

Talking Shop

How Citizens Can Talk to Their Military . . . and Get Answers

Perhaps one of the central and most important aspects of "healthy" civil-military relations in any society, but particularly a democratic one, is the communication itself - the dialogue - between soldiers and the public they serve. Ironically, when one searches for books or other guidance on how to dialogue with the military on issues of politics and war, there is little to be found. Consequently, the widest and most worrisome "gap" in the relationship between the American Soldier and the American State is a lack of guidelines - "tips" - on how Americans can and should question and speak with members of the military services on matters of politics, war, and warfare.

Can We Talk?

Comedienne Joan Rivers built a successful comedic career in the asking of this question in her stand-up routine. The United States Military and the general American public seem to have danced around this question for decades. In fact, the American Republic rests on a firm longstanding tradition of a public healthy skepticism over standing militaries. That skepticism tends to reinforce a decades-long healthy distancing between the public and its military; that distancing while an essential check and balance on the nation's martial power is also a primary cause for what seems today to be an unknowing-ness on the part of the general public, and even public officials, on how to speak to their military - and on the part of the military, a reluctance and even unwillingness to speak openly with the public and public officials on matters relating to contemporary politics.

And here's the potentially tragic irony: a healthy and balanced civil-military relationship depends on the establishment and fostering of clear and transparent jurisdictional boundaries between the military and civil society, but boundaries that also facilitate right and proper dialogue between the soldier and the society he or she serves rather than muffles, stifles, or outright prohibits a dialogue. The objective control of civilian authority over military practice that Samuel Huntington described as the core to effective democratic civil-military relations in his seminal work, *The Soldier and the State* (1957) is highly dependent on the preservation of those conditions that promote a constant and healthy dialogue between soldiers and the public.

Not only can we talk . . . it is essential that we talk!

Lost in Translation ~

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Still, many members of the US military are reticent about talking shop with the general public – and even their civilian authorities. Lying at the center of this reluctance is, again, a strong tradition of the healthy distancing of those things (and persons) of a martial nature from general public life. But also at this core is a misunderstanding among soldier and society alike of what constitutes the proper bounds of the military's involvement in those things deemed *political*.

We are all familiar with the popular saying heard often from military folk, from privates to four-star generals – something to the effect of, “that is a political issue and therefore beyond what I am professionally allowed to discuss.” Where the concept of the out-of-bounds political question once defining of the limits of judiciary rule and interplay is now an artifact, the political question is the wall that separates the military from politics, and consequently from the society it exists to serve. Ours is a message lost in how the US military has been permitted to translate those things of a *partisan* nature from those things *political*. The misnomer of partisan versus politics (political) is the root of the translation error and the consequence of an impoverished dialogue between military soldiers and officers and the public. Many in the military object to weighing in with their military knowledge and expertise on important public debates due to a misperception that as a political issue of debate, it is a debate that lies out-of-bounds for the professional soldier. The military as an institution has perpetuated this organizational cultural aversion (opting-out) to political debates. American society, picking up on this military stoicism on issues of politics, seems to have given the military the space it appears to want to maintain away and apart from “politics.”

In 1998, H.R. McMasters published what has become an important work on contemporary civil-military affairs, *Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam*. His accounting of the failures that led to the loss of the US war in Vietnam made strong note of the failings of the military advisors directly serving President Johnson and the Military Service Chiefs to *speak the truth, with candor, to Power*. While theirs, back then, was a sin of commission, the dereliction we deal with today, in our times, is more of a sin of omission . . . but it is a dereliction of duty nonetheless . . . on the part of the military in lying comfortable and dormant within wall of separation from those issues political . . . and on the part of the general public in their collective failing to press its military for answer to and dialogue on the important issues and questions defining contemporary politics and war.

The United States military – its officers and soldiers – are in no way cast-out of political debates. On the contrary, with war (and warfare) being a continuation of politics by other means – the cornerstone to US military doctrine (see Carl Von Clausewitz' *On War*, Paret (1986)) – how could it be that the martialist is to be

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removed from those things political? The illogic is obvious. If politics can be (and is!) widely accepted as the allocation of those things scarce and of value, and further, if it is understood that all institutions are political and deal in politics, . . . then the institution of the US armed forces, like any other government institution, is a political organization. The point is simple: the US military is expected - even mandated by commissioned oath - to be expert in all aspects of the military instrument of national power, to include the politics of war and warfare. One need only read Charles Wilson's great work, *This War Really Matters: Inside the Fight for Defense Dollars* (Congressional Quarterly Publications, 1999) to get the whole hard truth of the matter - in order to effectively *provide for the Common Defense*, US military officers must be well adept at the defense and security politics and policymaking practices that allow for the *provisioning* of the type and kind and quantities and qualities of capabilities needed to provide for that *Common Defense*.

What the professional military soldier is restricted from, and rightfully so, are those activities of a *partisan* nature. Participation in party-based politics is a violation of law, DOD regulation, and anathema to the professional ethos of the US military. Yet and still, we find more examples of what could be regarded as unethical - and in certain cases, illegal - participation of military personnel in partisan politics than we find engaged in effective (and ethical and legal) debates and issues of contemporary *war-politics*.¹

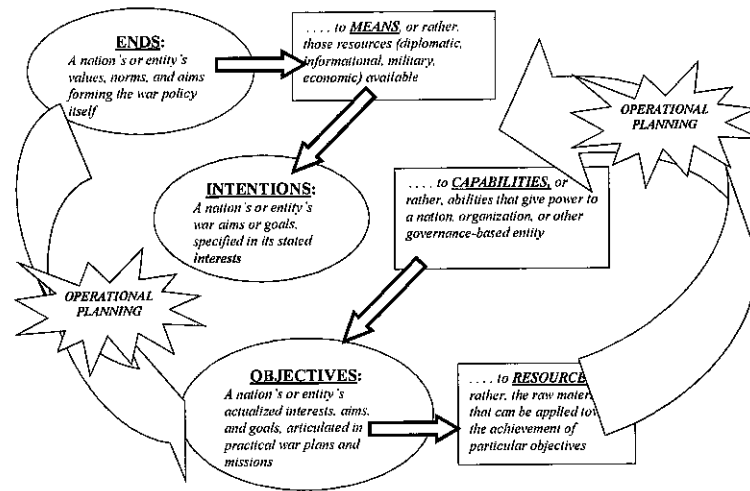
So, What's Fair Game?

I recently published some thoughts on the proper boundaries of military political participation in a posting to DemocracyArsenal.Com, titled "Being the Good Soldier (http://www.democracyarsenal.org/2006/04/being_the_good.html) I stand by these original broad thoughts and would reference readers to them as a decent beginning of a reconsideration of proper - and expected - civil military relations in contemporary times. Going further, I offer what is by no means an exhaustive listing of issue arenas in which US military officers and soldiers are capable (even obligated) of weighing in on, but a listing that I think serves quite well as a humble start point:

Strategy ~ Simply defined, strategy is "the process by which ends are related to means, intentions to capabilities, objectives to resources." (Gaddis 1982, viii).

¹ For a quick reference see the Triangle Institutes 1997 study on civil-military relations. See *TISS Project on the Gap Between the Military and Civilian Society*, at <http://www.poli.duke.edu/civmil/>

The Gaddis Paradigm



A simpler articulation of strategy is offered by Harry Summers, Jr. (On Strategy, 1982) – as “ends to ways to means.” With “ends” referring to political goals, “means” referring to resources and capabilities available to achieve those political goals, and “ways” referring to the policy processes that offer mechanisms for converting available resources into methods for achieving goals, what we see in matters of strategy is the nexus of civilian decisionmaking authority and military expertise that defines civil-military relations.

So, where can the military rightly speak on matters of strategy and strategymaking? On matters of, and in debates concerning, strategic planning – particularly on uses of those assets and functions typically regarded in terms of military power – military professionals are not only allowed to participate, but obligated to do so . . . as it is they who by delegated public authorities are the keepers of expert knowledge on such matters. In short, *if not the military experts, then who?*

Fair-Play Questions for Military Officers, re: Strategy

1. *Given there is a decision on political goals and endstate, what are the feasible and suitable courses of action (actioning options) for a successful attainment of those political objectives?*
2. *From a military perspective, what is the gamut of adversary (opponent) goals, resources available, capabilities, capacities for the strategic projection of threat and capacity for sustaining it? What can the “enemy” do? What actions are within the realm of the possible (feasible, acceptable) for the adversary?*
3. *What is/are the defense and security implications possibly involved in, or potentially to derive from, the policy positions, standing or under development?*

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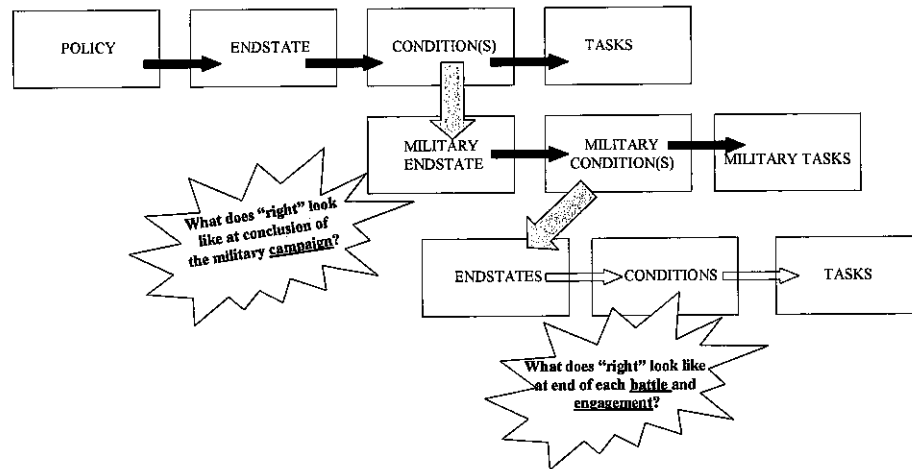
“Out-of-Bounds” Questions, re: Strategy

1. Questions that place the military soldier/officer in the position of commenting on the partisan-political intentions of decision makers, either directly (by giving them no way out of answering explicitly) or indirectly (by placing the military person in a position of not being able to answer, which in turn, appears to be an answer in and of itself)
2. Questions soliciting the opinions of military persons on the character, professional pedigree, or “politics” of decision makers themselves. For example, this past year’s so called Revolt of the Generals saw a mix of active duty and retired General Officers publicly speaking out about the Iraq War and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld. While it was not only okay for these officers to speak up and out about those aspects of the US war strategy dealing with the “mechanics” of carrying out the war-policy (the “how-tos”), but obligatory (as the subject-matter experts on such mechanical matters), it was not okay, and perhaps even unethical, for some of these officers to speak against the war-policy itself and the SECDEF himself – calls for Rumsfeld’s resignation were completely out of bounds)
3. Any questioning that puts the military person in a position where they cannot provide a non-partisan answer.

Operational Art and Science

One popular definition of operational art is *the use of military forces to achieve strategic goals through the design, organization, integration, and conduct of strategies, campaigns, major operations, and battles*. Thinking about and reconsidering this definition beyond the martial applications for a moment, operational art and science is an accurate reference to any policy process, specifically those processes that define the formulation of mechanisms for the effective realization of strategic political goals. Operational art and the science that makes it possible, then, is where the politics takes place. In matters of warfare and military operations in support of peace operations, operational art is where the politics take place. Military Operational art is a political enterprise.

Greer's Strategic Framework



SOURCE: COL. Greer, SAMS seminar, 8-9-02

In the politics of war and peace, soldiers and officers have much to say and much to contribute to the political debates that often revolve around – and define – war and peace policy. The graphic above describes this strategic-operational policy process – an offering by Colonel James Greer, former director of the U.S. Army School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) – the U.S. Army’s center of excellence on planning. What Greer shows explicitly here is the jurisdictional relationships between civilian executive decision makers – and their determination of the political goals and politically-acceptable strategic conditions that define a US intervention campaign – and the military’s derivation from these strategic conditions and political endstates, of the proper and effective military objectives (“intermediate” objectives), tasks, and capabilities defining of a right and proper (and effective) intervention policy. What is less explicit, but strongly implied and intended here is the military’s need-to-know on the strategic-political aspects of intervention policy planning as a precondition to their capacity to formulate operating plans and programs for effective implementation.

Fair-Play Questions for Military Officers, re: Operations

1. Any questions relating, again, to the mechanics involved with the formulation of operational plans and the implementation of those plans. More specifically,
 - a. resources required-to-tasks (“troop-to-tasks” in military jargon) allocations and distributions;
 - b. timing of operations and missions as related to constraints and limitations of complex operations (“mechanics of the move” types of questions)
 - c. spacing of troop/unit/resource deployments and redeployments;

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- d. purposes and objectives underpinning the operational mission;
 - e. phasing and staging of missions, operations, particular civil-mil tasks and activities;
 - f. types, kinds, quality/quantity, posture and arrayal of resources, units, as well as integrated mixes of varying "forces available" (i.e., joint-sister service mixes; interagency, intergovernmental, multinational; civil-military; etc.)
2. Any questions relating to the "how, when, and where" of intervention operations;
 3. Any questions relating to operational level (not "political") courses of action;
 4. Any questions relating to the feasibility, acceptability, and suitability of operational courses of action.

"Out-of-Bounds" Questions, re: Operations

1. Questions inquiring to the personal opinions of a military person on the partisan-political intent of decision makers possibly undergirding the determined of the timing, spacing, resourcing, and mixtures of forces available for civil-military operations;
2. Questions compromising the security of ongoing or imminent operations (i.e., questions relating to unit locations; troop rotation timelines; compliment and disposition of forces and capabilities). Note: such questions can be asked, but will likely (and legitimately) not be answered by military personnel

The bottom line is this: the US military is your military – we are here to serve the American Republic and the Constitution . . . and that includes answering your questions and concerns on matters of defense, security, and the instrumental uses of military power and capacity as a tool of national power and progress. As the expert keepers of the nation's knowledge on martial affairs – as the nations' delegated manager of violence – not only are we as military personnel able to talk truthfully and openly to you whom we serve, we are obligated by commissioned oath to do so. The trick is finding the right ways to communicate to one another – those ways that allow the public to get the information they need from the military (i.e., the facts pertaining to the mechanics of military capacity and intervention strategy) in a manner that does not place that military into a professionally compromising position.

The general public – you – have a particular responsibility in keeping your military safely outside the partisan-politics of the day. Failure on the public's part to keep its military well outside party politics and the political campaigning aspects of public policymaking places the nation at risk of allowing the military to depart from its non-partisan position of impartiality as a US Governmental institution, which leads toward a de-professionalization of the US military and its officers and soldiers. Our nation – our constitutional republic – is constructed upon a blueprint of detailed separations of power to provide the sort of unique checks and balances ("auxiliary precautions") that have allowed us now for over 230 years to maintain that delicate effective balance between liberty (individual freedom) and security (societal order). The US civil-military relationship is another of these unique separations of power relationships and processes. The Civil-Military relationship is premised upon three pillars: (1) commissioned oath to protect and defend the Constitution (proxy for "the people" and their elected representatives and our national way of life) of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; (2) nonpartisan nature of the US military; (3) subordination of the US military to civilian authority. When we as citizens allow the protections provided by any one or combination of these pillars to atrophy, we place the republic and American republican ideals at severe risk. Americans have long had a healthy skepticism – an aversion – to standing militaries. This cultural skepticism dates back to our colonial experience under British political and military occupation during the 18th century. From a history of representative democracies viewpoint, this skepticism is equally justified. The history of the decline and fall of past republics into illiberalism and even

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imperialism all record one common trend among the cases – one of the last institutions to fall, ringing in the fall from republican government, has always been a compromise of principles and regulatory processes originally designed to keep the martial power of the government of the day, ether it be city states or nation-states, subordinate to public authority and service and outside of and beyond the factional politics of the day.

Benjamin Franklin, when asked at the closing of the Second Continental Congress as to what kind of government he and the framers had given us answered, “a Republic . . . if you can keep it.” A major factor in keeping and preserving our American republic has always been, and is today, preserving the right and proper balance between the nations’ military power and its partisan politics.

The American public therefore is obligated to protect its military by speaking with it and to it in ways that allow that military to respond honestly but still professionally removed from the ideological and partisan aspects of the issues under debate and discussion. That said, your military must avoid using this veil of nonpartisanship as an excuse to avoid answering the hard “political” questions asked of it – those questions that speak directly to the allocation of scarce resources (manpower; materiel; time and spacing of operations; and the like). The healthy American civil-mil relationship depends on the public and the military jointly avoiding entry into partisan debates and debates that either place military persons unwillingly in positions of speaking out for or against particular civilian authority decisions or the decisions makers themselves, or, allow military persons to commit this kind of “sin” by their own personal or collective volition. This relationship also depends on the public and its military seeking the right kinds of forums and formats through which to discuss and debate the things that we can talk about – and that must be talked about. The relationship only serves it purpose as a separation of power and check and balancing process in this two-way, push-pull manner.

A Case in Point

The recent case of General Eric Shinseki, former US Army chief of staff, is illustrative . . . as well as a cautionary tale. By now we all are familiar with the story of how in the months leading up to the US decision to invade Iraq, General Shinseki was asked by congress in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee what it would take, in terms of time and manpower, to fight and win a war in Iraq. The answer provided by Shinseki was basically several hundred thousand troops for a lengthy but undetermined amount of time. And we all now the rest of that story – vehement disagreements from the civilian authorities within OSD and the Administration (with Deputy SecDef Wolfowitz characterizing Shinseki’s estimates as “wildly off the mark”), the perception (if not legitimized fact) of a punishment of General Shinseki through an early naming of his replacement (reinforced by the early replacement of Tom White, the Secretary of the Army), and the hypothesized negative impacts this “firing of Shinseki” had on the rest of the active US military – perhaps contributing to a general “muting” of senior military leaders, particularly during the first couple of years of warfighting in Iraq to speak openly and with candor the truth regarding troop size and complement to the public and civilian authorities.

Was the original round of questions asked by congress to General Shinseki “fair play” questions? Yes. The questions asked where “mechanical” questions – questions of operational science; of operational planning. They were answered by a senior military officer from a position and perspective of over 30 years of active duty martial service, a career of mixed experiences of both traditional “warfighting” and peace operations in places like the Balkans during the 1990s. So, was the answer provided by General Shinseki “right and proper?” Yes.

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This case is an important one as it illustrates two important points. The first point made is the vital importance of military persons, particularly senior leaders, to speak and answer to legal civilian authority openly and honestly on those matters impacting the feasibility and suitability and acceptability of the uses of military power. The second point made is the importance of civilian authority - and the general public - to avoid the partisan politicization of nonpartisan answers and information gained from its military. Such action degrades the professional relationship the military has with civilian authority and the America public, placing mutual trust and affinity at great risk. It also risks partisanizing the actions of the nations' military.

The distinction between a national military that is in the service of the public interests and the national security and a praetorian force serving factional state interests can make for the difference between a military serving a democratic republic and one that finds itself serving an imperial enterprise. The balance, again, is a delicate one and keeping it largely a matter of our choices in how we speak to one another.

