

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 48
Number 4 *Parameters* Winter 2018-2019

Article 3

Winter 12-1-2018

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Recommended Citation

Thomas N. Garner, "Civil-Military Relations and Today's Policy Environment," *Parameters* 48, no. 4 (2018), <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol48/iss4/3>

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Civil-Military Relations and Today's Policy Environment

Thomas N. Garner

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The 67th Annual Student Conference on US Affairs conducted at the United States Military Academy brought college students together from all over the country to discuss a variety of issues related to confronting inequality. While this event usually drives robust debate, the table on civil-military relations arguably had the most interesting outcome. These participants discussed whether the military should be representative of society as a driver of trust and legitimacy.¹ The table of seven males and ten females, from 17 different colleges, came to a conclusion that dealt more with the military's relationship to, than its representation of, society.

The students framed the civil-military relationship on the factors of trust and legitimacy and identified three issues facing civil-military relations: inadequate handling of veterans' affairs, ineffectiveness of sexual assault policy and prevention, and military outreach to American society. The first two topics are representative of some of the major military news stories in the media at the time, and the third is a topic that should not be taken lightly. While the first two conclusions inform the issue, the recommendation truly reinforces an emerging rift in US civil-military relations that the military is responsible for closing.

Civil-Military Relations

Alexis de Tocqueville once assessed Americans as having an "irritable patriotism," trapped somewhere between the "instinctive patriotism" that comes from an affection for one's birthplace and from civic action in a republic. This irritable patriotism led Americans, in Tocqueville's eyes, to be both ardently defensive and reverently questioning of the country in which they lived and the institutions they served. He concluded a more enduring form of patriotism results when citizens gain knowledge of and engage with their government, something he saw in Americans at even the lowest classes.²

Americans are undoubtedly proud of their nation's military. In fact, 91 percent of participants in a 2011 survey "felt proud of the soldiers

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1 This commentary is based on Thomas N. Garner, "The Military as a Mirror: Should the Military Be Representative of American Society?," in *Confronting Inequality: Wealth, Rights, and Power*, ed. Hugh Liebert, Thomas Sherlock, and Cole Pinheiro (Hudson NY: Sloan, 2016).

2 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America: An Annotated Text Backgrounds Interpretations*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 197–99.

who have served in the military in the post 9/11 era.”³ But this pride may not resemble what Tocqueville called instinctive patriotism, patriotism based on civic action, or reflective patriotism. There is reason to worry that Americans are proud of their military not because of involvement with it or reflection about what makes it good, but simply because it is theirs.

The past decade has elicited a patriotism that more closely reflects Tocqueville’s ideation of instinctive patriotism, meaning a stable society is based on institutions passed down from previous generations, and often left unquestioned.⁴ In this fashion, the instinctive, or reflexive, patriotism of the past decade-plus has led to an emerging rift in US civil-military relations that is the military’s responsibility to close.⁵ Truthfully, this rift is not a matter of policy, and yet, it is almost entirely the military’s fault.

Before Samuel Huntington wrote *The Soldier and the State*, the majority of civil-military thought had centered on the fear of a military coup d’état.⁶ Authoritative writers such as Tocqueville and Montesquieu informed and fortified America’s founders to take caution in their constitutional structures against the ills of a standing army. Huntington, on the other hand, informed the current civil-military debate by defining the “role of the military in society . . . in terms of ‘civilian control.’”⁷

Scholars such as Peter D. Feaver have explored the relationship between military and civilian institutions as a principal-agent problem: a relationship in which one side (the civilian) attempts to get another (the military) to carry out its will, while making use of the military’s own expert knowledge.⁸ Morris Janowitz, like Feaver, views the military as an instrument of national security policy. For Janowitz, the military’s relationship to the civilian government resembles that of a pressure group that “is not a voluntary association, acting on the organs of government; on the contrary, it is an organ of government, seeking to develop new techniques for intervening in domestic politics.”⁹

But a more recent rift assumes a different character. Since 2011, many articles and polls have shown that American society (71 percent of the public) and the US military (84 percent of veterans) are coming no closer to developing a shared understanding of each other or the

3 Bruce Drake, “On Memorial Day, Public Pride in Veterans, But at a Distance,” Pew Research Center, May 24, 2013.

4 Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 196.

5 James Fallows, “The Tragedy of the American Military,” *Atlantic*, January/February 2015.

6 Richard H. Kohn, “Building Trust: Civil-Military Behaviors for Effective National Security,” in *American Civil-Military Relations: The Soldier and the State in a New Era*, eds. Suzanne C. Nielsen and Don. M. Snider (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 264–89.

7 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 80.

8 Peter D. Feaver, “The Civil-Military Problematique: Huntington, Janowitz, and the Question of Civilian Control,” *Armed Forces and Society* 23, no. 2 (Winter 1996): 170.

9 Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait* (New York: Free Press, 1971), 369.

military's problems.¹⁰ The current rift does not ignore the relationship and the challenges associated with Huntington's definition of civilian control, rather the rift is an extension of this civil-military relationship to the society that the military serves.

Military Responsibility

By accepting the overwhelming trust and legitimacy bestowed on it without adequate self-criticism, the military has abdicated its voice in the national dialogue. In large part, the silence, associated with a professional ethos of humility, which is prevalent in large portions of the service, widens the rift between servicemembers and the civilians they serve, which has allowed the rift to exist in the first place. The problem is not trust, the military's pride in itself, or civilian's pride in the military. The problem is that civilian trust in the military institution is becoming meaningless because of the public's lack of understanding of the military and the military's acceptance of that trust as confirmation of its efforts. Therefore, the onus is on the military to be far more critical of itself than the public.

The danger, however, is that transparency may reveal "all the dark secrets" to the public, sacrificing a bit of civilian trust. But it would also give the military an opportunity to justify, or self-actualize, the trust by adequately earning it instead of merely receiving it. Unlike Tocqueville's fear of democratic armies, where officers separate themselves from the society, it can be assumed the soldiers of today want to return to society after service in much the same fashion expressed by George Washington in 1775: "When we assumed the soldier, we did not [lay aside the] citizen, and we shall most sincerely rejoice . . . to return to our private stations."¹¹ The real hope is the society and the soldier are not so unfamiliar to one another that there is no longer any meaningful connection.

This particular civil-military rift is the military's to close because of the concept of the military profession's responsibility to society enumerated by Huntington.¹² As Richard Kohn states, the "profession is intrinsically values-based, creating the necessary bond of trust between the professional and the nation served."¹³ Huntington suggests this bond arises not from the military's representation of society but from the nature of the profession itself. Professions are trusted when they demonstrate expertise and responsibility. But "ultimately it is the military that must make the relationship work."¹⁴

To make that relationship work and create the necessary bond of trust, the military should connect with the American public by

10 "War and Sacrifice in the Post-9/11 Era: Executive Summary," Pew Research Center, October 5, 2011; Mark Thompson, "An Army Apart: The Widening Military-Civilian Gap," *Time*, November 10, 2011; and Drake, "On Memorial Day."

11 George Washington, "Address to the New York Provincial Congress" (speech, New York, June 26, 1775).

12 Huntington, *Soldier and the State*, 8–10.

13 Suzanne Nielsen, "The Army Officer as Servant and Professional?" in *The Future of the Army Profession*, eds. Don M. Snider and Lloyd J. Matthews (New York: McGraw Hill, 2005), 168.

14 Kohn, "Building Trust," 287.

conducting outreach, discussing shared values, and engaging in public discussions. Actions as simple as moving into and becoming involved with the community or thinking, discussing, and writing critically about successes and issues associated with service could be what bridges the gap. The majority of service members can work alongside public affairs officers who develop coherent strategic messaging anyone in the service can use to educate the public about efforts that might include such topics as gender integration or day-to-day activities at the small unit level.

Civilian Blame

The professional ethos of humility prevalent in large portions of the service prevents the military from closing the gap. Kohn instead blames careerism, or “the pressure to conform, to stay silent, to go along, or to do what advances one’s career.”¹⁵ Whether the motivation is conceptualized as humble altruism or selfish ambition, the problem remains the same; the majority of the professional force cannot remain silent. To do so would be an abdication of one’s responsibility to educate and to inform the society that he or she serves. Authors such as David Barno and Nora Bensahel place the blame on “civilians [who] have a responsibility to understand their military and have an essential role in decisions to commit it to battle—regardless of how removed they may be from personal participation or connection to our warriors.”¹⁶

While this is certainly applicable to civilian political leadership of America’s military, the assessment is unfair for the civilian population at large. After all, the military has moved far from the original democratic warnings and separated itself from society on limited-access installations complete with walls, guards, retail stores, schools, and churches. Barno and Bensahel go on to condemn the society at large: “Wearing yellow ribbons and saying ‘thank you for your service’ are simply no substitute for active engagement with U.S. military personnel and the political decisions to send them into harms way.”¹⁷

The perspective of civilian responsibility for the rift is hard to shake. Michael J. Sandel reinforces, “military service, like jury duty, is a civic responsibility” that expresses and deepens democratic citizenship. He argues that “turning military service into a commodity—a task we hire people to perform—corrupts the civic ideals that should govern it. . . . It allows us to abdicate a civic duty.”¹⁸ He further contends choice in legitimacy for a military rests in the idea of civic responsibility that is closer to Kohn’s careerism or to Janowitz’s military pressure group than to an ethos of humility. The gap may well be a failure in civic responsibility on the part of the citizen. But that possibility does not relinquish or excuse the military from responsibility.

15 Kohn, “Building Trust,” 277.

16 David Barno and Nora Bensahel, “When the Yellow Ribbons Fade: Reconnecting Our Soldiers and Citizens,” *War on the Rocks*, July 14, 2015.

17 Barno and Bensahel, “When the Yellow Ribbons Fade.”

18 Michael J. Sandel, *Justice: What’s the Right Thing To Do?* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 86.

Modern concepts of military professionalism—whether they be from Huntington, Feaver, Nielsen, or even Kohn—maintain the military must ultimately make the civilian relationship work “just as doctors do with their patients, lawyers with their clients, teachers with their students, and all professionals with those they serve.”¹⁹ The military owes society what it wants—military outreach. By passing up opportunities to educate the civilian population on its current challenges and successes, the military abdicates its voice and its responsibility.

19 Kohn, “Building Trust,” 287.

