Ensuring Effective Military Voice

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ABSTRACT: Culture, psychology, and decision-making structures place limits on the development, delivery, and impact of effective military voice in national security policy discussions. Only by working together and overcoming these limits will both military and civilian leaders ensure the robust dialogue necessary for solvent national security policies and successful waging of wars.

The war in Vietnam was not lost in the field, nor was it lost on the front pages of the *New York Times* or on the college campuses. It was lost in Washington, D.C., even before Americans assumed sole responsibility for the fighting in 1965 and before they realized the country was at war . . . [it was an] abdication of responsibility to the American people.

H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*

The Vietnam War was not lost by Lyndon B. Johnson and Robert S. McNamara alone. Regardless of tactical successes on the battlefield, senior military leaders in both Saigon, Vietnam, and Washington, DC, shared culpability for failing to achieve American policy aims.[1] Today, 15 years of largely inconclusive war should demand similar introspection on the moral responsibility of both civilian and military leaders to work together better to wage war effectively, not just fight battles well. This article examines how civilian and military leaders can effectively encourage and express military voice, and thus, improve outcomes from the national security policy process.

In discussions of options and risks occurring prior to the final civilian decision on use of force, military officers have the opportunity to voice their considered advice and, if necessary, their differing opinions. But, what about the moral responsibilities of both civilian and military leaders to align war aims and resources to wage a war successfully, not just to fight a war?[2] If, as Clausewitz writes, "war is a continuation of political discourse by other means," how can military leaders help civilian decision-makers strike a balance between political ends sought and resources allocated so the lives of soldiers and civilians in the theater of battle are not wasted?

US Army War College Commandant MG William E. Rapp graduated from the US Military Academy in 1984 and holds a masters and doctorate in political science from Stanford University as well as a masters of security studies from the US Army War College.

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1 H. R. McMaster makes this point convincingly in his landmark study, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997).

2 James M. Dubik, *Just War Reconsidered: Strategy, Ethics, and Theory* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2016) makes this critically important distinction. War waging is a whole-of-government endeavor to achieve lasting political outcomes better than those ex ante. Warfighting is the set of tactical combat actions and operational military maneuvers used to win battles and campaigns. Often, both military and civilian leaders equate warfighting with war waging.

Over the past decade, debates about the surge in Iraq and the war in Afghanistan have put a spotlight on the responsibility of senior military leaders to participate fully in discussions leading to use of force decisions and the ensuing dialogues necessary to adapt those initial decisions to the changing realities of the conflict.[3] The goal of this often bruising dialogue is to improve solvency in national security policies— the condition in which policy ends are achievable with the available resources and at acceptable levels of risk.[4] But since full agreement between military and civilian leaders in this back-and-forth dialogue is frequently absent, the issue at hand is how military leaders can best express their considered military advice—including dissent—in line with American traditions of proper military subordination to civil authority.[5]

Yet military leaders are often at a distinct disadvantage when providing military advice not fully aligned with prevailing civilian leadership direction. Although military members often seem to have advantages in policy discussions due to asymmetric information, and even a deferential aura among some policy elites who have never served in uniform, profoundly held cultural values of obedience and loyalty as well as other psychological and structural factors often inhibit effective expression of voice. These factors limit military participation in dialogue that can lead to the best possible national security policies and the best strategies to implement them.

Notably, voice in this context never advocates usurping civilian authority or disobeying legal orders. Providing quality military advice to civilian leaders clearly demands competence in the professional jurisdictions assigned to the military. And, providing this military advice effectively demands moral character, interpersonal skills, candor, education, and experience. But if military leaders believe, after consultation and reflection, that the potential decisions concerning use of military force are insolvent or ill-advised, they have a moral duty to strongly, but respectfully, express their considered opinion. They have a duty to strive to be heard.

Albert O. Hirschman famously categorized individual responses to weighty decisions in organizations as "exit, voice, and loyalty."[6] Unfortunately, the recent dialogue on military dissent has focused too

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3 See Richard K. Betts, *American Force: Dangers, Delusions, and Dilemmas in National Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); and Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Free Press, 2002). Both authors discuss what Cohen calls the "unequal dialogue" and prescribe vigorous back-and-forth dialogue to refine problems, gain mutual understanding of interests and options, and make more solvent policy decisions.

4 The concept of policy solvency was popularized by Walter Lippman, *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1943). In a campaign speech in 1954, Eisenhower stated that, "We must achieve both security and solvency." Quoted in Andreas Wenger, *Living with Peril: Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Nuclear Weapons* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 14. Clearly, solvency is not binary, and risk of failure is always present, even in the best constructed and resourced policy decisions. The issue is about improving the probability of policy success.

5 Unfortunately, the state of the current dialogue on dissent focuses on resignation under protest. For this important debate, see *Armed Forces & Society* 43, no. 1 (2016): Peter Feaver, "Resign in Protest? A Cure Worse Than Most Diseases," 29–40, doi:10.1177/0095327X16657321; Richard H. Kohn, "On Resignation," 41–52, doi:10.1177/0095327X16657323; James M. Dubik, "Taking a 'Pro' Position on Principled Resignation," 17–28, doi:10.1177/0095327X16659736; and Don M. Snider, "Dissent, Resignation, and the Moral Agency of Senior Military Professionals," 5–16, doi:10.1177/0095327X16657322.

6 Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).

narrowly on the first and the third options—exit and loyalty—as well as resignation under protest, the ultimate expression of dissent. This emphasis compromises military leaders' ability to develop an ethos of respectful but forceful voice.

Effective voice is the full provision of military advice throughout the policy-strategy-execution process, especially when such advice differs from views held by civilian leaders and their staff. Civilian and military leaders need to broaden their understanding and acceptance of effective military voice and remove the connotations of civil-military impropriety and partisanship. Expressing thoughtful disagreement is vitally important throughout the dialogue leading to a decision, but its value does not end there. Subsequent to decisions to use force, as leaders assess and adapt strategy to changing dynamics in the operating environment or to evolving domestic political realities, room for military leaders to express unbiased assessments and dissenting views is essential. Loyalty and exit remain options for officers, but more voice will lead to less blind loyalty and thoughts of exit—both of which are hazardous to proper civil-military relations. This article explores the cultural, psychological, and structural limits on effective military voice and offers ways for military and civilian leadership to ensure the robust dialogue necessary for successful war waging—the ultimate achievement of national objectives.

Cultural and Psychological Limits

Strongly ingrained military culture and the psychological biases of individual military leaders, and those who support them, provide the first set of limits on effectively providing unconstrained and high-quality military advice.

The most fundamental of these self-imposed limits on voice is the culture of the US military, which determines how the military develops senior leaders and inculcates key values. America's deeply ingrained norms of civil-military relations, which came from the founding of the country, were significantly shaped by Samuel P. Huntington's model of such relations.[7] Military officers are expected to clearly, but not publicly, voice opinions and give military advice without questioning the final decisions from civilian leaders empowered to make them. Military leaders are taught civilians will clearly articulate the ends of policy, and military advice should be limited to matters of ways, means, and risk.[8]

While this is true of assigned missions at the tactical level, strategic ends are far more likely to emerge from extended dialogue than crystallize at the very beginning. Strategic ends change over time as well. If, during the dialogue, the military leader assesses the ends of policy are not achievable with the resources provided, including time, then he or she is obligated to provide updated military advice. The updated

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7 Samuel P. Huntington*, The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1957). Huntington's model, now known as "objective control" of the military by civilian leaders, has been challenged recently by a number of authors, most notably Cohen, *Supreme Command*; Betts, *American Force*; and Peter Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

8 The civilian purview of ends is ingrained into the military culture. See William E. Rapp, "Civil-Military Relations: The Role of Military Leaders in Strategy Making," *Parameters* 45, no. 3 (Autumn 2015): 13.

information might address the lack of solvency in the military aspects of the policy or identify military task accomplishments that will not lead to overall policy success.

The thorniest cultural problem for military voice occurs when the military can achieve its assigned objectives with the provided resources, but military leaders recognize accomplishing those objectives will not likely lead to the desired strategic ends. This challenge has haunted American foreign policies involving use of force since Vietnam. Arguably, military leaders within the American tradition must consider themselves concurrently responsible with civilian leaders and other agencies to achieve strategic policy ends, not just cognitively stop at the edge of the military playing field as their culture has encouraged. Providing this range of voice on policy solvency is necessary to use the lives and treasure America puts forward into distant lands well, and despite commendable intramilitary coordination, voice helps counter the prevailing norm of "staying in one's lane" when it comes to civil-military relations.

A second challenge posed by military culture is that candor is often viewed as detrimental to team play. While military leaders say they prize candor and telling truth to power, some authors posit military culture itself often suppresses such forthrightness in favor of conformity to the team.[9] The lieutenant who questions the wisdom of his captain's plans, just like the major who constantly questions the musings of his colonel, is not likely to receive favorable evaluations and is thus unlikely to progress in rank and commands.[10] Granted, this culture of deference to power is not true in command climates of the very best units and most certainly has not created a cohort of "yes-men." However, for the majority of general officers who have risen in rank over a period of 25 years in an environment where "hooah" or "yes sir" is the expected reply to guidance from higher, immediately feeling comfortable offering alternative views to senior military and civilian leaders is a stretch.

Another cultural constraint on effectively providing dissenting opinions is the fear of leaks or publicly revealed military voice. This fear afflicts military and civilian leaders for different reasons and can be used as a lever in intragovernmental debates. Although norms for providing considered military advice dictate it is given strictly in private, especially if it strongly dissents from the civilian viewpoint, the ubiquity of leaks and adverse reactions to public interviews in recent years has further inhibited the full expression of voice. Just as the Donald Rumsfeld Pentagon accused the Joint Chiefs of leaking their displeasure with iterations of the Iraq War plan in 2002, the Barack Obama White House chided General Stanley McChrystal for leaks involving his 2009 Afghanistan assessment.

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9 Paul Paolozzi, *Closing the Candor Chasm: The Missing Element of Army Professionalism*, Professional Military Ethics Monograph Series, vol. 5 (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2013), 11–13. See also MG Dennis Laich and LTC Mike Young, "The Million Dollar Muzzle: A Follow-up to Yingling," *Defense Policy* (blog), August 8, 2011, quoted in Greg Jacob, "Leadership Failure," Front and Center, August 11, 2011, http://policyfrontandcenter.org/leadership-failure/.

10 For an outsider's view of this culture of conformity, see annex C of "US Army Culture: A British Perspective," in H. R. McMaster and Robert Simpson, *Army Culture* (unpublished white paper, US Army Training and Doctrine Command, August 25, 2009).

Without the expectation of privacy or discretion, officers fear accusations of politicization from the side favoring the administration's view while civilian leaders fear public discord with senior military leaders and artificial constraints from leaked assessments and recommendations. This concern extends beyond deliberations of the executive branch. Because Congress has a constitutional right to request candid military advice from flag officers, dissenting voices, however pure in motive, may rapidly become politicized. Senior leaders may have an abundance of moral courage, but compartmentalizing advice or suppressing alternative opinions to minimize the damage from publicly revealed voice greatly reduces the effectiveness of military advice during policy discussions and in critical decision-making.[11]

The final cultural limit on military voice comes from the career preferences of officers who studiously try to remain with troops and avoid service in Washington, DC, or evade time in assignments that entail significant contact with civilian thought leaders. This approach reduces opportunities to build relationships, develop trust with other participants in policymaking circles, and learn both the interagency decision process and the relationships between tactical actions and strategic ends. Clearly, some services have a stronger norm of service in DC than others, but all suffer from rapidly rotating officers in and out of billets.

Military advice has meaning only if the voice has gravitas, credibility, and acute strategic tone. Regardless of the soundness of advice, if the military leader has not earned the trust of those receiving it, advice has less value.[12] Rank does not confer this relational trust in either direction, nor does rank automatically confer wisdom in policy deliberations. Personal relationships, social intelligence, operational experiences, and iterations in the policymaking process are required. As with other barriers to full expression of voice, trust and strong relationships increase the probability of a military officer's opinion being heard, but are themselves insufficient for adequate exercise of voice.

Psychological Barriers

Psychological barriers constitute a broad set of limits on effective military advice, which affect the quality of the voice. As we know from social science and economic literature, human rationality is bounded, biases are ingrained, and cognitive heuristics guide our perceptions and interpretations of reality.[13]

Humans are systematically overconfident, overestimating the probability of success and underestimating the probability of failure. These tendencies create a critical psychological barrier to expressing objective

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11 Dubik, *Just War Reconsidered*, 147–48.

12 Mackubin Thomas Owens argues that the current erosion in civil-military trust, in both directions, is having a deleterious impact on strategic decision-making quality. See Kori Schake and Jim Mattis, eds., *Warriors & Citizens: American Views of Our Military* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University / Hoover Institution Press, 2016), 71.

13 For a more complete examination of the psychology of strategic decision-making using the Vietnam War as context, see Kenneth Payne, *The Psychology of Strategy: Exploring Rationality in the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). See also Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

dissenting views known as the optimism bias.[14] Military culture exacerbates overconfidence in policy execution by its can-do ethos and bias for action. Generals do not rise to those ranks by being pessimists—in fact, the culture views optimism as a force multiplier.[15] Interestingly, in the wars of limited objectives since Vietnam, this can-do attitude is much more pronounced in policy execution than in policy formation. When policy debates involve potential use of military force, military leaders tend to be more risk averse than their civilian masters.[16]

Operational assessments from distant theaters that appear overly optimistic to analysts at home are no surprise. General William Westmoreland and General Paul D. Harkin were not purposefully lying when they persistently transmitted optimistic reports to President Johnson from Vietnam.[17] Naturally, theater commanders' cognizance centers not only on Washington's reaction to their assessments but also on reactions within their own command, especially effects on troop morale and partners. American combat personnel, multinational partners, and host country leaders need reassurance that their sacrifices make a positive difference, while civilian leadership needs what they consider to be unvarnished truth.

Once military force is committed in a conflict with vague strategic objectives and limited resources, the bias for action and can-do attitude can create the pernicious tendency in both civilian and military leaders to "retreat to the tactical." Marines ashore in Beirut turned into combatants as they experienced this tactical mission creep from November 1982 through September 1983 although the strategy called for them to remain a neutral lever for diplomacy.[18] When this bias happens, warfighting takes precedence over war waging; tactical actions look attractive even if they are strategically unproductive. In this case, those culturally based psychological biases can degrade the quality of voice if quality is measured by the probability of such advice leading to sustainable political outcomes.

Additionally, the challenges of expressing dissenting voice in an optimistic, can-do culture are compounded by the lack of objective reality in assessing the risks of highly complex problems. There is a real and unambiguous answer to the question "How high is Mount Everest?" But, the answer to "How hard will it be to execute this operation?" is much more complicated. Multiple variables—the military's doctrine, organization, training, manning, education, and degree and type of modernization, as well as the enemy's will and capacity to

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14 Tali Sharot, *The Optimism Bias: A Tour of the Irrationally Positive Brain* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011). See also, Dominic D. P. Johnson, *Overconfidence in War: The Havoc and Glory of Positive Illusions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

15 David Roth, *Sacred Honor: A Biography of Colin Powell* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 169.

16 The Joint Chiefs, for example, pushed back against the muscular diplomacy desires of Secretaries of State George P. Shultz in Lebanon in 1982–84 and Madeleine Albright in the Balkans more than a decade later.

17 Johnson, *Overconfidence in War*, 140. Westmoreland and Harkin had been greatly influenced by General Maxwell Taylor, who advised both to be optimistic in their reports. See David Halberstram, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1969), chap. 11.

18 For a history of the microdecisions throughout that year, see Gail Yoshitani, *Reagan on War: A Reappraisal of the Weinberger Doctrine, 1980–1984* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2012); and Benis M. Frank, *U.S. Marines in Lebanon, 1982–1984* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, US Marine Corps, 1987).

endure—impact the difficulty of a given operation. The can-do culture of the military is essential in dealing with these slippery challenges of military operations in competitive, adaptive environments, but also makes asserting that something cannot be done or even expressing uncertainty in an assessment extremely difficult.[19]

Psychologically, humans seek to reduce internal cognitive dissonance—the mental and emotional stress of holding two or more contradictory beliefs or of performing an action contradictory to one's beliefs or values.[20] Officers rationalize to reduce this internal dissonance when they want to express dissent but are concerned about how such voice will affect their place at the table of future discussions. The story of President Johnson directly challenging Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Earle G. Wheeler on July 27, 1965, to concur with his plan for Vietnam is a case in point. Halberstram writes, "It was an extraordinary moment, like watching a lion tamer deal with some of the great lions." After a pause, Wheeler nodded in agreement with the president, though everyone in the room knew he was opposed to the decision.[21] Army chief of staff at the time, General Harold K. Johnson, later admitted he and the other chiefs rationalized they had to remain part of the process to have later votes. General Johnson said, "I made the typical mistake of believing that I could do more for the country and the Army if I stayed in . . . I am now going to my grave with that lapse in moral courage on my back."[22] A senior leader rationalizing the acceptance of a position to which he or she has great reluctance by thinking they can have a much greater positive effect by staying part of the leadership team rather than diminishing their future influence or exiting altogether is a perfectly human response. However, senior leaders are derelict in their duty by remaining silent when their voice is required to improve the odds of policy solvency and thus strategic success.

Frames of reference and the heavy psychological weight of sunk costs are additional psychological and cultural barriers to expressing dissenting voice in the military. Even when the objective situation on the battlefield is dire, American history provides few examples of senior military leaders in theater who have recommended concluding operations under unfavorable conditions. Past actions and sunk costs affect our assessment of present conditions and may limit the advice military leaders provide.[23]

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19 I am indebted to Jim Golby for pointing out that the can-do ethos inhibits the expression of uncertainty.

20 Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Evanston, IL: Row, Peterson, 1957).

21 Halberstram, *Best and the Brightest*, 599. In reality, all five members of the Joints Chiefs of Staff were largely silent on the president's way forward in Vietnam in July 1965 as McMaster notes in *Dereliction of Duty*, 300–322.

22 Quoted in Lewis Sorley, "To Change a War: General Harold K. Johnson and the PROVN Study," *Parameters* 28, no.1 (Spring 1998): 93–109. The quotation came from an interview of Johnson by Brigadier General Albion W. Knight Jr. on February 1, 1997.

23 See Hal R. Arkes and Catherine Blumer, "The Psychology of Sunk Cost," in *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 35 (1985): 124–40. The Joint Chief's unanimous opinion that the Marines needed to be withdrawn from Beirut following the October 23, 1983 bombing of the Marine barracks is, however, one example where sunk costs did not rule the day.

Military difficulties, instead of prompting a reassessment of strategy, may do just the opposite, and provoke an "escalation of commitment."[24] In a memo to President Johnson, George Wildman Ball pointed out this challenge when he wrote, "Once we suffer large casualties, we will have started a well-nigh irreversible process. Our involvement will be so great that we cannot—without national humiliation—stop short of achieving our complete objectives."[25] Thus, the more significant the expenditure of blood and treasure, the greater the efforts of civilian and military leaders to make some good come from the sacrifice of their soldiers.

The Soldier's Creed states in part that "I will never accept defeat, I will never quit, [and] I will never leave a fallen comrade."[26] It is hard to expect a senior commander in a failing operation to tell his superiors that the strategy is not working and that we ought to cut our losses and pull out.[27] Such a defeatist stance is not in the DNA of military culture.

While cultural and psychological factors tend to limit the expression and content of voice, there are also structural factors that either suppress or prevent senior military leaders from providing their unvarnished alternative views to the prevailing elite opinion within the circles at the highest levels.

Structurally Imposed Limits

Although military leaders are most responsible for identifying and overcoming their own psychological biases and cultural predilections hindering candor and effective voice, civilian leaders are most responsible for setting the conditions facilitating military voice in the process of national security policymaking. Civilian leaders have the authority to make decisions, but they also have the moral responsibility to create space for dissenting views to be heard—and to consider those views. Civilian leadership can support three structural issues to facilitate effective military advice: ensure military voice has access, avoid distorting the military voice within the bureaucracy, and discern and address the squelching effects of inner-ring dynamics on the military voice.[28] Senior military leaders, knowing the criticality of participative dialogue, are coresponsible to create these expectations and organizational climates.[29]

Purposeful, restricted access to the decision-making process is perhaps the most pernicious structural factor limiting full and honest expressions of effective military advice. While Georges Clemenceau,

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24 Barry M. Staw, "The Escalation of Commitment: An Update and Appraisal," in *Organizational Decision Making*, ed. Zur Shapira (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 191–215.

25 "Memo from George Ball to President Johnson: A Compromise Solution in South Vietnam," in *Vietnam and America: A Documented History*, ed. Marvin E. Gettleman et al. (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 282–83.

26 "Soldier's Creed," Army.mil, https://www.army.mil/values/soldiers.html (accessed October 28, 2016). This quote is from the version of the creed developed and published in 2003; however, it finds roots in the "Ranger Creed," which was written in 1974 and reflects the broader Army and military culture. It is an uncertain line between being seen as prudently advocating withdrawal and retrenchment or being viewed as being defeatist in outlook. The latter is anathema to military culture and further amplifies the can-do culture.

27 Though this was essentially what Generals John Abizaid and George Casey, as well as Admiral William Fallon, were saying in 2006–7, a stance for which they were castigated by surge proponents.

28 For discussion on group dynamics influencing advice given to senior decision-makers, see C. S. Lewis, "The Inner Ring" (speech, Memorial Lecture, King's College, London, 1944).

29 Dubik, conversation with author, November 18, 2016.

a former premier of France, might have famously quipped that war was too serious a matter to entrust to military men, excluding military advice on military matters is a dangerous affront to healthy civil-military relations.[30] As early as 1964, President Johnson and Secretary of Defense McNamara had largely excluded the Joint Chiefs of Staff from deliberations about the Vietnam War.[31] Similarly, General Henry "Hugh" Shelton wrote of Secretary Rumsfeld's attempt to control military voice when the latter returned to the Pentagon in 2001.[32]

There may well also be the existence of "mind-guards" or gatekeepers who prevent off-azimuth opinions from reaching the top decision-makers.[33] The president can organize his or her advisory process in any manner, but precluding military advice will limit informed voices from strengthening policy choices and from preparing the inevitable strategic adaptations needed for lasting, positive political outcomes in war. Similarly, Congress can use techniques such as closed or classified hearings to elicit military candor and voice without politicizing those military leaders. The president and Congress, as coprincipals to the military, must create environments that encourage unguarded access to apolitical military advice.

The bureaucratization of decision-making processes presents the second structural obstacle to providing effective military advice and operates in two profound ways. First, military advice, especially dissenting opinions, may be diluted or distorted on the way to the president. Senior military leaders unfamiliar with the layered national security policy apparatus may find their voice gains no traction in the interagency processes leading to the president. The aims of senior military leaders may also be confounded by the opinions of other senior military leaders who hold different, reasoned opinions on a particular issue and who have a voice in other layers of interagency discussion. It is not unheard of for the chairman of the Joint Chiefs to be at odds with a combatant commander, a service chief, or even the vice chairman! Thus, access to the president is a valuable commodity, and most of what the president sees has been processed through numerous filters. In his 1968 examination of the institutional processes in Washington surrounding the Vietnam War, James C. Thomson called this phenomenon the "curator mentality"—an inertia that confounded dissenting opinions and incongruent situational assessments on the war.[34]

Secondly, while all agencies utilize various bureaucratic processes, the Department of Defense planning systems are by far the most structured and staff-intensive. However, staffers who work on an issue on behalf of senior military and civilian leaders in the early phases of decision-making may not fully know nor accurately convey their boss's

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30 "La guerre! C'est une chose trop grave pour la confier a des militaires," quoted in Georges Suarez, Soixante années d'histoire française (Paris: J. Tallandier, 1932).

31 The Johnson White House is exemplar of the exclusion of military advice from the inner circle of real decision-making on war waging. See McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 4–5, 41, 208–9; and Matthew Moten, *Presidents and Their Generals: An American History of Command in War* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 293, 299–300.

32 Hugh Shelton, *Without Hesitation: The Odyssey of an American Warrior* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010), 402, 407–9.

33 David Patrick Houghton, *The Decision Point: Six Cases in U.S. Foreign Policy Decision Making* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 51.

34 James C. Thomson, "How Could Vietnam Happen? An Autopsy," *Atlantic*, April 1968.

intent. Nor are they commonly allowed to coordinate with equivalent level planners in other agencies until the top-level policy position is determined. Although interagency members, such as political advisers and liaisons, are embedded in other bureaucracies, the relative insularity and differing process timelines of these planning systems create a conundrum for the production of workable, whole-of-government strategies to deal with complex problems.[35] Both bureaucratic distortion and insularity during the planning process can inhibit the strategic dialogue needed to craft solvent, viable policy implementation strategies.

The group dynamics in the secretary of defense's and president's inner circles pose a third structural obstacle to the effective expression of military voice. They may limit the extent to which senior military leaders offer dissenting opinions. An examination of the dynamics within John F. Kennedy's Executive Committee of the National Security Council deliberations during the Cuban missile crisis highlights the importance of group dynamics and spawned considerable work in social psychology.[36] Graham T. Allison and then Irving L. Janis wrote of the strong social pressures to conform within an elite group of decision-makers. The social need to belong, the sense of camaraderie, leads to self-censorship Janis called "groupthink."

In the spring and early summer of 1965, President Johnson allowed the strongly dissenting George Ball to remain in the inner circle's deliberations, but nearly all participants came to see him as playing the "devil's advocate" role. This socially acceptable role within the inner circle eased the way for the others to remain conformed to Johnson's leanings on the expansion of the US role in South Vietnam.[37] But, if the secretary of defense, president, or their inner circles, limit the access of those with alternative opinions either by action or inaction, opposing views may never be fully heard or considered, to the detriment of solvent national security policies.

Changing Culture and Encouraging Voice

Recognizing and addressing cultural biases in expressions of alternative views are necessary for effective civil-military relations and the achievement of well-crafted security policy goals; however, personal and organizational factors that inhibit fully expressing this voice must be addressed by civilian and military leaders.[38] Individual thinking

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35 Some now argue for the creation of standing interagency planning groups to mitigate this dilemma. See Janine A. Davidson, Emerson T. Brooking, and Benjamin J. Fernandes, "Mending the Broken Dialogue: Military Advice and Presidential Decision-Making," Council on Foreign Relations, November 2016.

36 See Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971); and Irving L. Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982). In *The Decision Point*, Houghton summarizes the same arguments and provides useful case studies. Although some believe that only General Maxwell Taylor had access to this inner circle, military advice in the Cuban missile crisis was prominent and well-articulated, and then declined.

37 Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), 85. Thomson, who served on the National Security Council staff in the mid-1960s, wrote on the domestication of dissent noting George Ball's role allowed the bulk of Johnson's advisers to tell themselves that they had allowed for the hearing of a dovish perspective. See also Thomson, "How Could Vietnam Happen?" General Shelton commented on similar dynamics in the Bush White House, *Without Hesitation*, 418–19.

38 See as well the thoughtful piece on improving this dialogue in Davidson, Brooking, and Fernandes, "Mending the Broken Dialogue."

and organizational culture are exceedingly difficult to change, but the imperatives of national security demand that leaders continue making such changes.

Military and civilian leaders in the Department of Defense must begin by reinforcing the good elements while changing military culture to reshape assumptions about of the value of candor, thereby changing officers' proclivity to offer dissenting opinions throughout their career. Leaders must demonstrate their belief in the value of such voice in how they develop, reward, and promote officers throughout their careers. It is a case of misplaced hierarchy of loyalties if candor is viewed as counter to the sense of team. The country needs senior military leaders who are accustomed to offering their considered military advice in fraught national security policy debates and who are expected to do so.

We cannot expect generals simply to flip the switch to candor and dissent upon putting on stars if the behavior is not culturally valued during the more than two decades of service preceding their promotion. This prospect requires a cultural shift, an important one. These generals do not lack moral courage, but research suggests they have been conditioned by a culture that values team play, conformity, and collegiality more than candor and voice.[39] While difficult to do, culture changes result from sustained behavioral changes; thus, we must create opportunities to build and reward expressions of alternative views in leader development and in developmental exercises that include both military and civilian leaders.

The most difficult question about fostering a culture of candor and voice involves the appropriateness of public expression of military voice. While an individual choice with few historical examples, the only time a uniformed military leader can publicly express dissent is if that voice does not get a fair hearing in the decision process and if that leader deems the potential consequences of policy failure to be far greater than the costs to civil-military relations, which could be severe.[40] Offering a dissenting voice in public, to Congress in open session, or to the press is not a step for military leaders to take lightly.

Generals and senior civilian leaders must also recognize the common biases and the self-imposed limits on the quality of their voice, which include overoptimism, the sunk cost trap, and the tendency to advocate for escalation when the status quo is not working. Military leaders must recognize these biases tend to work against favoring use of force initially and then work toward continued use of force once committed. They must realize the trust necessary to give their opinions credibility is built over time and over many interactions.

Personal relationships, experience, and education all matter because they lend weight and credibility to dissenting opinions. These building

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39 A gentler view of this cultural focus on team is found in Stephen K. Scroggs, *Army Relations with Congress: Thick Armor, Dull Sword, Slow Horse* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000), 133–36, 155, which is based on interviews with 26 Army senior general officers. The harsher view can be found in Laich and Young, "Million Dollar Muzzle." Similarly, an unpublished study found evidence that team play is valued by some Army generals more than candor in meetings. See Craig Bullis et al., "US Army General Officer Attributes" (unpublished, US Army War College, 2016).

40 One of these examples came in 1977, when Major General John Singlaub, then Chief of Staff of US Forces in Korea, came out publicly against the decision to remove forces from Korea and was promptly fired by President Carter and shortly thereafter was retired.

blocks develop leaders' capacity to put their voice into context and in compelling, relevant, and understandable language. Service in inter-agency circles, especially in DC, is important and should be valued in the manner that all military services select and reward officers for these assignments. Creating this competency in senior military leaders needs to be a concerted focus of talent management systems. It will be an important cultural shift when the Services view a colonel serving on the National Security Council staff as important as a colonel commanding at Fort Hood or Camp Pendleton.

Senior military and civilian leaders must next recognize they establish a climate that either elicits or suppresses alternative views. The social science findings about conformity and rationalization are strong. In the absence of a conscious attempt to engender and value candor, group dynamics that seek conformity may dominate debates and suppress discussions of alternatives. All senior leaders must demonstrate intellectual humility and tolerance for alternative views, as well as culti-vate the virtues of freethinking and respectful argumentation. Structural and procedural mechanisms that facilitate red teaming or expressing alternatives can help to overcome both psychological biases and group dynamics. Reasoned military voice cannot be viewed, especially by senior civilian leaders, as disloyalty, but should rather be accepted as true faithfulness to achieving policy success for the country.

Finally, senior military leaders must make the distinction between being political and being politically aware. Politics in this sense is partisan and focused on electoral or party issues. For a military leader to be political is completely counter to proper civil-military relations in the United States. In military parlance, being political is no-go terrain. Military leaders cannot trod these grounds and retain the ability to give reasoned military advice on key issues. Among the behaviors that can be considered political are lobbying the public or the Congress on the president's or a candidate's behalf, considering public opinion when providing military advice to civilian leaders, timing decisions or actions to influence US domestic politics, and taking public or partisan positions on issues or policies under debate or execution.

Being politically aware, however, means understanding the inter-connected environment into which the advice is given and the action is taken. Such grand strategic awareness is essential to effective participa-tion in the give-and-take dialogue that produces solvent security policies and good strategies. Achieving the long-term political goals of national security policy requires military officers who advise civilian decision-makers understand military force is sometimes necessary but rarely sufficient to achieve the ends of policy.[41] To provide advice effectively, military leaders should understand and appreciate the impact of military action on the other elements of national power, on US relations with international partners, and on the American public's view of legitimacy; of strategic ends and competing interests on national policy motivations; and of the dynamic interplay of agency priorities and resources. Such awareness by military leaders of the ultimate policy ends and what other

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41 Clausewitz makes the point that pure military advice is nonsensical at the strategic level. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Eliot Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 606–8. Cohen makes that point in *Supreme Command*, 10, as well as Dubik in *Just War Reconsidered*, 89.

agencies and partners are doing toward those ends will help prevent a "retreat to the tactical" that focuses heavily on warfighting and increases the probability of waging war successfully.

Finally, being politically aware, or strategically astute, does not and must not compromise a military leader's apolitical nature. General Matthew B. Ridgway stiffly prescribed, "Under no circumstances, regardless of pressures from whatever source or motive, should the professional military man yield, or compromise his judgment for other than convincing military reasons. To do otherwise would destroy his usefulness."[42] Military leaders intuitively agree with Ridgway; however, to ensure tactical actions on the battlefield support, rather than confound, the larger strategic aims of the government, they must see military action as only part of a whole-of-government approach toward achieving lasting positive political outcomes and not an end itself. They must also be part of the dialogue that produces and adapts those policies and strategies.

Retired Army Lieutenant General James M. Dubik writes, "Moral agency is expected of the general just as it is for any other soldier or leader. . . . Senior civilian leaders rightly have the final decision authority as to political aims as well as military and nonmilitary strategies, policies, and campaigns necessary to achieve those aims. But those senior military leaders who are in dialogue about the efficacy of the final decisions are co-responsible for both the decision-making process and its outcomes."[43] Addressing the limits on effective military advice to policy decision-making—to include appropriate approaches for the expression of dissenting voice—will improve dialogue and lead to better national security outcomes.

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42 Matthew B. Ridgway, *Soldier: The Memoirs of Matthew B. Ridgway, as Told to Harold H. Martin* (New York: Harper, 1956), 272. Although the connotation is "change," Ridgway actually uses the term "compromise."

43 Dubik, "Taking a 'Pro' Position."