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CHALLENGES FOR CIVIL- MILITARY RELATIONS

Policy Revolt: Army Opposition to the Korea Withdrawal Plan

Eric B. Setzekorn

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ABSTRACT: In the mid-1970s, Jimmy Carter, first as a candidate and later as president, announced his intention to remove US forces from the Korean peninsula. By publicly opposing the plan as part of a Fabian strategy, senior Army leaders gained public support of their position and the president suspended the planned withdrawal.

Direct military opposition to national policy is rare and generally unsuccessful. In the late 1970s, however, senior Army officers in Korea directly opposed President Jimmy Carter's goal of withdrawing US troops from the Korean peninsula. After the relief of one general officer, they adopted an indirect strategy that included inflating threat assessments of North Korea and cultivating ties with congressional members skeptical of Carter's plan. These efforts succeeded, and Carter decided in 1979 to suspend the withdrawal of US troops. This episode illustrates a fundamental ethical and bureaucratic tension between servicemembers' desires to influence defense policy, particularly in regions or on topics where the military has long-standing connections and expertise, and their desire to serve their civilian masters honorably. This article describes how Army officers effectively circumvented official policy by using bureaucratic measures that also protected them from being relieved from duty.

Studies of disagreements between presidential administrations and military officers abound. But most focus on major crisis events—such as Harry S. Truman's firing of General Douglas MacArthur or the actions, or inactions, of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Vietnam—which obscure a much wider range of civil-military interactions that often shape defense policies. Recent academic attention on the relief of officers and military resignations unfortunately highlights rare situations rather than the day-to-day policy process.¹ The debate on military resignations is particularly puerile because only one Army general officer, Major General Edwin A. Walker, has resigned since World War II.²

Rather than opposing policy directly, US officers have had more success with a Fabian strategy of gradually leveraging Congress, the

1 James M. Dubik, "Taking a 'Pro' Position on Principled Resignation," *Armed Forces and Society* 43, no. 1 (January 2017): 17–28; Jim Golby, "Beyond the Resignation Debate: A New Framework for Civil-Military Dialogue," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 18–46; Peter D. Feaver, "Resign in Protest? A Cure Worse Than Most Diseases," *Armed Forces and Society* 43, no. 1 (January 2017): 29–40; and Don M. Snider, "Should General Dempsey Resign? Army Professionals and the Moral Space for Dissent," Strategic Studies Institute, October 21, 2014.

2 Warren Weaver Jr., "Pension Restored for Gen. Walker," *New York Times*, July 24, 1983, 17.

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media, and elements of the bureaucracy, such as the intelligence services, to exhaust a presidential administration's resolve. Roman General Fabius delayed and obstructed the Carthaginian General Hannibal in a similar manner. In a direct battle, presidential authority can be overpowering. In such cases, an administration has every incentive to demonstrate its power. In contrast, a recalcitrant institution, which is decentralized and has deep connections to other organizations, can force an administration to expend irreplaceable time and capital in the political equivalent of a guerilla war.

General Colin Powell's successful effort to stop President Bill Clinton's gays-in-the-military initiative provides a classic example of a Fabian strategy in civil-military relations. Through consultation with sympathetic members of Congress from both parties, a network of retired generals, and public statements that obliquely encouraged critiques of the president, Powell slowed the implementation of an announced policy. After a nearly yearlong delay, a much different "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy emerged that maintained a ban on homosexuals serving openly in the US military.³

The actions of Army officers, particularly those of the United Nations Commander, and later Chief of Staff of the Army, General John W. Vessey Jr., in delaying and rallying opposition to stop presidential decisions to withdraw troops from Korea is a more impressive demonstration of the Army's institutional power. In the late 1970's, Vessey was outside Washington, DC, and the Army, still reeling from Vietnam, had little public support.

Moreover, the dispute centered on military basing overseas, a subject that did not have a natural domestic political constituency to energize public opinion. As in the Powell case, Army officers working to stop the withdrawal noted a lack of consultation before President Carter's decision, which was perceived as both a flawed policy process and disrespectful to the military. The Army made the topic a public debate where it could use specialized information and professional expertise to stymie a presidential policy that clashed with the Army's assessments of America's national security interests.

A Leader, for a Change

In the post-Watergate election of 1976, Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter projected an image that conveyed transparency and simplicity in government, using the campaign slogan "A Leader, for a Change." During the campaign, he made vague statements about phasing out US troops in South Korea, explaining, "he favored taking US troops out of Korea and would be prepared to begin as soon as he became President."⁴ Some reports indicated analysts from the Brookings Institution convinced

3 Peter D. Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 201–4; and Daniel Bessner and Eric Lorber, "Toward a Theory of Civil-Military Punishment," *Armed Forces and Society* 38, no. 4 (October 2012): 658–61.

4 Don Oberdorfer, "Carter's Decision on Korea Traced Back to January, 1975," *Washington Post*, June 12, 1977.

Carter to believe “the large US presence in South Korea amounted to a ‘trip wire’ that could automatically involve the United States in another Asian land war.”⁵ These analysts, many of whom would later work for the Carter administration, argued for the United States to draw down forces overseas to focus primarily on Japan, leaving Korea and Taiwan as tangential Third World security interests.⁶

Carter was also drawing on a new generation of foreign policy analysts who were shaped by what they perceived to be the lessons of Vietnam, foremost among them an overreach in American objectives and an excessive use of military force. Many of Carter’s policies, particularly those for East Asia and Korea, were formulated by Jerome Cohen, a well-known peace activist with an antimilitary reputation, who had no military experience and was a staunch critic of South Korean President Park Chung Hee’s human rights abuses. On June 23, 1976, Carter implied military support would be contingent on larger issues in the bilateral relationship and on subjective moral assessments rather than an objective security policy:

I believe it will be possible to withdraw our ground forces from South Korea on a phased basis over a time span to be determined after consultation with both South Korea and Japan. At the same time, it should be made clear to the South Korean Government that its internal oppression is repugnant to our people, and undermines the support of our commitment there.⁷

Carter’s withdrawal plan fulfilled several key political goals. First, it offered Carter an opportunity to reinforce his moral policies and to provide a high-minded rationale for the withdrawal. Second, removing US forces from Korea provided the president the option to commit forces elsewhere. Lastly, withdrawal respected the public’s skepticism of foreign military engagement, particularly in Asia, giving Carter an easy political win.

During his first months in office, Carter attempted to create policies and strategies that reflected his campaign promises, and the withdrawal of ground forces from Korea was given high priority. He immediately directed the Policy Review Committee (PRC) to reexamine US policies toward the Korean peninsula before March 7, 1977.⁸ Normally the member of the National Security Council with a primary interest in the issue chaired the committee. But despite the military nature of the issue, the State Department’s Cyrus Vance led the committee. As the

5 Larry A. Niksch, “U.S. Troop Withdrawal from South Korea: Past Shortcomings and Future Prospects,” *Asian Survey* 21 (March 1981): 326–28; and Steven L. Rearden and Kenneth R. Foulks, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy, 1977–1980* (Washington DC: Office of Joint History, 2015), 154.

6 Barry M. Blechman, Edward M. Gramlich, and Robert W. Hartman, *Setting National Priorities: The 1975 Budget* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1974), 129.

7 Jimmy Carter, “Relations between the World’s Democracies” (speech, Foreign Policy Association, New York, NY, June 23, 1976) Department of State, Office of the Historian, accessed November 14, 2018.

8 Jimmy Carter to the Attorney General, memorandum, “Korea: Presidential Review Memorandum/NSC-13,” January 29, 1977, Washington, DC, Carter Presidential Library and Museum, accessed November 27, 2018.

administration sought to accelerate the process to reach a predetermined conclusion, senior officials also endeavored to limit military participation. On February 2, 1977, National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski's staff successfully cancelled Vessey's upcoming Congressional testimony based upon the general's opposition to the withdrawal.⁹

Early in the review process, the administration appeared to have already decided its policy to the point that Department of Defense input would merely be a formality. To many, Vice President Walter Mondale's public statement, "We will phase down our ground forces only in close consultation and cooperation with the Governments of Japan and South Korea," confirmed the policy had already been decided.¹⁰ In fact, Carter privately confirmed he had reached a decision on March 5, 1977—before comments or discussion from the State Department, Defense Department, or Central Intelligence Agency—when he gave a handwritten note to Brzezinski and Vance: "American forces will be withdrawn. Air cover continued."¹¹ Since the president announced the 4-to-5 year withdrawal schedule nearly two months before the policy became official, many in the bureaucracy felt no genuine discussion had occurred.¹² The review had been a check-the-block exercise centered not on whether to withdraw but how.

Overall, the president's development of a new national security policy regarding the Korean peninsula was severely flawed. The administration made poorly considered campaign promises official through a sham process that excluded major sources of information indicative of Samuel Huntington's observation: "The problem of the modern state is not armed revolt but the relation of the expert to the politician."¹³ Driven by his desire to be a popular politician, Carter created severe tension with his primary experts on South Korea—US Army officers.

An Army in Opposition

The withdrawal plan was not popular with US Army officers in South Korea. As the Korean War approached a stalemate in 1953, the US presence there rapidly declined from roughly 400,000 troops to a stable deterrent force of roughly 55,000 personnel, mostly assigned to two Army divisions. During the 1950s and early 1960s, an assignment to

9 Michael Armacost to Zbigniew Brzezinski, memorandum, 0297, "General Vessey's Testimony on Korean Troop Withdrawals," February 2, 1977, container 1, NSA 26, records of the Office of the National Security Advisor (Brzezinski), Carter Presidential Library and Museum.

10 Hubert H. Humphrey and John Glenn, *U.S. Troop Withdrawal from the Republic of Korea: A Report to the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1978), 20.

11 "Handwritten Note from Jimmy Carter for Zbigniew Brzezinski and Cyrus Vance, 5 March 1977," in *The Carter Chill: US-ROK-DPRK Trilateral Relations, 1976–1979* (Washington DC: North Korea International Documentation Project, n.d.), 77.

12 Humphrey and Glenn, *U.S. Troop Withdrawal*, 20; and Jimmy Carter to the Vice President, Secretary of State, and Secretary of Defense, "U.S. Policy in Korea Presidential Directive/NSC-12," May 5, 1977, Washington, DC, Carter Presidential Library and Museum, accessed November 27, 2018.

13 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 20.

Korea served as a stepping-stone to higher rank. Both General Lyman L. Lemnitzer and General George H. Decker commanded the Eighth Army in Korea before serving as the chief of staff of the Army.

After the withdrawal of US forces from Vietnam, senior Army leaders, in the role of United Nations commander, wielded tremendous influence within South Korea. Ambassador William Gleysteen remarked that General Richard G. Stilwell “knew he was very important to the Koreans, because ‘he’ provided security and military assistance to them—not to mention use of the Command’s golf course and clubs. The embassy, on the other hand, was usually the source of complaints and problems.”¹⁴ During the late 1970s, the increasingly authoritarian South Korean government led by Park Chung Hee looked for support from America’s military officers rather than the State Department’s civilian officials. Many Americans, including Vessey, who was the commander of US and UN forces in Korea, felt the senior US commander had more access to Park than the US ambassador.¹⁵

Shortly after Carter was sworn in, Vessey expressed his misgivings on the withdrawal plan publicly to the *Washington Post* and privately to the president. While the general’s arguments were not in-line with the president’s thinking, the withdrawal policy was technically still under review and there were no official guidelines restricting the discussion of it.¹⁶ Other senior Army leaders were also critical of the policy. Lieutenant General John H. Cushman, commander of I Corps in Korea, wrote an article supporting a robust US presence in South Korea. But a prepublication review determined his views were “contrary to policy.”¹⁷

During a visit to Korea in late April 1977, Chief of Staff of the Army Bernard W. Rogers told senior military leaders that, despite the ongoing policy review, “the decision in my opinion has been made to withdraw the forces, and what remains is how they will be withdrawn—what schedule and what numbers for each milestone.”¹⁸ Presidential Directive/National Security Council 12 (PD/NSC-12) confirmed his opinion. One brigade would leave South Korea before December 1978; the second, June 1980.¹⁹ The State and Defense Departments received tasking memorandums and military assistance plans for the withdrawal.

Army officers in Korea continued to see the withdrawal plan as ill-considered and hastily approved. Moreover, “an informal plan”

14 William H. Gleysteen Jr. (ambassador to South Korea from 1978–81), interview with Thomas Stern, June 10, 1997 (Arlington, VA: Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project [ADST], 2000), 132.

15 Gen John W. Vessey Jr. (commanding general of the Eighth US Army; commander of US Forces, Korea; and commander in chief of the United Nations command in Korea from 1976–79), interview 19 with Thomas Saylor, August 29, 2012 (Saint Paul, MN: Concordia University, 2014), 24.

16 Vessey, interview 20, September 6, 2012, 12–13.

17 John H. Cushman, *Korea 1976–1978—A Memoir* (self-pub., October 2013), 25.

18 *Hearings on Review of the Policy Decision to Withdraw United States Ground Forces from Korea Before the Investigations Subcommittee of the Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives*, 95th cong. 83 (1977) (statement of Bernard W. Rogers, Chief of Staff of the Army).

19 Jimmy Carter to the Vice President, Secretary of State, and Secretary of Defense, “U.S. Policy in Korea Presidential Directive/NSC-12,” May 5, 1977, Washington, DC, Carter Presidential Library and Museum, accessed November 27, 2018.

among senior Army officers “gradually took shape in opposition to troop withdrawal.”²⁰ Three weeks after the president signed PD/NSC-12, Major General John K. Singlaub, chief of staff of US forces in Korea, made comments understood to be off-the-record during an interview with *Washington Post* reporter John Saar in Seoul.²¹ The most inflammatory segment of the interview captured Singlaub’s contention, “If U.S. ground troops are withdrawn on the schedule suggested, it will lead to war.”²² Within the Washington bureaucracy, Singlaub’s comments regarding the dangerous and destabilizing policy further polarized the president’s White House staff and their opponents in the State and Defense Departments.²³

Within Carter’s inner circle, the issue of a withdrawal from Korea was less important than increasing presidential power and preparing for upcoming bureaucratic battles. Hamilton Jordan, a close personal friend of Carter and a senior political strategist, wrote, “This is an opportunity for you to firmly establish the position of your administration on the question of civilian control of the military establishment. . . . It is important for the military establishment to realize that when they challenge your decisions and judgements, they do so at the risk of their own careers.”²⁴

On May 21, 1977, President Carter officially relieved General Singlaub of his position as a result of his comments. The action discouraged direct challenges to presidential decisions but increased debate. Thomas Stern, a Foreign Service officer stationed in Seoul remarked, “Singlaub took it upon himself to challenge Carter publicly on this whole question of troop withdrawal. That helped to raise the issue in both public and private channels.”²⁵ Public commentators agreed, “White House drama served only to give [the Singlaub affair] far more significance and substance than it deserved.”²⁶

The high-profile dispute provided an opening for Congress to hold hearings and potentially slow Carter’s withdrawal plan. During congressional testimony, Singlaub reiterated the consultation process had been rushed and had shunned the input of military officers.²⁷ The testimony also revealed the United Nations Command in Korea formally requested a rationale for the decision and the long-range

20 James V. Young, *Eye on Korea: An Insider Account of Korean-American Relations* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), 43.

21 John K. Singlaub, *Hazardous Duty: An American Soldier in the Twentieth Century* (New York, Summit Books, 1991), 385–86.

22 John Saar, “U.S. General: Korea Pullout Risks War,” *Washington Post*, May 19, 1977.

23 John K. Singlaub, *Hazardous Duty*, 385–86; and William H. Gleysteen Jr., *Massive Entanglement, Marginal Influence: Carter and Korea in Crisis* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), 23.

24 Hamilton Jordan to President Carter, “General Singlaub,” n.d., container 37, Office of the Chief of Staff Files, Hamilton Jordan’s Confidential Files, Singlaub, General, container 37, folder for General Singlaub, series of Hamilton Jordan’s Confidential Files, collection of the Office of the Chief of Staff Files, Carter Presidential Library and Museum, accessed November 27, 2018.

25 John T. Bennett and Thomas Stern, interview with Charles Stuart Kennedy, October 2, 1987, (Arlington, VA: ADST, Training, Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, 2000), 17.

26 “The Singlaub Affair,” *Washington Post*, May 24, 1977.

27 *Hearings on Review of the Policy Decision*, 9.

policy objectives because of the military's exclusion from the matter.²⁸ Singlaub's testimony cited the growing number of intelligence reports on the increased North Korean threat.²⁹

The hearings led to a sharp increase in studies of and senior official visits to Korea. Military officers actively presented facts and opinions to friendly congressmen. Once a relationship was developed between a senior officer and Congress, visits and "fact-finding" trips could further present the Army's message opposing the withdrawal. Vessey remarked, "I don't say that I searched for them. I think that would be inaccurate. But I found out who they were." The general "welcomed them on their trips to Korea and then made sure that they were taken to the Demilitarized Zone and could see the situation there, and had good briefings on both the strengths and weaknesses of the armed forces of the Republic of Korea as well as our own. *I don't think we did anything that I would call dishonest or misleading. On the other hand, we certainly didn't tell them that President Carter's plan was a good idea.*"³⁰

While Army leaders built connections and influence in Congress, the administration also strengthened its position. During his June 8, 1977, commencement address at the United States Military Academy, Secretary of the Army Clifford Alexander Jr. took a hard line on military subordination. He outlined three distinct forums, with variable degrees of independence. First, military officers were free to offer opinions within their chain of command until a decision was reached. Second, when appearing before Congress, an officer is free to express a personal opinion but is bound to cite and support policy. Lastly, when dealing with the media, an officer should know when a policy is established or still under discussion and express that to the media. Alexander warned, "Attempts to achieve outside the chain of command what one could not achieve inside the chain of command are out of keeping with this tradition [of the president as commander in chief] and inconsistent with military professionalism."³¹

As the White House and civilian officials attempted to continue tightening the framework for public discussion by Army leaders, Congress continued the hearings, which provided a forum for military officers to cast doubt on Carter's Korea policy throughout the summer of 1977. The commander of I Corps in Korea, the current and retired commander of US Forces Korea, the commander of Pacific Air Forces, the commander in chief of the Pacific Command, the Army chief of staff, and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs were all called to testify on the Korea withdrawal plan. Each expressed reservations about the withdrawal plan. And their testimony was used by Carter's congressional opponents and hawkish Democrats to strengthen their arguments.

28 *Hearings on Review of the Policy Decision*, 10.

29 Singlaub, *Hazardous Duty*, 401.

30 Vessey, interview 21, September 13, 2012, 5 (emphasis added).

31 Headquarters Air Force, message, 172355Z, "Statements by Defense Officials," June 1977, quoted in Felix F. Moran, "Free Speech, the Military, and the National Interest," *Air University Review* 31, no. 4 (May-June 1980): 112.

Testifying in August, Chief of Staff of the Army General Rogers was asked, “Were the Joint Chiefs ever asked whether troops should be withdrawn from Korea?” He responded bluntly, “They were not.”

Under oath, Rogers also testified he had no idea when the announced withdrawal should begin. When asked about the value of American troops in South Korea, Rogers stated, “I think it makes two contributions. First, as a deterrent, and second, if under conditions of combat the national command authority released the 2d Division for use by 8th Army, it could make a contribution in the area of war-fighting capability as well.”³² The ongoing hearings were highly effective in shaping opposition to Carter’s policies. By late July, official polls showed 52 percent of Americans disapproved of Carter’s withdrawal plan.³³

In addition to working closely with Congress to cast doubt on official policy, military officers cultivated intelligence that magnified the North Korean threat. Due to a lack of human intelligence, estimates of North Korea’s forces had been constrained to satellite imagery. In January 1978, Vessey asked for an assessment of North Korea’s military capabilities.³⁴ The Defense Intelligence Agency produced a report in May 1978 that sharply increased both the size and the capability of North Korean forces, identifying more than three entirely new combat divisions.³⁵ Disseminating these revised threat assessments put additional pressure on the Carter administration to delay or to halt the withdrawal program.

On April 21, 1978, Carter delayed the first increment of withdrawals. While the redeployment of 2,600 noncombat elements and a combat battalion by the end of the year would proceed as planned, two of the combat battalions scheduled for withdrawal in 1978 would remain, at least until 1979.³⁶ Military officers were not subtle in rejoicing. One wrote, “At last, a reprieve!”³⁷ On July 29, 1979, Carter announced the suspension of US troop withdrawals from Korea. The administration remembered the military opposition, and in 1979, Vessey was passed over for the position of chief of staff.³⁸

Conclusion

Although President Carter demonstrated his official power by relieving Singlaub, he was less successful at stopping Vessey from pursuing a Fabian strategy that increased the political costs and security

32 *Hearings on Review of the Policy Decision*, 95–71.

33 “Public Likes Carter, Survey Finds, More for His Style than Programs,” *New York Times*/CBS News Poll, July 29, 1977, 1; Larry K. Nicksch, “US Troop Withdrawal from South Korea: Past Shortcomings and Future Prospects,” *Asian Survey* 21, no. 3 (March 1981), 329.

34 Byung-Kook Kim and Ezra F. Vogel, *The Park Chung Hee Era: The Transformation of South Korea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 478.

35 Joe Wood, “Persuading a President: Jimmy Carter and American Troops in Korea,” *Studies in Intelligence* 40, no. 4 (1996): 98, 106.

36 Steven L. Rearden and Kenneth R. Foulks Jr., *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy, 1977–1980* (Washington, DC: Office of Joint History, 2015), 158.

37 Ward M. Le Hardy, “Where the Dawn Comes Up Like Thunder: The Army’s Future Role in the Pacific,” *Parameters* 8, no. 4 (1978): 37.

38 Young, *Eye on Korea*, 46–47.

risks of withdrawing forces from Korea. The Army's ability to oppose presidential policy and win the political debate was due to a congruence of domestic political factors and bureaucratic skills. First, the Army leveraged its position in South Korea to present itself as the expert voice on the North Korean threat and South Korean requirements. Second, the Army provided an issue that polarized congressional Democrats, allowing military officers to serve as "expert witnesses," which was critical to creating a nonpolitical narrative. Lastly, the statements and testimony of Army leaders focused on the short time span of deliberations and the rushed nature of the process. This oblique criticism highlighted the Carter administration's opaque policy process and politicized decision-making.

Although Army leaders were clearly manipulative and pushed the boundaries of professional ethics, they effectively halted a deeply flawed withdrawal policy. Viewed from a distance of forty years, President Carter's politicized policy process and shortsighted mentality of reducing deterrence capabilities on the Korean Peninsula were clearly dangerous. Singlaub and Vessey, as the subject matter experts on the American military role in South Korea, should have been consulted. Yet the generals' actions led to a more comprehensive debate of American security policy in Korea. As the case of the aborted Korean withdrawal highlights, Army leaders can successfully challenge presidential policies. But the question is should they?

