’s principal-agent approach, professionalism did not forestall officers’ efforts to shirk or act contrary to civilian policy preferences. Politicians’ efforts to intrusively monitor the military also belied the existence of a neat division of labor. Andrew Bacevich similarly contended that U.S. civil-military relations are characterized more by bargaining than any easily maintained division of labor between political and military leaders.

An undercurrent in many of these critiques is that rather than solving key dilemmas and challenges in civilian control and military professionalism, Huntington’s objective control model obfuscates them. As a contemporaneous reviewer of The Soldier and the State nicely summarized it, Huntington wishes away all the “really hard political problems of civil-military relations.”

In sum, past scholarship raises fundamental questions about the implications of Huntington’s concept of objective control for military professionalism: whether the model

43. Ibid., p. 9.
44. Feaver, Armed Servants.
fosters the all-encompassing abstention from political behavior among officers that Huntington posits and whether such a goal is even desirable. These works underscore that Huntington’s objective control approach is an analytical and normative construct. And, as I argue below, the model is problematical given the challenges facing contemporary civil-military relations in the United States.

**Three Paradoxes of Huntingtonian Professionalism**

Huntington’s objective control approach contains three “paradoxes.”

**PARADOX ONE: PREVENTING WHILE ENABLING POLITICAL ACTIVITY**

As described above, Huntington foresaw that military personnel who focus on developing their technical/tactical expertise would come to view political activity as antithetical to their role and identity. Yet, while objective control may discourage political behavior by fostering beliefs among officers that such activity contravenes their professionalism, Huntingtonian norms also enable such behavior in three ways.

**Officers’ Blind Spots**

First, the reflexive self-identification of military officers as apolitical can encourage blind spots such that they fail to recognize the political content or impact of their actions. Tautologous and ambiguous aspects of Huntington’s argument contribute to this dynamic. Huntington measured the outcome (professionalism) with reference to its purported cause (the absence of political behavior). Thus, by definition, those who see themselves as professionals define away the possibility that their actions might be political. An officer socialized to Huntingtonian norms

potentially assumes that because he is a professional, he is by definition apolitical. He cannot be the former if he is the latter. This tautology, in turn, alleviates the impulse for self-scrutiny about what it means to be apolitical and what the behavioral and intellectual bases are for such a stance.

One potential blind spot a person might have is not recognizing that actions lacking an express political agenda can still have political consequences. Officers, for example, might conclude that as long as they are not expressly acting politically, such as by advocating publicly for a particular policy agenda, they are conforming with apolitical norms (i.e., what matters is their intentions in undertaking an act, not its consequences). This view, however, “assumes that men are only political when they have an explicit set of justifications for their behavior . . . when they are ideological, or when they are doctrinaire.” For example, a military leader may speak out, believing himself to be motivated by personal conscience or an altruistic concern for the country’s security, but then fail to recognize the action’s political effects. That officer might even resist interpretations that suggest he is behaving politically, if it contradicts his self-concept as an apolitical professional.

Aspects of the debate about whether it is appropriate for officers to resign in protest over disagreements with civilian leaders, or what Peter Feaver calls “McMasterism,” reflect this dynamic. “McMasterism,” which originates from a distorted interpretation of H.R.

McMaster’s Dereliction of Duty,\textsuperscript{51} refers to military officers’ conviction that they have the right to insist that their views are heeded by civilian officials and the obligation to resign if those civilians adopt military plans or strategies contrary to their advice and which they perceive will be harmful to national security. Support among elite veterans for the concept of resignation-in-protest has grown in popularity in recent years. In late 1990s surveys by the Triangle Institute for Security Studies, 28 percent of elite veterans responded that resignation was an appropriate response to an “unwise” order.\textsuperscript{52} In a 2013 YouGov survey by Kori Schake and Jim Mattis the number of respondents who agreed with that statement had climbed to 63 percent.\textsuperscript{53} In fact, one reason for the popularity of the skewed interpretation of McMaster’s book may be because it implicitly justifies opposition to civilian authority.

“McMasterism” remains popular with some in the military despite its potential political consequences.\textsuperscript{54} If a military leader resigns in opposition to an imminent decision by a president


\textsuperscript{52} By “elite veterans” the authors are referring to men and women who served in the military at high levels. For details on the survey’s sample population, see Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, eds., Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), p. 20.

\textsuperscript{53} The question asked in both the TISS and YouGov surveys was: “If a senior civilian Department of Defense leaders asks a military officer to do something that the military officer believes is unwise, would it be appropriate for the officer to . . . retire or leave the service in protest.” Results for both surveys appear Jim Golby, Lindsay P. Cohn, and Peter D. Feaver, “Thanks for Your service: Civilian and Veteran Attitudes after Fifteen Years of War,” in Schake and Mattis, Warriors and Citizens, p. 123.

or policymaker and that mobilizes public opposition to the coming decision, it increases the costs to the civilian leadership of pursuing that action. In this manner, resignation can constrain political leaders’ choices, subverting their practical authority to pursue policies and strategies that they otherwise deem fit for the country. The popularity of the resignation-in-protest concept within the military thus suggests a failure by those who support it to appreciate its political dimensions. In a survey of officers that he conducted over six years teaching at the National Defense University, Gregory Foster for example, found that more than one-third of his respondents did not think that “mass resignations in opposition to administration policy” would constitute a civil-military relations crisis—a finding that suggests that even the very senior officers whom Foster taught failed to understand the political consequences of such a high-profile act.

*Professions Are Political*

A second way in which Huntingtonian norms can encourage political behavior among military officers is by not making clear why political engagement is intrinsically contrary to professionalism and to distinguish among the variety of political activities that they might undertake. It may not be obvious to military personnel why professionalism requires complete abstinence from all incarnations of politics. As discussed above, professions often advocate on behalf of themselves and their clients; some forms of political activity are not obviously

---


inconsistent with the role of a military professional. Such expressions might include public advocacy about issues related to the management or use of force, particularly when military leaders anticipate civilian decisions will produce risks to national security, or when those actions bear on the military’s capacity to protect the country, or, in some cases, the institution’s own capabilities and cohesion. Consider, for example, the U.S. Army’s encouragement that its members’ practice “Stewardship” or assuming “the responsibility to strengthen the Army as a profession . . . caring for the people and resources entrusted to [the Army] by the American people, [and] ensuring Army forces are ready, now and in the future, to accomplish the Army’s missions.” Stewardship could conceivably encompass officers publicly advocating for policies that protect their service’s organizational interests and military effectiveness.

Moreover, professions often advocate on behalf of their clients and doing so is consistent with their being professionals. As Andrew Milburn argues, “The Military officer belongs to a profession whose members are conferred great responsibility, a code of ethics and an oath of office. These grant him moral autonomy and obligate him to disobey 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.”59 Although Milburn’s argument would be considered heretical according to Huntingtonian norms,60 it is consistent with many understandings of professionalism. As John Binkley puts it, “One would not criticize medical professionals for publicly commenting on pending national health policy or lawyers for commenting on potential constitutional issues, yet a military officer’s involvement in public discourse is considered dangerous and inimical to American democratic values.”61

One might counter that the officer corps is different from the legal or medical profession, in part because of the nature of the military’s client (the U.S. polity) and its officers’ pledge to uphold the Constitution.62 Dissent or advocacy, even if it appears to serve the U.S. public’s proximate interest in ensuring a healthy or effective military, violates its more fundamental interest in the principle of civilian control of the military in a democracy. The conditions under which military dissent attenuates or subverts civilian control can be debated,63 as can the situations in which officers should remain politically engaged and aware. The point here is that Huntington does little to encourage that debate. Compliance with apolitical norms relies on military officers’ obedience to a vaguely conceived principle, rather than on a reasoned elucidation of those norms’ purpose and character.

Inadequate Organizational Response

60 Kohn, “The Erosion of Civilian Control of the Military in the United States.”
61 Binkley, “Clausewitz and Subjective Civilian Control,” p. 268.
62. Tony Inness argues that the military cannot be a profession because it does not have the necessary autonomy. See Inness, “When the Military Profession Isn’t.”-Yes correct
Third, Huntingtonian norms can enable political activity by complicating efforts by the military as an organization to develop a comprehensive approach to confront challenges to its members’ apolitical ethos. After all, if the military comprises professionals who by definition are apolitical, the norm of abstaining from politics is assumed to be self-sustaining. There is no need for a comprehensive organizational imperative to instill that ethic in military personnel. Huntingtonian norms may even foster an organizational culture that resists engaging with the possibility that its officers are violating the apolitical ethic, or might do so in the future. If, as Major Brian Babcock-Lumish puts it, “being called political by one’s military peers is almost universally considered a slur on one’s character in the American military,” then how can its leaders acknowledge that servicemembers behave in ways that are political, or that have political effects?

**MOUNTING CHALLENGES TO THE MILITARY’S APOLITICAL ETHOS**

At one time, Huntingtonian norms might have been adequate to forestall political behavior by military officers, but those norms are poorly suited to the contemporary era, for three reasons.

*The Military is Already Political*

---


First, evidence suggests that many in the military express attitudes at odds with an apolitical ethos, and therefore that Huntingtonian beliefs are an inadequate check on such behavior. Scholars have found significant support among senior officers, for example, for Milburn’s argument that officers have an obligation to challenge civilian authority, for instance by disobeying orders “if they deem them to be injurious to US strategic aims, unnecessarily risky for troops, or in some cases, simply objectionable to their own moral principles.”

A 2013 survey showed that large numbers of retired officers who have served in senior positions in the military, or what they term veteran elites, believed that a military officer should “resist carrying out an order” that he or she thinks is “unwise” even at the risk of a court-martial (23 percent) or, as noted above, by resigning in protest (63 percent).

Heidi Urben has also found evidence that prohibitions against military officers engaging in partisan political activity are weakly socialized. In a survey of more than 4,000 active-duty U.S. Army officers, she finds that, while many expressed views in accordance with Huntington’s apolitical norms, a large segment appeared to have no qualms about criticizing civilian leaders, and seemed to believe they should be able to express their political views without limits—attitudes that suggest that either they do not recognize the disconnect between their professionalism and these attitudes, or that they do not think their professionalism requires they maintain a nonpartisan ethic. As Urben summarizes, “The fact that a quarter of respondents feel it is appropriate for active duty military to publicly

67. Golby, Cohn, and Feaver, “Thanks for Your Service,” pp. 115, 123.
criticize elected officials and a third feel there should be no limits on their public, political expression is startling.” 68

A second reason why Huntington’s norms are poorly suited to the contemporary era is that the military is facing new pressures and opportunities for partisan political expression. 69 The growth of social media usage among younger generations of military personnel contributes to these pressures. Urben’s 2015/16 survey research of West Point cadets and officers at the National Defense University found they engaged in extensive social media usage, with 44 percent of respondents reporting that their military friends often talked about politics on social media. 70 In addition, 35 percent said they had observed their active-duty friends using or sharing “insulting, rude, or disdainful comments directed against specific elected officials on a social media networking site,” while 50 percent said they seen the same behavior directed at politicians running for office. 71 A striking 33 percent said they had seen their friends in the military make rude comments on social media sites about the president. 72

Civilians Are Pulling the Military Into Politics

A third reason for concern about Huntington’s norms is that civilian leaders may in the future increasingly try and politicize the military—a dynamic illustrated by President Trump. While some presidents may wear flight suits or bomber jackets when speaking to the troops,

71. Ibid., pp. 33–34.
72. Ibid., p. 35.
Trump explicitly treats the military as an allied political constituency. In a February 2017 speech at MacDill Air Force Base, for example, he directly referred to military personnel voting for him. As he put it, “We had a wonderful election . . . you like me, and I like you.” In a July 2017 speech, he called on military personnel to lobby Congress on behalf of his legislative priorities, including in opposing the country’s health-care laws. At one point Trump even threatened that his allies in the military might get “tough” with his opponents in U.S. politics.

Trump has also adopted policy positions that aim to safeguard his persona or popularity with his political base, at the expense of the military’s organizational integrity. These include granting pardons to two servicemembers and restoring the rank of a third accused of war crimes, and requests by his staff to the Navy’s Seventh Fleet to obscure from view the name of the USS John McCain during his visit to Yokohama, Japan, in May 2019.

Huntingtonian norms can perversely facilitate such efforts to politicize the military by encouraging three inadequate responses by its leaders. The first is for military leaders to remain silent on the grounds that the military operates outside the boundaries of partisan politics. Military leaders may think it inappropriate for them to rebut publicly, or otherwise challenge a president or politician’s statements or policy decisions if doing so could influence partisan debate—even when those political leaders are using the military’s popular esteem, or its resources to gain an advantage in that partisan competition. Second, military leaders may comply with politicians’ requests because they believe staying apolitical requires deferring to civilian authority, whatever the demand. A third option for the military is to slow-roll or shirk behind the scenes by not implementing a president’s policies in a timely or effective manner, or otherwise distorting its advice to the president.79 This approach may allow the military to defend against actions contrary to its organizational interests,80 but constitutes a form of resistance that is not readily observed by the public. In all three cases, military leaders may not fully grasp that their inaction or apparent readiness to follow orders can suggest to the public that the military supports controversial civilian policies, or is the president’s partisan ally.81

79. See, for example, the discussion of how Chairman Joseph Dunford appeared to rely on slow-rolling tactics in response to White House efforts to politicize the military. Mark Perry, “The Last Adult Is Leaving the Room,” Foreign Policy, August 13, 2019, https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/13/the-last-adult-is-leaving-the-room-trump-military-dunford-mattis-kelly/.
80. For example, Secretary Mattis’s decision to forgo Pentagon press conferences was interpreted by some observers as complicity in Donald Trump’s controversial policies. See Lara Seligman, “Mattis’s Successor Signals He Wants to End the Pentagon’s Long Silence,” Foreign Policy, August 19, 2019, https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/19/mattis-successor-signals-he-wants-to-end-the-pentagon-long-silence-defense-secretary-mark-esper-media-relations/.
The Challenge Is Not Going Away

Moreover, these shortcomings in Huntington’s framework are increasingly important because other politicians may emulate Trump given politicians’ growing incentives to politicize the military. Military leaders need to prepare for ongoing challenges to the military’s nonpartisan stance in U.S. politics.

Two factors interact to produce these incentives. First, as numerous studies have documented, since the 1970s, military officers have become increasingly partisan, identifying with one of the major political parties (primarily the Republican Party). This trend is long-standing, but matters today because of how it could interact with a second factor: there appears to be a growing confidence gap in how Americans perceive the military. Although, in general, Americans regard the military highly, as David Burbach reports, “Republican confidence increased sharply over the last 20 years. Party ID is now the best predictor of one's confidence in the military.”

Second, many of the country’s citizens may want the military to abandon its nonpartisan stance in U.S. politics. Mounting evidence suggests that they view partisan statements by military leaders positively when those statements align with their own views and may support the military acting in a partisan way.

82. For a discussion, see Urben, “Like, Comment, Retweet,” pp. 351–368; and Urben, “Party, Politics, and Deciding What Is Proper,” p. 15. There has been a decline in the number of officers who identify as independent or nonpartisan compared with those that claim affiliation with a political party. See Golby, Cohn, and Feaver “Thanks for Your Service,” p. 101; and Hugh Liebert and James Golby, “Midlife Crisis? The All-Volunteer Force at 40,” Armed Forces & Society Vol. 43, No. 1 (January 2017), p.119, doi.org/10.1177/0095327X16641430.
Consequently, political coalitions may form between sections of the officer corps and parts of the electorate. Members of the Republican Party, for example, may come to see the military as their allied constituency, and many of the country’s officers and enlisted personnel may support—or at least not be wholly uncomfortable with—that perception. There are signs, in fact, that at least some in the military are at ease with being seen as partisans. On Trump’s visit to Iraq in December 2018, for example, troops eagerly lined up for the president to sign caps with his signature phrase “Make America Great Again.” In May 2019, Trump’s visage and the phrase “Make Aircrew Great Again” appeared on sailors’ morale patches during the President’s Memorial Day address on the USS Wasp.

PARADOX TWO: PROMOTING AND UNDERMINING CIVILIAN CONTROL

The second paradox in Huntington’s objective control model is that it promotes civilian authority, but undermines civilian control of military affairs. As conventionally characterized by scholars, civilian control requires that military personnel willingly defer to civilian officials in making decisions about military affairs. Yet, civilian control fully considered requires more than compliance with civilian orders and the absence of a military veto. It requires that civil-military relations operate in a positive manner by

promoting civilian preferences and political goals. Those relations should support political leaders’ efforts to productively employ armed force, allowing them to achieve the full potential of the country’s military resources in pursuit of their international goals. Huntingtonian norms undermine civilian control defined in this broader sense in three ways.

**Flawed Advisory Processes**

First, the norms inhibit the emergence of advisory processes that enable civilians to fully discern how military tools might or might not serve their political objectives. Objective control implies a hierarchical, linear system in which civilians formulate desired goals in isolation from consideration of military means and then provide that guidance to military leaders. As Huntington prescribes, “When required in his executive capacity to make decisions involving both military and political elements, the military man ideally should formulate his military solution first and then alter it as needs be on the advice of his political advisors.”

Military leaders formulate options and deliver a menu of choices to political leaders and, in a repeat of the cycle, amend those options upon the request of civilians.

This approach generates particular expectations about the roles that political and military leaders are supposed to play in the advising process. “Military leaders are taught civilian leaders will clearly articulate the ends of policy and military advice should be limited to matters of ways, means and risk,” writes William Rapp. Yet, as Jim Golby and Mara Karlin explain, “In many cases, even setting political objectives requires a textured understanding of expected costs, troop

---

90. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, p. 73.
commitments, conflict duration, the likelihood of success, the impact on other global contingencies, and military and political risks."  

In 2015, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin E. Dempsey described the advisory process this way:

In the military culture, as you know, we spend decades learning how to do campaign planning, and we start with a well-stated and clear objective. Then we build a campaign to achieve that objective, with intermediate objectives and milestones along the way. Then we come up with three courses of action: high risk, medium risk, and low risk. We pick the middle-risk option and execute. If you are an elected official, the likelihood of your conceiving a well-crafted and well-defined objective at the beginning is almost zero.

Rather, as an elected official, your first instinct is to seek to understand what options you have. . . What other options do I have in this magnificent toolbox called the U.S. military? What tools do I have that I can apply pressure with, that I can manage escalation with, and that I can integrate with the other instruments of national power? Elected officials are hardwired to ask for options first and then reverse-engineer objectives. And the military is hard-wired to do exactly the opposite.  

The transactional Huntingtonian model is at odds with this inductive process of considering both military means and political leaders’ goals coincidentally, to arrive at a policy or strategy choice.  

Military officers inculcated in Huntingtonian norms, consequently, may resent or be unprepared to adjust to these civilian needs in the advisory process. As Janine Davidson describes, Civilians’ “expectations [for the advisory process] are often considered inappropriate, unrealistic or irrelevant by the military.” The Huntingtonian mind-set fuels an interpretation  

93. These comments appear in Hooker and Collins, “From the Chairman,” p. 5.
that problems in advisory processes are the fault of civilians, rather than with how military leaders approach their roles within it. In this view, the process fails because civilians do not provide military leaders with clear guidance on their desired goals, or they expect them to achieve military objectives while imposing timelines or limiting resources. Civilians’ failure to act in accordance with military leaders’ expectations may then be framed as dysfunction, or as flawed political leadership—attitudes insidious to civilian authority and that may reinforce military recalcitrance to changing practices.\textsuperscript{96}

\textit{A Cultural Aversion to Civilian Oversight}

Second, Huntingtonian norms impede civilian control by fostering within the military an aversion to civilian oversight of battlefield military activity that may make it hard for civilian policymakers to ensure that military activity conforms to their preferences and advances their goals. Huntington’s construct perpetuates a conception that autonomy is an inherent prerogative of the military and that civilian incursions into its sphere of responsibility and authority represent a violation of that prerogative. In \textit{The Soldier and the State}, Huntington characterized the military’s right to protect its autonomy, arguing: “What does the military officer do when he is ordered by a statesman to take a measure which is militarily absurd when judged by professional standards and which is strictly within the military realm without any political implications? This situation, provided that the last qualification holds and that it is completely removed from politics, represents a clear invasion of the professional realm by extraneous considerations. The presumption of superior professional competence which existed in the case of a military superior

\textsuperscript{96} For an example of how this culture clash can be interpreted in a manner that disparages civilians, see Paul D. Miller, “The Military Did Not Thwart Obama, the Taliban Did,” \textit{Foreign Policy}, October 20, 2010, https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/10/20/the-military-did-not-thwart-obama-the-taliban-did/.
giving a questionable order does not exist when the stateman enters military affairs. Here the existence of professional standards justifies military disobedience.” Huntington’s objective control also complements and magnifies the military’s natural organizational interests in maximizing autonomy and minimizing uncertainty. For these reasons, noted Major Babcock-Lumish, it is no surprise that the “military has fully embraced the Huntingtonian myth, and used it as a justification for a membrane between the political and military.”

Consistent with Huntingtonian norms, Triangle Institute for Security Studies surveys in 1998 and Urben in 2009 show that majorities of military officers believe that military leaders should not just offer advice or advocate for certain approaches, but should insist that civilians heed their judgments about which units to use when committing U.S. forces abroad. In this manner, the military’s professionalization can justify political engagement in defense of its autonomy and mandate—a phenomenon that scholars of comparative politics have widely observed in their studies of militaries in Latin America, Asia, and beyond. Even if military leaders do not overtly contest civilian involvement in their professional domain, however, Huntingtonian norms rationalize a cultural narrative that is opposed to civilian oversight of the

100. For details, see Urben, “Party, Politics, and Deciding What Is Proper,” p. 363.
military. They fuel the presumption that the military is best equipped to monitor and address any defects in the organization; it is able to and should solve its own problems, independent of civilian authorities. Of course, institutions may resent intervention in their affairs by those their members perceive as outsiders; pushback against micromanagement is not unique to the military. Huntington norms are insidious, however, in the way they transform such interventions from something that might be seen as merely inconvenient or frustrating to something that represents a violation of the appropriate role of civilians in overseeing the military.

In addition, the Huntington model can fuel disdain among military personnel for politics and its practitioners, which can magnify cultural impediments to civilian oversight. As one analyst puts it, “Military members generally view politics with distaste, if not downright hostility. Many view themselves as separate from and morally superior to politicians, whom they see engaged in political turf wars and nasty electoral campaigns”\textsuperscript{102} Surveys show that a majority of those in uniform agree with the statement that “when civilians tell the military what to do, domestic partisan politics rather than national security requirements are often the primary motivation.”\textsuperscript{103} Grievances about civilians’ violations of the rightful boundaries of military authority, in turn, are made worse if military personnel view those interventions cynically and believe they are not motivated to ensure military success.

\textit{Civilians Embrace Huntington’s Model}


\textsuperscript{103} In her 2009 survey, Urben reports that 55 percent of respondents agreed with the statement, compared with 54 percent who agreed with it in the Triangle Institute for Security Studies surveys conducted in the late 1990s. See Urben, “Party, Politics, and Deciding What Is Proper,” p. 360.
Third, Huntingtonian norms pose challenges for the quality of civilian control because of how they can affect civilian leaders’ understanding of their role in monitoring and overseeing military activity. The obstacles described above create a mind-set among military officers that can foster resistance to civilian oversight and practices contrary to civilian control. Yet, equally problematic, is that Huntington provides a model that civilians may themselves embrace that can result in insufficient investment and focus on oversight of the military. At the extreme, Huntingtonian logic discourages the kind of transparency and accountability that is essential to civilian control and fosters practices in which the military’s tactical and operational activities become disconnected with civilians’ broader political and security goals—a dynamic I turn to next.

DECLINING CIVILIAN CONTROL OF MILITARY ACTIVITY UNDER DONALD TRUMP

The implications of Huntington’s logic for civilian control are especially relevant given how they have shaped civil-military relations in the Trump administration, as well as the possibility that objective control will be adopted by future presidents.\(^ {104}\)

Trump has implicitly embraced the objective control model, either directly absorbing Huntingtonian thinking or perhaps being influenced by military leaders (or other civilians in his administration) who adhere to Huntingtonian norms.\(^ {105}\) Trump’s embrace of Huntington’s model also may be a means to curry favor with military personnel who are happy to be unleashed from civilian oversight. Regardless, this model has legitimized a massive delegation of authority to the

---

Military to run the country’s wars and administer its own affairs under Trump in a manner that is contrary to civilian oversight and control.

Trump’s stated reasons for delegating significant operational authority to the military reflects his apparent embrace of the objective control model. As Trump puts it, he is leaving the military alone “to do its job.” Trump implicitly attributes the military’s tactical success to the Huntingtonian model. In May 2017 he contended, “We have the greatest military in the world and they’ve done the job as usual. We have given them total authorization . . . and that’s why they’ve been successful lately.” As Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis put it, “I have absolute confidence as does the President, our commander in chief, in the commanders on the ground as he's proven by delegating this authority to me with the authority to further delegate it and they've carried it out aggressively.” Trump also echoes other themes consistent with Huntingtonian thinking, such as the military’s apprehension about timelines and rejection of the premise that domestic political constraints should bear on the pace or nature of military operations.

in the military have applauded Trump’s actions as a necessary “course correction” that allows them to more aggressively pursue their tactical objectives. 110

*Letting the Military Run the War*

Specifically, the Huntingtonian model is reflected in two aspects of civil-military relations under Trump. The first is the degree to which he has delegated broad authority to military commanders to decide within their chains of command when and how to prosecute military operations. 111 Trump has loosened rules of engagement and otherwise delegated authority for the military to decide those rules in Afghanistan, Somalia and Yemen, 112 allowing commanders greater leeway than under past presidents to undertake bombing missions, raids, airstrikes, and other missions. 113 For example, when describing the delegation of authority in the fight against the Islamic State, Trump stated, “I let the colonels and the majors and the all of them—the captains—that’s what they do . . . they do their job. They don't have to call me to get approval to go into battle.” 114 Trump has taken other actions to provide military commanders


111. Hennigan and Bennett, “Trump Doesn’t Micromanage the Military—but That Could Backfire.”


greater authority, such as declaring regions of Yemen and Somalia areas of “active hostilities.” He has granted them more autonomy than prior presidents to undertake kill or capture operations against foot soldiers in militant groups and reduced the need for high-level approval of drone attacks. He reportedly has also given the Pentagon authority to increase troop levels in Iraq and Syria, and Afghanistan. Furthermore, Trump has gone months without talking with his top commanders in Iraq and Afghanistan, instead “keeping with the chain of command.”

Expanding Military Autonomy

A second way the Trump administration is following the objective control model is in allowing the military a high degree of autonomy over its own affairs. An example is the military’s declining transparency about its operational and tactical activities, and internal affairs, enabling the military to self-regulate within domains it deems to be within its professional expertise. One such area concerns how the military changed how it is tracking its performance in Afghanistan. Beginning in October 2017, the military command in Afghanistan decided to keep secret indices related to the effectiveness of local Afghan government security forces, as well as casualty figures; this move is significant not only because training these forces has

117. Hennigan and Bennett “Trump Doesn’t Micromanage the Military—but That Could Backfire.”
118. Hennigan and Bennett, “Trump Doesn’t Micromanage the Military—but That Could Backfire.”
consumed a large portion of the more than $120 billion spent on reconstruction thus far, but also because this effort has been a key facet of President Trump’s apparent strategy toward ending the war.\textsuperscript{119} Also restricted is information about other factors with strategic implications, such as anti-corruption efforts by the Afghan ministry of interior.\textsuperscript{120} In addition, in April 2019 the U.S. military command decided it would no longer undertake regular assessments of the degree to which the Taliban maintains control over the population at the district level, an imperfect indicator, but one that provides a tractable and consistent indicator of the strength of the insurgency.\textsuperscript{121} As the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, John F. Sopko, summarized these changes, “What we are finding is now almost every indicia, metric for success or failure is now classified or nonexistent. Over time it’s been classified or it’s no longer being collected.”\textsuperscript{122} The military has claimed variously that the indicators are not useful (despite long providing them), that releasing them publicly undermines national security, or that they are duplicative of information otherwise available. According to Sopko, however, “The classification in some areas is needless.” Moreover, there has not been an effort to provide

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{121} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
alternative metrics or replace the information no longer available. However flawed, such indicators provide the public at least some information about military activity in Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{123}

The military has also starkly limited information in other areas, including about its airstrikes in Yemen, Somalia, and Libya; deployments of special operations forces;\textsuperscript{124} and troop levels in places such as Syria and Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{125} The Pentagon has sought to prevent officials from the Department of Defense from testifying before Congress, and it has reduced its interactions with the press, in some cases issuing prohibitions against them.\textsuperscript{126} The U.S. Navy has classified its accident record and other information.\textsuperscript{127} On May 8, 2019, an internal Department of Defense memo placed conditions on when the military could share information about operational plans and orders, for example, mandating that officials provide a “summary briefing” rather than the actually plans or document. Notable is how that move was justified: “A


defense official, speaking on the condition of anonymity to describe military officials’ thinking about the memo, said Pentagon leaders had been concerned about preserving the military chain of command and about the potential for congressional interference in what they consider to be an executive branch function, the formulation of military operations.” 128

These and other actions by the Trump administration could harm civilian control in at least two ways. The first is reducing the capacity for the public to hold the military—and ultimately the civilians in charge of it—to account, given declining information and metrics about how the military is prosecuting armed conflicts. Second, civilian control, as defined above, may suffer. Civilian leaders’ reliance on the Huntingtonian model means that the military may prosecute operations consistent with its commanders’ preferences, in a manner potentially discordant with the president’s foreign policy or political preferences. As Alice Friend puts it, “Operational and tactical level contexts can have incentive structures that are separate from national purposes, and political leaders can lose control of military campaigns if they aren’t proactively evaluating the first-order diplomatic and political purposes of applying force.”129 One example is how a decline in transparency has enabled misrepresentation or omissions in

accounting of facets of the Afghanistan war,\textsuperscript{130} potentially creating a more positive view of progress and obscuring the degree to which what is happening on the ground is consistent with Trump’s larger strategic and political objectives to reduce the country’s role in the war.\textsuperscript{131}

**PARADOX THREE: FURTHERING AND COMPROMISING MILITARY EFFECTIVENESS**

A third paradox of Huntington’s norms is that while they promote the skill and expertise of military personnel, and therefore their effectiveness in battlefield operations and tactics, they impede the country’s overall strategic effectiveness, in four ways.

*The Operational Bias Is Unchecked*

First, they exacerbate what Hew Strachan argues is an operational level bias common among military organizations that privileges a focus on operational objectives over strategic and political goals.\textsuperscript{132} Organizational interests in reducing uncertainty and other factors may contribute to the origins of this bias,\textsuperscript{133} but instead of mitigating it, Huntingtonian norms reinforce it.

---


Second, Huntingtonian norms generate a reluctance among military leaders to engage in debate about factors in strategic assessment that might bear on civilians’ policy choices or political objectives. Strategy—or the theory for how force can be used to achieve political goals—sits at the intersection of the political and the military spheres. Therefore the military’s role in formulating it is ambiguous in the objective control model. To be sure, Huntington recognized that there is an overlap between the domains and that a “commander can make a decision on purely military grounds only to discover it has political implications unknown to him.”\textsuperscript{134} His solution, however, was for military commanders facing this situation to stand aside and allow political leaders to assume decision-making responsibility once such “considerations of policy” became apparent. Huntington was uncompromising in this regard: there are two distinct categories of decisions—political and military—and each side is responsible for its own. As Sarkesian and Connor put it, “It has been an article of faith in the military profession to erect a wall between the military and politics.”\textsuperscript{135} In turn, this culture induces officers to “cognitively stop at the edge of the military playing field as their culture has encouraged” rather than seeing themselves as “concurrently responsible with civilian leaders and other agencies to achieve strategic policy ends.”\textsuperscript{136}

\textit{Military Resistance Promotes Strategic Incoherence}

Third, the transactional advisory style encouraged by Huntington contributes to strategic ineffectiveness in the response it elicits among military commanders to civilian push-back to military advice. When civilians question the options military leaders provide, or fail to commit resources the military sees as necessary, Huntingtonian thinking encourages one, of two

\textsuperscript{134} Huntington, \textit{The Soldier and the State}, pp. 72–73.  
\textsuperscript{135} Sarkesian and Connor, \textit{The U.S. Military Profession into the Twenty-First Century}, p. 167.  
\textsuperscript{136} Rapp, “Ensuring Effective Military Voice,” p. 16.
responses. First, military leaders simply take the resources provided and operate under civilian imposed constraints. With the mind-set of “tell us what you want to do and what resources you are willing to commit,” the agenda for discussion between civilian policymakers and military leaders devolves to the least-common-denominator analysis of options and resource commitments, framed in terms of tactical-operational-level commitments. Rather than question civilians about whether their strategic or political goal is achievable, the military just works with what it is given to an uncertain end.

Alternatively, military leaders exert pressure to obtain the resources or policy changes they deem necessary to achieve their operational goals. Military commanders may insist they be provided additional troops for a specific mission, for example, even when that proposed commitment is at odds with the aggregate costs that domestic publics are willing to bear in overseas wars, the coherence of the strategy for the war, or the attainment of civilian leaders’ political objectives in fighting it. Huntingtonian norms, moreover, provide military leaders leverage in their efforts to mobilize U.S. public opinion in support of their plans through public statements, leaks to the media or other means.\textsuperscript{137} Americans seem to have absorbed Huntington’s argument that the military should be given autonomy to run the country’s wars and may be receptive to claims by military leaders that that the civilian leadership is violating this principle.\textsuperscript{138}

\textsuperscript{137} Brooks, “Militaries and Political Activity in Democracies.”
\textsuperscript{138} In a 2013 survey, 83 percent of nonveteran civilians and 76 percent of veterans in the general population believed that “when a country is at war, the President should basically follow the advice of the generals.” Large numbers also agreed that “when force is used, military rather than political goals should determine its application.” See Golby, Cohn, and Feaver, “Thanks for Your Service,” pp. 112, 115, 117.
Fourth, Huntingtonian cultural notions can lead to an inadequate sense of ownership by military leaders over the overall strategic outcomes of their military operations. If leaders offer their military advice and civilians do not provide the recommended resources or otherwise heed their recommendations, then military leaders can skirt responsibility for strategic failures.\textsuperscript{139} Rather than seeing themselves as mutually accountability for a war’s outcome, military leaders influenced by Huntington norms may contend that civilians lost the war because they did not give the military what was required to win. Alternatively, if military leaders achieve their military objective in a mission, they may count the operation as a success, whether or not it contributes to achieving larger strategic or political objectives in the war. Military commanders have done what Huntington’s norms require of them: applied their expertise to achieve the military goal set before them. Hence military successes are measured against themselves, not against the larger political or strategic goal those operations are ostensibly aiming to accomplish. Indeed, military leaders focused on operational and tactical victories may not even seem to absorb strategic failures, as long as metrics on the ground appear favorable.\textsuperscript{140} The chasm between political goals and military operations, where strategy resides, widens.

UNDERSTANDING THE SOURCES OF STRATEGIC INEFFECTIVENESS TODAY

\textsuperscript{139} The objective control model may also appeal to military officers because it focuses blame on civilians’ decisions and shields the military from criticism if the war does not go well. See, for example, the discussion in Hoffman, “Dereliction of Duty Redux?, p. 224.

\textsuperscript{140} This mind-set may help explain the disconnects in military thinking about the war in Afghanistan present in U.S. government documents obtained by the Washington Post in 2019. The documents show that military leaders frequently focused on tactical and operational objectives, while failing to probe whether their successes in those domains were contributing to U.S. strategic and political goals. Craig Whitlock, “The Afghanistan Papers; At War With the Truth,” Washington Post, December 9, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-confidential-documents/
The third paradox—that Huntington’s norms promote and undermine military effectiveness—is also salient today, for two reasons. First, the Huntingtonian mind-set may be especially ill-suited to the type of wars and military operations in which the United States has recently been engaged and may fight in the future.141 These involve combating terrorist organizations and insurgencies, as well as confronting peer competitors employing gray-zone tactics in which nonmilitary measures combine with unconventional tactics in “the space between routine statecraft and open warfare.”142 Such conflicts involve the co-mingling of political, strategic and tactical issues.143 A model that divides these levels of military activity into discrete categories, such as Huntington’s, is therefore especially ill-suited to ensuring strategic effectiveness in these types of conflicts.144 Second, public opinion surveys and social mobilization by anti-war groups reveal that Americans appear to be increasingly coming to terms with the inconclusive outcomes of the United States’ wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.145 Given this public skepticism, it is vital that the


diagnosis of what went wrong in the wars consider how civil-military relations may have influenced their outcomes.

To illustrate how Huntingtonian norms contribute to the United States’ strategic ineffectiveness, I examine the U.S military’s role in President Obama’s 2009 review of the war in Afghanistan. My aim is not to provide a complete analysis of the Afghanistan war, but to use analysis of U.S. civil-military relations at this crucial decision point to illustrate how Huntingtonian norms can contribute to politico-strategic disintegration in war.

The Afghan Surge and the Huntingtonian Mind-Set Illustrated

When Barack Obama assumed the presidency in January 2009, he inherited a dire situation in Afghanistan and faced a pending request by the military to send in more troops, and the president approved the deployment of 21,000 in February. Following a review undertaken by counterterrorism expert Bruce Reidel, on March 27 Obama announced that his goal in Afghanistan was to “disrupt, dismantle and defeat Al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan and to prevent their return to the either country in the future” by bolstering the Afghan government and building the country’s security forces, so that terrorist organizations could not attack the United States again.

In early June 2009 Obama assigned, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the newly appointed commander of ISAF, to undertake a sixty-day assessment of the situation in Afghanistan as part

---

of a broader review of U.S. strategy. On August 31, McChrystal provided to the Pentagon a report that concluded, “Failure to provide adequate resources” for a counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign in Afghanistan, is “likely to result in mission failure.” McChrystal called for more troops and ultimately requested 40,000. In late November 2009, at the culmination of the review, the president approved a “surge” of 30,000 troops to be deployed by mid-2010 and then to remain until July 2011, when they would start to be withdrawn. The surge had some positive consequences, such as reducing the Taliban foothold in southern Afghanistan, but ultimately contributed little to stabilizing the Afghan state and allowing the Afghan military to take over defending the country’s territory. Thus, though perhaps tactically successful, the surge failed to produce enduring strategic or political benefits.

Two aspects of the Huntingtonian mind-set are apparent in how military leaders approached the strategy review and help explain the Afghan surge’s strategic failings. First, accounts of the events reveal that military leaders focused on the tactical and operational levels of war and tended to subordinate larger strategic considerations to those priorities. From the start of the review, Central Command’s commander Gen. David Petraeus, McChrystal and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Adm. Michael Mullen favored an enhanced counterinsurgency effort against the Taliban. Support for that approach reflected an assumption that reliance on

the tactics of population-centric COIN would translate into the emergence of a stable and capable Afghan government.

Discussions in numerous National Security Council meetings in the fall of 2009, however, revealed that there were major obstacles to achieving strategic political and success based on COIN. One central issue repeatedly raised by civilian participants in the review was the corruption in the Afghan government, police, and military, and how this impeded the “transfer” problem inherent in COIN—that is, the capacity to transfer responsibility for governance and security to the Afghan state.152 In addition, participants repeatedly raised concerns about Pakistan’s interests in Afghanistan and its role in providing safe haven to Taliban militants.153 Accounts of the meetings and review process suggest that U.S. military leaders tended to gloss over these strategic concerns and to focus on how to implement COIN.154 They assumed, for example, that neither corruption in the Afghan government nor Pakistan would be an obstacle if COIN was implemented and the Taliban insurgency weakened.155

One example of this bias occurred in a meeting with the NSC principals on October 8 when McChrystal was asked what he meant by “defeat”—a concept that appears in his report fourteen times in reference to the Taliban.156 When pressed, McChrystal responded that what he really meant was to “degrade” the Taliban. When asked at the same meeting if the shift from defeat to degrade meant that fewer troops would be needed, McChrystal replied no—he still

---

Conway, were concerned about the focus on troop numbers versus the mission. Perry, The Pentagon’s Wars, pp. 252–253.  
152 Woodward, Obama’s Wars, pp. 224–225, 229. At the time, it was estimated by U.S. intelligence agencies that there were approximately 100 members of al-Qaida in Afghanistan; the rest were in Pakistan. Chandrasekaran, Little America, p. 126.  
153. Ibid., pp. 167, 212, 231; Gates, Duty, p. 371; and Dorani, America’s War, p. 109.  
154 Chandrasekaran, Little America, pp. 123-127.  
156. Woodward, Obama’s Wars, p. 177.
needed the 40,000. The next day, in a full NSC meeting with the president, a small blue box had been added to McChrystal’s briefing slide clarifying that defeat meant that the Taliban could no longer threaten the government or operate as an effective insurgency.157 A strategic shift in the goal of U.S. COIN operations—from eliminating the insurgency to eroding the capabilities of the Taliban—is thus seemingly initiated on the fly by McChrystal in response to a query in an NSC meeting.158

To further see how these strategic considerations seem to fail to penetrate military thinking, consider comments in 2017 by Gen. John Nicholson, commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan who cited “two illusions” that limited the military’s success in prior iterations. “The first was that U.S. commanders didn’t realize just how crucial external support from Pakistan was in allowing an unpopular Taliban insurgency to survive. The second was that commanders didn’t understand how corruption was rotting the Afghan security structure the United States was trying to build.”159 These are the same fundamental obstacles to strategic success discussed during Obama’s review nearly a decade earlier.160

157. Ibid., p. 216. Subsequently, in an October 26 meeting with the president, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates stated that he disagreed with the military’s initial focus on the word “defeat” and they should change it to “degrade.” See ibid., p. 253.
158. Ibid., p. 213.
160. Huntington’s model also enables a truncated narrative about why the surge failed, which attributes it primarily to the timeline that Obama placed upon the commitment of forces. The military views the imposition of such timelines as an incursion of politics in the domain of operations. See Woodward, Obama’s Wars, p. 230; and Bryan Bender and Wesley Morgan, “Generals Win Key Fight Over Afghanistan They Lost with Obama,” Politico, August 22, 2017, https://www.politico.com/story/2017/08/22/trump-generals-afghanistan-241922. From the military’s perspective, McChrystal provided the president a sound plan to weaken the Taliban, but the civilian leadership failed to grant the resources and the time necessary to execute it. Rosa Brooks, “Civil-Military Paradoxes,” in Schake and Mattis, Warriors and Citizens, pp. 21–68.
A second aspect of military leaders’ role in the review is the way they responded when their advice about a fully resourced COIN approach was challenged.161 During the review, some in the administration, including Vice President Joseph Biden, favored an alternative known as “counterterrorism-plus,” which focused on preventing attacks on the United States (Obama’s overarching goal) by going after al-Qaida using special operations forces and drone attacks, with some limited number of additional troops for training Afghan forces.162 In response to an NSC request to evaluate this option, McChrystal provided a peremptory two-page dismissal of its feasibility stating that a counterterrorism approach would not work in the absence of a fully committed COIN effort.163 General Cartwright, the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, nonetheless, developed an option reflecting Biden’s view;164 it involved a hybrid counterinsurgency-counterterrorism approach that would require 10,000-20,000 additional troops.165 Yet other members of the military leadership were dubious of the approach. “There was a glitch,” as one account of the episode reports, “Admiral Mullen despised the hybrid option. He did not want it discussed and debated at the White House. So he barred it from leaving the Pentagon.”166 McChrystal was similarly opposed to the option. In October in a speech on Afghanistan at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London, McChrystal was asked

163. Woodward, Obama’s Wars, p. 236; and Dorani, America’s War, p. 107.
164. Biden stated that, while he had a strategic concept, he was not a “military guy” and needed a plan to which Cartwright reportedly responded, “We’ll provide that.” Perry, The Pentagon’s Wars, p. 244.
166. Woodward, Obama’s Wars, p. 236; and Perry, The Pentagon’s Wars, p. 251. While Mullen was opposed on substantive grounds, Cartwright’s decision to go outside the chain of command to work with Biden also rankled the military leadership. See Woodward, Obama’s Wars, p. 237.
if he would support a plan that focused on hunting down and eliminating al-Qa'ida militants
(Biden’s preferred option). He replied, “the short answer is: no’.”167

Other actions taken by military leaders make it look like the military was trying to
constrain Obama’s choices in favor of the COIN option. After an article by David Ignatius
critical of the prospects of COIN was published in early September in the Washington Post,
Petraeus contacted Michael Gerson of the Post who then published an interview with the general,
in which Petraeus advocated, echoing McChrystal, for a “fully resourced, comprehensive
counterinsurgency campaign.”168 Mullen then testified during hearings on his reappointment as
Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman that he supported a “properly resourced classically pursued
counterinsurgency”,169 the tenor and language of his comments reinforced a sense that there was
a “military bloc” pushing COIN.170 Finally, on September 21 the Washington Post published a
version of the McChrystal assessment under the headline, “McChrystal: More Forces or Mission
Failure,” which according to Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, had been leaked by someone on
McChrystal’s staff (Gates 2014, 368). As Peter Feaver put it at the time, “The leak makes it
harder for President Obama to reject a McChrystal request for additional troops because the
assessment so clearly argues for them.”171

167. Quotation in John F. Burns, “McChrystal Rejects Scaling Down Afghan Military Aims,”
New York Times, October 1, 2019,
168. Gates, Duty, p. 367; Perry, The Pentagon’s Wars, p. 245; and Woodward, Obama’s Wars,
p. 157.
170. Gates, Duty, pp. 365, 367–368. Although offering candid advice in testimony was
appropriate, Mullen could have demurred or acknowledged that a policy review was in process.
Woodward, Obama’s Wars, p. 173.
171. Peter Feaver, “Bob Woodward Strikes Again! (McChrystal Assessment Edition),” Foreign
mccrystal-assessment-edition/. Senator Lindsey Graham reportedly told Obama administration
officials through back-channels that Republicans would support the Afghan strategy “as long as
Finally, especially intriguing is General McChrystal’s characterization of the 2009 review in a 2019 interview—and how his thinking reflects Huntingtonian norms. He muses that if he, “would have been politically smarter in the Summer of 2009, I would have done the assessment, I would have the numbers say we need 40,000 more troops and I’m not going to ask for any. I’ll try to do it without. Now what that would have done would be that it would put me in one of those positions where . . . The numbers say we need more, but I’m not asking for more. I’m not recommending more. We’ll do our best.” Therefore, rather than reconsider whether his COIN-based approach was sustainable or strategically efficacious given the aforementioned constraints, or whether it was aligned with the Obama administration’s overarching counterterrorism goals, McChrystal says he might have just pushed forward with fewer troops than he thought necessary for success.

McChrystal goes on to say, “It would have been a shrewder move to not ask for any [troops] but I’m not sure it would have been as intellectually honest as Sam Huntington would want me to be. Because Sam Huntington wants you to measure and tell you how long it is and what you need.” He continues, “I kept telling my staff in Afghanistan, ‘We don’t own this war. This is not our war. We are technicians. We are going to use the Sam Huntington model here.’ ”

McChrystal seems to be arguing that it is not the military’s job to care about the larger politico-strategic success of what it is doing on the ground. McChrystal thus encapsulates the

---

the generals are O.K. and there is a meaningful number” of at least 30,000 troops committed. Peter Baker, “How Obama Came to Plan for ‘Surge’ in Afghanistan,” New York Times, December 5, 2009, https://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/06/world/asia/06reconstruct.html. Obama reflected at one point during the review that he had been pressured by the military to adopt their recommendations. Mullen reportedly replied, “We would never do that.” Perry, The Pentagon’s Wars, p. 247.

deficiencies in Huntingtonian thinking. His comments exemplify Owens’ conclusion, that “this strategic black hole [in the military’s thinking] exists largely because the military is focused its professional attention on the apolitical operational level of war, abdicating its role in strategy making.” 173 In short, for all the tactical prowess that Huntington may facilitate, the norms paradoxically contribute to a cultural mind-set among some of the country’s officers contrary to the country’s strategic effectiveness.

Conclusion

Samuel Huntington based his argument about civil-military relations on a simple, but powerful logic: objective control would allow an apolitical professionalism to flourish in the military. This apolitical professionalism would provide both for the military’s effectiveness and subordination to civilian authority. Huntingtonian norms, however, have more contradictory and, in some ways, negative implications for military professionalism than sometimes appreciated by scholars and practitioners. As I have argued, they can be contrary to the military’s apolitical ethos, undermine civilian control and contribute to strategic ineffectiveness.

It is time for scholars and practitioners to develop a new normative framework for military professionalism that is better suited to the contemporary era, by focusing on three goals. 174 First, the military should develop a comprehensive approach to counter mounting pressures on its nonpartisan ethic. 175 Senior military leaders should also proactively devise effective responses to civilian politicians’ efforts to draw the military into electoral politics, such as what to do when politicians make partisan comments to military audiences, or use military

---

personnel or resources as props in partisan speeches or events. Second, scholars and practitioners should develop a new framework that specifies how senior military leaders can participate in advisory processes to enhance the United States’ strategic effectiveness in armed conflict. That new approach should promote greater engagement by military leaders with civilian policymakers in considering political objectives and policy related issues.

Third, and most fundamentally, military leaders should rethink the meaning and scope of what it means for military personnel to be “apolitical” and reconsider how they use that concept to describe the U.S. military. Officers are now taught to aspire to inhabit an austere type of depoliticized professional. But as Janowitz states, professionalism does not “mean being ‘above politics’ to the point of being unpolitical.” Officers need to be politically aware, so that they can parse negative and partisan behaviors that are contrary to civilian control from those that are essential to achieving strategic success and ensuring a healthy civil-military relationship. Reconceptualizing the apolitical norm will help prevent the potentially damaging political behaviors facilitated by Huntingtonian norms, while supporting these more productive forms of political involvement. For the moment the chimera of a “politically sterile” military obscures the need for that effort.

---
