



President Bush seeking advice in August 1990.

DOD (R.D. Ward)

Civilian Control: A National Crisis?

By MACKUBIN THOMAS OWENS

Is there a crisis in American civil-military relations? Is the influence of generals on policy excessive? Several experts on military affairs think so. Richard Kohn, the former chief historian of the Air Force, has argued that civilian control of the military has decayed to an alarming degree.¹ Edward Luttwak specifically indicts the Joint Staff for having conducted a bloodless coup against the civilian leadership of the Pentagon.² Russell Weigley, a respected military historian, contends that civilian control “faces an uncertain future.”³

These are serious charges. Are they true? The answer largely depends on what one means by civilian control of the military. Is Kohn afraid that the Armed Forces are about to overthrow the Constitution? Well, no. “The real problem of civilian control is the relative weight or influence of the military in the decisions the government makes, not only in military policy and war, but in foreign, defense, economic, and social policy (for much military policy can have vast implications for various aspects of national life).”

The situation outlined by Kohn is, of course, a far cry from the threat of an imminent coup. But it apparently is enough to set

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off alarm bells in the night. To some, any military presence at the policymaking table represents a danger to the Republic. They seem to prefer an officer corps that meekly acquiesces to civilian dominance over military affairs.

In the view of the writers cited above, a major villain is General Colin Powell, the former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Luttwak calls him the “most manipulative of generals” and contends that he “overruled” President Clinton “with contemptuous ease” on issues such as revising military policy toward homosexuals and using force in ex-Yugoslavia. Kohn accuses Powell of “turning the age-old Clausewitzian formula about war being an extension of policy on its head” by insisting that “political objectives must be carefully matched to military objectives and military means and what is achievable.” He also states that Powell developed a “new national security policy for the country”

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in 1990–92 without consulting his civilian superiors. Kohn further takes Powell to task for publicly airing his views on military intervention in Bosnia.

Did Powell exceed his powers? It is clear that the Goldwater-Nichols DOD Reorganization Act of 1986 substantially strengthened the office of the chairman. It is incontrovertible that Powell exercised his statutory powers more fully than the first chairman to function under the new law, Admiral William Crowe. But his actions seem altogether consistent with the intent of Congress in passing Goldwater-Nichols: precisely to strengthen civilian control by making the chairman rather than the corporate Joint Chiefs of Staff the principal military advisor to the President.

Powell certainly had strong views on the relationship between the use of force and political objectives. We know that he was very effective in conveying those views to the President and the Secretary of Defense. But Luttwak’s claim that Powell “overrode” Clinton is absurd. On gays in the military and intervention in Bosnia, Powell gave ad-

vice to Clinton who, for whatever reasons, took it. According to accounts which have been published since the Gulf War, Powell opposed the early employment of military force against Iraq after the invasion of Kuwait. His commander in chief at the time chose not to accept that advice.

As to Kohn’s contention that Powell unilaterally imposed a personal strategic vision on the Nation without coordination and consultation, it should be noted that the Goldwater-Nichols Act reinforced the leading role of the chairman in developing military strategy. However, such strategy is developed in the context of a broader national security strategy to which the chairman is only one contributor. If Powell succeeded in shaping the debate over national security strategy, it is a tribute to his powers of intellect and persuasion, not a manifestation of some sinister conspiracy against civilian control of the military.

If Powell exceeded his powers, can it be argued that Goldwater-Nichols is flawed? Those reforms, it should be recalled, were passed to nearly universal acclaim by national security experts, including Luttwak and Kohn (indeed Luttwak, displaying his characteristic humility, claims credit for the passage of the Goldwater-Nichols Act). Only a handful objected. Some, like John Kester, were concerned over the power of the chairman. Others, like this writer, feared that a unified staff would be driven by strategic *monism*, the dominance of a single service view or strategic concept when strategic *pluralism* is the appropriate approach for the United States.⁴ A variation of this concern was voiced by others, such as former Secretary of the Navy John Lehman, who worried that the strategic view of the naval service would be overwhelmed by the Army and Air Force.

This writer now concedes that his concern over strategic monism was misplaced. Strategic pluralism still reigns, but the arena has changed. The Joint Staff, after all, consists of officers from the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force who still demonstrate a healthy attachment to the strategic concepts of their respective services. The result is what Congress intended: improved coordination and cooperation, not total integration or the

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dominance of one strategic view. That, ironically, is now exactly what Luttwak deprecates:

Charged to define an all-new military structure for the post-Cold War era, the Joint Staff duly cogitated and calculated and coordinated—only to come up in the end with the same old mix of ground, air, and naval forces as before. Itself manned by fixed ratios of Army, Navy, Marine, and Air Force officers at each hierarchical level, the Joint Staff predictably obeyed the logic of its own composition by resisting any genuine reappraisal of the mix of U.S. military forces. . . . The Great Pentagon Reform has shown us that the only thing worse than interservice rivalry is interservice harmony.

What Luttwak really deplors, his touching solicitude for civilian control notwithstanding, is precisely the lack of strategic monism. His expectation that Goldwater-Nichols would result in the institutionalization of his strategic concept explains why he initially supported the reforms with enthusiasm. The fact that U.S. strategy is increasingly based on the recognition of complementary service strategic concepts rather than strategic monism accounts for his new opposition.

There are at least four other reasons to reject the contention by Kohn et al. that there is a problem with civil-military relations. First and most importantly, civilian control of the military is not merely bureaucratic control of senior officers by DOD officials. This view, which suffuses the writings of Kohn and other critics, implies that the military should not debate a policy advanced by bureaucrats, no matter how hare-brained it may be. It implies that not only policy but also strategy are within the exclusive domain of Pentagon bureaucrats.

Thus it should not be a surprise that Kohn's exemplar of civilian control of the military is none other than Robert Strange McNamara who, it is observed favorably, as Secretary of Defense under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, "ignored or dismissed military advice, disparaged military experience and expertise, and circumvented or sacked generals or admirals who opposed him." But McNamara also confused strategy with economics and accordingly bears a major responsibility for the greatest military failure in American history—the Vietnam debacle.

In contradistinction to the position held by Kohn, civilian control of the military signifies, or should signify, constitutional subordination of military means to national

policy as developed by the President and Congress. Thus the chairman has a responsibility to make his views and those of the Joint Chiefs known to the President and Congress, whether they relate to turning the military into a laboratory for social experimentation or intervening in Bosnia.

The next point is a corollary of the first. Based upon an array of powers anchored in the Constitution, civilian leaders have various tools at their disposal to ensure control of the military. These include the powers to enact budgets, to reorganize the defense establishment, to define roles and functions, to influence promotions (and conversely to fire commanders), and most importantly to deploy the Armed Forces.

The third point is that civil-military relations are manifest in different ways over time. The role of America in the world is different today than it was in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The nature of military operations also has undergone significant changes. As two analysts at the U.S. Army War College have recently concluded:

Civil-military relations were simplified in the nineteenth century by the quarantine of the military, both intellectually and geographically, and by the rigid distinction between war and peace. The Cold War demanded a more holistic strategy, but the future is likely to require an even more inclusive notion, possibly leading to a fundamental transformation of U.S. civil-military relations.⁵

The point is that what may look like a crisis in civil-military relations is instead a change in the conditions to which civil-military relations must adapt.

Finally, if the military is so influential, if it can "overrule" the President and the Secretary of Defense "with contemptuous ease," why has it so meekly acquiesced in Clinton's Haiti policy? Haiti, after all, is exactly the type of operation that the military would most like to avoid. Why has force structure been cut by 30 percent from the Bush administration's proposed base force? Why is it likely that the services will lose several weapons systems which they believe are necessary to future effectiveness? Why are combat specialties being opened to women? Why is it likely that the courts will

eventually lift the ban against practicing homosexuals in the military?

Kohn and others of his ilk are correct in one respect: there is a growing disparity between the quality of military officers and their civilian counterparts, although they err in thinking that this constitutes the whole of civil-military relations.

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This change is primarily a result of improvements in Professional Military Education (PME), especially at the war college level, and the fact that, as Congress

intended in passing the Goldwater-Nichols reforms, the services now increasingly select their best officers for joint duty assignments after they complete courses at the war colleges.

In the first instance, PME emphasizes the relationship of policy, strategy, and resources. This helps to foster a military perspective with a coherence that is often absent among the civilian officials who make defense policy. In the second instance, the better educated officers frequently compete with civilians who are technocrats rather than innovative thinkers, appointees whose jobs are repayment for political debts, and a Pentagon bureaucracy that is increasingly designed to “look like America.” Thus it is not surprising that General Powell was successful in shaping the debate over not only a post-Cold War military strategy, but national security strategy as well. But if the relative weakness of civilian policymakers constitutes a real crisis in civil-military relations, it is easily rectified. As Luttwak concedes, “The only true remedy is to keep a very strong Joint Staff, but to balance it with the counterweight of equally assertive civilian leadership.”

No evidence exists to suggest that civilian control of the military, properly understood, has atrophied. The President and Congress determine policy, from force structure and acquisition to the use of military force. Senior military officers have a constitutional responsibility to ensure that a military voice is heard. Of course, if the civilian leadership chooses not to accept military advice, it is the duty of any commissioned officer to carry out the resulting policy or tender his resignation. This is exactly what professional

officers have always done. Until there is reason to expect some other response, there is no crisis in civil-military relations. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Richard H. Kohn, “Out of Control: The Crisis in Civil-Military Relations,” *The National Interest*, no. 35 (Spring 1994), pp. 3–17.

² Edward M. Luttwak, “Washington’s Biggest Scandal,” *Commentary*, vol. 97, no. 5 (May 1994), pp. 29–33.

³ Russell F. Weigley, “The American Military and the Principle of Civilian Control from McClelland to Powell,” *Journal of Military History*, vol. 57, no. 5 (October 1994), pp. 27–58.

⁴ Mackubin Thomas Owens, “The Hollow Promise of JCS Reform,” *International Security*, vol. 10, no. 3 (Winter 1985–86), pp. 98–111.

⁵ Douglas Johnson and Steven Metz, “American Civil-Military Relations: The State of the Debate,” *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 1 (Winter 1995), p. 210.