# Beyond Huntington: US Military Professionalism Today

Risa Brooks

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Risa Brooks
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ABSTRACT: Norms of the military profession today strongly reflect the Huntingtonian separation-of-spheres concept in which the military and civilian elements of policy decision making interact in particularly prescribed and distinct ways. These norms can be a detriment to civilian control of the military, the military's relationship with broader society, and the success of the country in armed conflict, undermining healthy civil-military relations and US national security writ large.

When renowned political scientist Samuel P. Huntington first published *The Soldier and the State* in 1957, the book elicited enormous controversy.[1] Huntington advocated the United States maintain a professional military whose officers would be isolated from society and wedded to a distinctive apolitical ethic. He was subsequently accused of glorifying militarism, given his favorable assessment of Prussian civil-military relations and of advancing a model of civil-military relations sharply at odds with the Founders' historical apprehensions about maintaining a standing army.[2] Critics also contended Huntington's conception of professionalism was unrealistic and ducked rather than engaged the "really hard political problems of civil-military relations."[3]

Judging by the book's contemporary influence, one would hardly know Huntington's arguments were ever so controversial. Indeed, *The Soldier and the State* and especially Huntington's concept of objective control have come to define contemporary understandings of military professionalism in the United States. The model prescribes a separation be maintained between the civilian sphere of politics and the military's domain of managing armed conflict. Huntington posited officers would consequently develop an aversion to politics and would leave such matters to the civilians, who in turn would respect the military's exclusive sphere

Dr. Risa Brooks,
the Allis Chalmers
Associate Professor
of Political Science at
Marquette University,
is a nonresident
senior associate in the
International Security
Program at the Center
for Strategic and
International Studies and
an adjunct scholar at the
Modern War Institute at
West Point.

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1. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957).
2. Tamar Lewin, "Samuel P. Huntington, 81, Political Scientist, Is Dead," *New York Times*, December 28, 2008, https://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/29/education/29huntington.html; Joe Holley and Martin Weil, "Political Scientist Samuel P. Huntington," *Washington Post*, December 29, 2008; and Walter Millis, "Conflicting Forces; Military Mind," *New York Times*, April 28, 1957, https://www.nytimes.com/1957/04/28/archives/conflicting-forces-military-mind.html.
3. John C. Wahlke, "The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations. Samuel P. Huntington," *Journal of Politics* 20, no. 2 (May 1958): 399.

of activity. Objective control would thus, in Huntington's estimation, both safeguard civilian control and ensure the country's success in war.

Despite Huntington's influence, this article explicitly questions his concept of objective control and considers whether it, in fact, provides a sound basis for military professionalism in the contemporary era. In some respects, Huntington's concept of military professionalism serves the military well, as detailed below. Yet that approach also contains shortcomings detrimental in three areas: civilian control of the military, the military's relationship to American society, and the military's role in ensuring the country's strategic effectiveness in armed conflict. The country's civil-military relations and its national security would be well served by rethinking professionalism in the military today.

## Concept of Professionalism

Before delving into a discussion of Huntington's approach to professionalism, it is useful to consider the origins of the concept. The notion of professionalism originated with social scientists in the late nineteenth century to describe a distinctive form of organizing work among those with specialized knowledge such as the law, medicine, and clergy. Broadly understood, professions are granted autonomy contingent on maintaining the trust of the society they serve; their members cultivate expertise and acquire knowledge within a community of experts who share a commitment to common values and ethical principles. The concept has been applied to the profession of arms since the late nineteenth century, although its meaning and usage has varied.

Historically the emergence of professional militaries was often associated with changes in military organization and recruitment. For example, the professionalization of European armies commonly refers to the end of the practice in the late nineteenth century of selecting and promoting officers based on social class and the purchase of commissions, in favor of the adoption of meritocratic criteria. The concept of a professional military is also used to describe one maintained largely through career military personnel versus one primarily built of conscripts. Globally the professionalization of militaries may be associated with improved training and the adoption of technically sophisticated equipment, standardization of merit-based recruitment and promotion practices, the routinization of organizational processes, and increasing specialization within the organization.[4]

Today, however, military professionalism in the United States is an encompassing concept comprised of skill and organizational attributes as well as ideational components. A professional military acquires expertise and masters a body of knowledge, but it also aspires to uphold particular values and embody particular principles of action

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4.  Mehran Kamrava, "Military Professionalization and Civil-Military Relations in the Middle East," *Political Science Quarterly* 115, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 69.

and standards of behavior.[5] As Theo Farrell describes, "organizations in a [military] field gradually develop understandings of appropriate form and behavior" and among these are a normative conception of military professionalism.[6]

Broadly defined these norms encompass implicit expectations about what it means to be and act like an officer. They are regulative in that they proscribe and prescribe particular behaviors; that is, they "assign a value to an action or way of behaving (e.g., obligation, permissibility, appropriateness, prohibition) that are recognized in a society or social group."[7] They are also constitutive of officer identity in that they describe what an individual believes makes him or her an officer.[8] As such the norms are broadly shared and generally agreed upon, although not necessarily explicitly considered; a person may act in conformity with normative principles, while rarely overtly reflecting upon them.

## Norms of Professionalism

While many scholars might agree on the core attributes of military professionalism, especially the need for ongoing education and expertise, no single conceptualization of the professional ethic exists; what constitutes an appropriate normative construct for professionalism has long been debated by historians and social scientists who study the military.[9] There are different ways of understanding the core principles to which a military officer should adhere and articulating the essential elements of professionalism.[10]

Nonetheless, Huntington's approach is arguably the dominant one within the US military today.[11] As noted above, according to Huntington the military and civilian leadership spheres must remain separate. The military focuses on cultivating its expertise in the management of violence, free from interference by civilian authority; the military leadership then abstains from engagement in the civilian world of politics and policy. Isolated from society and focused on cultivating its expertise,

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5.    Don M. Snider, "The U.S. Army as Profession," in *The Future of the Army Profession: Revised and Expanded*, 2nd ed., ed. Don M. Snider and Lloyd J. Matthews (Boston: McGraw-Hill Education, 2002), 14; Don M. Snider, "Will Army 2025 Be a Military Profession?" *Parameters* 45, no. 4 (Winter 2015–16): 39–51; and Nathan K. Finney and Tyrell O. Mayfield, ed., *Redefining the Modern Military: The Intersection of Profession and Ethics* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2018).

6.    Theo Farrell, "World Culture and Military Power," *Security Studies* 14, no. 3 (2005): 455.

7.    Sophie Legros and Beniamino Cislaghi, "Mapping the Social-Norms Literature: An Overview of Reviews," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 15, no. 1 (2020): 62–80.

8.    Theo Farrell and Terry Terriff, "The Sources of Military Change: Culture, Politics, Technology," in *The Sources of Military Change: Culture, Politics, Technology*, ed. Theo Farrell and Terry Terriff (Boulder, CO: Lynne Reinner, 2002), 7.

9.    Ronald Spector, *Professors of War: The Naval War College and the Development of the Naval Profession* (Honolulu, HI: University Press of the Pacific, 2005).

10.    Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait* (New York: Free Press, 1960); and Sam C. Sarkesian and Robert E. Connor Jr., *The US Military Profession into the Twenty-First Century: War, Peace and Politics* (London: Frank Cass, 1999).

11.    Huntington, *Soldier and the State*; Risa Brooks, "Paradoxes of Professionalism: Rethinking Civil-Military Relations in the United States," *International Security* 44, no. 4, (Spring 2020): 7–44; and Risa Brooks, "The Paradoxes of Huntingtonian Professionalism," in *Reconsidering American Civil-Military Relations: The Military, Society, Politics, and Modern War*, ed. Lionel Beehner, Risa Brooks, and Daniel Maurer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

Huntington posits the military acquires a strong corporate identity such that officers have a "sense of organic unity and consciousness" in which they identify with the military organization as a whole.[12] Military officers meanwhile maintain a sense of responsibility for protecting the security of society.

In addition, an apolitical ethos emerges rendering the military both subservient to civilian authority and militarily effective in protecting national security. In outlining his model of professionalism, Huntington described how he thought the separation of spheres would shape military identity and behavior and prescribed a particular ideal to which officers should aspire. In this respect Huntington defined a normative framework for military professionalism.

Importantly these ideas about military professionalism did not originate with Huntington, although he put his particular mark upon them. Rather he was building on a longer intellectual tradition and debate about military professionalism that emerged in the nineteenth century. That debate was subsequently encapsulated by the views of General Emory Upton and General John McCauley Palmer who diverged on the merits of maintaining a professional military. Upton favored a model based on the Prussian military, while Palmer argued an army comprised of full-time officers—versus a citizen-army—was not necessary for military effectiveness and would rupture the relationship between the military and society.[13] Upton's views prevailed within the officer corps, and Huntington came to embrace them in his academic work. He explicitly references Upton's influence on the development of the "objective control" model.[14]

Several key assumptions and arguments are central to understanding these Huntingtonian-inspired norms of professionalism, including the assumption that clearly discernable spheres of military and political activity in armed conflict exist, and therefore a division of labor is both sustainable and desirable.[15] This assumption, in turn, informs a particular conception of decision making about the use of force, allocating distinctive roles for military and political leaders in authorizing and implementing such decisions and sharply dividing them into exclusive domains. Huntington also assumed the military and society should remain separated—that such a separation was both necessary and beneficial to society. He posited the existence of a monolithic "military mind" that ideologically and psychologically distinguished military personnel from their civilian counterparts.

Especially distinctive, however, to Huntington's approach was how he conceptualized the apolitical dimension of professionalism. In his estimation this apolitical tenet was (and should be) all-encompassing.

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

13.    Christopher W. Wingate, "Military Professionalism and the Early American Officer Corps, 1789–1796," master's thesis (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2013), 26, 30.

14.    Huntington, *Soldier and the State*, 84, 230–36.

15.    Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Free Press, 2002).

"The antithesis of objective control is military participation in politics," Huntington argued, and civil-military relations are at their best when the military remains "politically sterile and neutral."[16]

Notably, being apolitical entailed abstaining from policy decisions as well as maintaining intellectual distance from issues bearing on politics or political thinking.[17] Indeed Huntington was quite absolute in this, deeming it incumbent on an officer to pass any issue requiring political reflection to a civilian leader for his or her consideration. Many scholars and practitioners might agree that overtly partisan activities or forms of political advocacy undertaken by officers are unconstructive and potentially contrary to civilian control of the military. Nonetheless Huntington's proposition was distinctive in that it grouped all forms of politics and political thinking together and then assessed this activity incompatible with an officer's identity and roles.

Even when not always explicitly identified with Huntington, the concept of military professionalism he favored has been deeply influential within the contemporary American military. As Eliot Cohen has written, the separation of spheres and the concept of apolitical professionalism are so deeply entrenched that they constitute the "normal theory of civil-military relations."[18] As William Rapp, a former commandant of West Point and the US Army War College, observed: "Huntington's 1957 *The Soldier and the State* has defined civil-military relations for generations of military professionals. Soldiers have been raised on Huntingtonian logic and the separation of spheres of influence since their time as junior lieutenants."[19] The military's senior leadership has also regularly reinforced the apolitical tenet.[20]

To be sure, these norms have served the military well in several respects. They provide a baseline appreciation for the importance of staying out of domestic politics and debates. Hence military officers are socialized from early in their careers that they should remain nonpartisan and refrain from political activism that might contravene civilian authority. The emphasis on cultivating expertise has provided for military operational and tactical excellence and an unquestioned sense of responsibility to defend the country. Yet in other respects, those norms today do not always serve the military, its civilian leadership, or perhaps the country's national security, especially well. The following discussion explores these potential shortcomings.

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16.　Huntington, *Soldier and the State*, 83–84.

17.　John Binkley, "Clausewitz and Subjective Civilian Control: An Analysis of Clausewitz's Views on the Role of the Military Advisor in the Development of National Policy," *Armed Forces & Society* 42, no. 2 (April 2016): 251; and Carsten F. Roennfeldt, "Wider Officer Competence: The Importance of Politics and Practical Wisdom," *Armed Forces & Society* 45, no. 1 (January 2019): 59–77.

18.　Cohen, *Supreme Command*; and Finney and Mayfield, *Redefining the Modern Military*.

19.　William E. Rapp, "Civil-Military Relations: The Role of Military Leaders in Strategy Making," *Parameters* 45, no. 3 (Autumn 2015): 13.

20.　Thom Shanker, "Military Chief Warns Troops about Politics," *New York Times*, May 26, 2008, https://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/26/us/politics/26military.html; and Martin Dempsey, "Keep Your Politics Private, My Fellow Generals and Admirals," Defense One, August 1, 2016, https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2016/08/keep-your-politics-private-my-fellow-generals-and-admirals/130404/.

## Civilian Control

Prevailing norms may first have some unconstructive consequences for military leaders' relationship to civilian leaders and practices of civilian control in the United States. To see this point it is helpful to consider what civilian control encompasses. The concept can be construed narrowly to refer primarily to the exercise of authority—to political leaders' power to make decisions. Consequently by this definition, as long as civilians are giving orders and military leaders are following them, civilian control is observed.

Yet while the authority to give orders and have them followed is an essential feature of civilian control, this decision-making authority is not sufficient to allow civilian leaders to realize their objectives. Civil-military relations must be organized in a manner that supports civilian needs in advisory processes and interactions with military commanders. This arrangement helps ensure the policy or strategy preferences held by civilians, who are making these decisions on behalf of the electorate, prevail.

For civilians to control effectively, or more aptly, shape military policy and activity in conformity with their larger political objectives, the structure and character of those processes must conform to their needs and proclivities in policy making and strategic assessment. As Janine Davidson cogently argues, civilians may require a nonlinear and fluid process that simultaneously considers both political goals and resources; assessing goals may be best accomplished from a civilian leader's perspective inductively and in tandem with consideration of military means.[21] That is, when weighing the utility of using the military, civilians are searching for a theory for how force might (or might not) advance some acceptable political outcome—an outcome they may not have arrived at before engaging military leaders in an advisory capacity.

Yet the current norms of professionalism do not prepare officers well for these demands and roles in strategic assessment. The Huntingtonian model supports a modal understanding of the military's role in advisory processes at odds with an inductive and dialectal process for the integration of ends and means.[22] Rather such a model leads military officers to expect definitive guidance and then respond in a potentially iterative but inherently transactional process. That transactional concept, based on the idea there are inviolable boundaries between military and political domains, is inherent in Huntingtonian professionalism.

To be sure the fluidity with which civilians may desire military leaders to speculate on military options may not always be feasible given the challenges inherent in planning for complex military operations. Civilian leaders also need to work to understand military constraints

21.  Janine Davidson, "The Contemporary Presidency: Civil-Military Friction and Presidential Decision Making: Explaining the Broken Dialogue," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 43, No. 1 (March 2013): 129–45.

22.  Davidson, "Contemporary Presidency."

and the functional challenges of military planning.[23] Nonetheless, the obstacles to military adaptation in the advisory process are not merely functional but are also cultural and result from the mindset of military officers steeped in the separation-of-spheres concept.[24] As Tami Biddle has argued, military officers may not understand how to engage civilians effectively in the advisory processes.[25]

Yet the problem may even be more complicated. Officers who have deeply internalized the separation-of-spheres concept may resent adjusting to civilian needs or view them as "inappropriate, unrealistic or irrelevant."[26] The military may view as dysfunctional civilians' failure to conform to the transactional model (instead delineating ex ante clear guidance) rather than see it as it is—a reflection of the necessary balance of complex demands and political constraints in the civilian decision-making environment.

These norms also can create an aversion to civilian oversight, which is an institutional expression of civilian control. Huntingtonian norms can encourage military leaders to view with some resentment, and perhaps suspicion, the appropriateness of civilian interventions and the motives and expertise of the political officials undertaking it. Huntington fosters an idea that the military should oversee itself—that autonomy in operational and tactical matters is a right and not a prerogative variously delegated, depending on what civilians deem appropriate and necessary. Indeed Huntington actually makes the case the military has the right to resist actively intrusions into military activity it deems a violation of the separation of spheres.[27]

While all organizations bristle under outside intervention, Huntingtonian norms suggest such interventions are inappropriate and constitute violations of the rightful order of things. Not all definitions of military professionalism entail such an unreserved grant of autonomy. Some even question whether the military really constitutes a profession, given autonomy is incompatible with the need for civilian intervention to monitor or modify military activity and ensure consistency with broader political objectives.[28]

A related and particularly worrisome byproduct of the Huntingtonian mindset is it encourages disparagement of politics and its practitioners—civilian leaders. Politics is seen as something beyond the pure domain of military expertise. Hence politics and the political

23.  Tami Davis Biddle, *Strategy and Grand Strategy: What Students and Practitioners Need to Know* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2015), 8, https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/430.pdf.

24.  R. D. Hooker Jr. and Joseph J. Collins, "From the Chairman: An Interview with Martin E. Dempsey," *Joint Force Quarterly* 78, no. 3 (July 2015): 2–13.

25.  Tami Davis Biddle, " 'Making Sense of the Long Wars' – Advice to the US Army," *Parameters* 46, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 9.

26.  Davidson, "Contemporary Presidency," 131.

27.  Huntington, *Soldier and the State*, 77.

28.  Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier*; and Tony Ingesson, "When the Military Profession Isn't," in *Redefining the Modern Military: The Intersection of Profession and Ethics*, ed. Nathan K. Finney and Tyrell O. Mayfield (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2018).

concerns that in part motivate civilian leaders' decisions are viewed as extra-military considerations; constraints on military operations induced by such concerns, resource limits, timelines and the like, are viewed as external factors.

The imposition of such constraints by politicians then further reinforces cynicism about civilian motives in protecting national security. Surveys reveal, for example, that many in uniform agree with the statement, "when civilians tell the military what to do, domestic partisan politics rather than national security requirements are often the primary motivation."[29] Heidi Urben reports in her 2009 survey that 55 percent of respondents agreed with the statement, compared with 54 percent who agreed with it in Triangle Institute for Security Studies surveys conducted in the late 1990s.[30] This suggests a deep cynicism about the motives of civilians overseeing military activity, which magnifies the cultural aversion to oversight the separation-of-spheres concept may already foster.

## Relationship with Society

Huntingtonian norms can also foster dynamics corrosive to the military's relationship with American society. Much has been written about the public's relationship to society and the emergence of a "civil-military gap" between Americans and the military. Americans revere the military, however, this regard is not accompanied by much knowledge or insight into the military or efforts to learn about it.[31] A superficial "thank you for your service" mentality prevails in American culture.[32]

There is also a military side to the civil-military gap, albeit one that does not get the same attention. Service to society is a deeply embedded value in military professionalism today. As United States Army doctrine states, professionalism encompasses a "shared understanding of *why* and *how* we serve the American people [emphasis in original]" among Army personnel.[33]

Yet the humility toward society implied by that tenet may be absent among some military personnel. In the 1990s, journalist Thomas Ricks wrote about how the Marines with whom he interacted derided civilian society.[34] Surveys of military personnel have since shown many

29.   Heidi Urben, "Party, Politics and Deciding What Is Proper: Army Officers' Attitudes after Two Long Wars," *Orbis* 57, no. 3 (Summer 2013): 360.

30.   Urben, "Deciding What Is Proper," 360.

31.   James Fallows, "The Tragedy of the American Military," *Atlantic* 315, no. 1 (January/ February 2015): 72–90; Kori N. Schake and Jim Mattis, eds., *Warriors & Citizens: American Views of Our Military* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2016); and Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, eds., *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

32.   Phil Klay, "The Warrior at the Mall," *New York Times*, April 14, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/14/opinion/sunday/the-warrior-at-the-mall.html.

33.   Headquarters, US Department of the Army (HQDA), *The Army Profession*, Army Doctrine Reference Publication 1 (Washington, DC: HQDA, June 2015), 7-4, https://fas.org/irp/doddir/army/adrp1.pdf.

34.   Thomas E. Ricks, "The Widening Gap between the Military and Society," *Atlantic* 280, no. 1 (July 1997): 66–76.

servicemembers continue to disparage American society.[35] Gregory Foster found many of his students at the National Defense University perceived the military to be more self-sacrificing, patriotic, and loyal than their indulgent and self-interested civilian counterparts. Foster wrote such attitudes "accentuate the deep-seated widespread belief—an arrogant one, certainly—among military personnel that they are morally superior to a general public they consider to be in some advanced state of moral decline."[36]

A variety of factors may enable the emergence of such attitudes. One facilitating factor may be that the military does not mirror the cleavages and demographic character of American society. In today's all-volunteer military, those who self-select to join are demographically unrepresentative of society; military personnel are drawn disproportionately from rural and less populated areas, often in the South and Midwest, while those who choose military services often come from military families.[37] A partisan skew in the military exists, especially among officers, such that personnel do not mirror ideological divisions in society.[38]

Worries about such consequences of maintaining a professional military are deeply rooted in the American tradition and were in part why the Founders were concerned about a large standing army.[39] Sociologists such as Morris Janowitz have also expressed concern that without deliberate efforts to counter such tendencies, military professionalism would generate distance between society and the military and erode the latter's regard for democratic traditions.[40]

Contemporary norms of professionalism may then turn a military that operates apart from society to one inclined to see itself as better than that society. While professionalization may unavoidably create a military officer class apart from society, Huntington goes further in encouraging a sense of distinctiveness as normatively appropriate. He also explicitly argued society should emulate the superior values found in military culture. In the famous closing section of *The Soldier and the State*, Huntington compares the residents of the town abutting West Point to its cadets, arguing: "historically, the virtues of West Point have been America's vices and the vices of the military, America's virtues. Yet today America can learn more from West Point than West Point from America."[41]

35.   Feaver and Kohn, *Soldiers and Civilians*; and Schake and Mattis, *Warriors and Citizens*.

36.   Gregory Foster, "Civil-Military Relations on Trial: Through the Eyes of Tomorrow's US Military Leaders," *RUSI Journal* 161, no. 4 (2016): 34–41.

37.   Amy Schafer, "Generations of War: The Rise of the Warrior Caste and the All-Volunteer Force," Center for a New American Security, May 8, 2017, https://www.cnas.org/publications /reports/generations-of-war.

38.   Feaver and Kohn, *Soldiers and Civilians*; and Heidi A. Urben, "Civil-Military Relations in a Time of War: Party, Politics, and the Profession of Arms," PhD diss., Georgetown University, 2010.

39.   Russell F. Weigley, "The American Military and the Principle of Civilian Control from McClellan to Powell," *Special issue, Journal of Military History*, 57, no. 5 (October 1993).

40.   James Burk, "Theories of Democratic Civil-Military Relations," *Armed Forces & Society* 29, no. 1 (October 2002): 7–29.

41.   Huntington, *Soldier and the State*, 465–66.

Retired Army Lieutenant General David Barno captures the implications of these dynamics:

> Today's Army—including its leadership—lives in a bubble separate from society. Not only does it reside in remote fortresses—the world's most exclusive gated communities—but in a world apart from the cultural, intellectual and even geographic spheres that define the kaleidoscopic United States. This splendid military isolation—set in the midst of a largely adoring nation—risks fostering a closed culture of superiority and aloofness.[42]

Hence the process of professionalization combined with the particular norms of professionalism—in which military service is viewed as imparting some superior character and values to individuals—may be contributing to some worrisome dimensions of the societal-military relationship. These values, while not formally sanctioned, are seemingly pervasive and in effect characterize a deeply concerning byproduct of prevailing conceptions of military professionalism.

## Military and Strategic Effectiveness

Finally, norms of professionalism may be counterproductive to the military's capacity to help ensure the country's strategic effectiveness in armed conflict. In part this results from Huntington's all-encompassing approach to the apolitical tenet and the notion that engagement in debate about political considerations and political thinking are antithetical to the roles and responsibilities of a military professional. This mindset is potentially averse to healthy strategic assessment—and arguably to appreciating the political effects and constraints of military activity at all levels.[43]

The making of strategy inextricably combines political and military considerations; strategy sits at the nexus between the operational and tactical domains on the one hand and policy and political outcomes on the other. Yet the separation-of-spheres concept mandates military officers forgo engagement with that which bears on the political. Rather this separation dictates a retreat to the boundaries of ostensibly pure military considerations when such issues filter into debate. Consequently some military officers analytically distance their own thought processes from political considerations.[44] As Sam Sarkesian and Robert Connor wrote, "it appears to have been an article of faith in the military profession to erect a wall between the military and 'politics.' "[45]

42. David Barno, "Dave Barno's Top 10 Tasks for General Dempsey, the New Army Chief of Staff," *Foreign Policy*, January 21, 2011, https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/01/21/dave-barnos-top-10-tasks-for-general-dempsey-the-new-army-chief-of-staff/.

43. Celestino Perez Jr., "Errors in Strategic Thinking: Anti-Politics and the Macro Bias," *Joint Force Quarterly* 81, no. 2 (2016): 10–18.

44. See Frank G. Hoffman, "Dereliction of Duty Redux?: Post–Iraq American Civil-Military Relations," *Orbis* 52, no. 2 (2008): 217–35; Mackubin Thomas Owens, "Civil-Military Relations," Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies (website), https://oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-123, November 30, 2017; Hew Strachan, "Strategy or Alibi? Obama, McChrystal and the Operational Level of War," *Survival* 52, no. 5 (October 2010); and Carnes Lord, "On Military Professionalism and Civilian Control," *Joint Force Quarterly* 78 (3rd Quarter 2015): 70–74.

45. Sarkesian and Connor, *US Military Profession*, 180.

This barrier inclines officers to "cognitively stop at the edge of the military playing field as their culture has encouraged" whereas they might otherwise see themselves as "concurrently responsible with civilian leaders and other agencies to achieve strategic policy ends."[46] As Carl Builder captures it, "the difficulty lies in seeing the strategic side of national security increasingly as the province of politicians and diplomats while the operational and tactical sides belong to the military, free from civilian meddling."[47] In turn this operational and tactical emphasis interacts with the transactional advisory process. "The current demand by the military for well-defined objectives is eloquent evidence of how far our thinking has drifted toward the tactical domain."[48]

The aforementioned attitudes to civilian oversight fostered by Huntingtonian-informed norms may also prove counterproductive to strategic effectiveness. The separation-of-spheres model is premised on a tacit agreement between political and military leaders such that civilians violate their obligations when they infringe on the military domain. Yet civilian oversight may be required to ensure the integration of operational and tactical activity with strategy and political goals.

Tactical operations have a rhythm and character of their own that can become disconnected from larger political objectives. A mission may be militarily efficient in that it uses resources well to achieve a discreet military objective.[49] Yet a mission may not be militarily effective if that outcome (or the means used to achieve it) yields counterproductive strategic effects. Certainly many military commanders understand these tensions and work to mitigate these counterproductive tendencies. Yet having civilian policymakers, whose role it is to focus upon and represent these larger political objectives, monitoring military activity and intervening in decisions in consultation with commanders, is a pathway for ensuring means-end integration. If interventions in military activity are viewed as an abrogation of the obligation to respect military autonomy, however, military personnel may resent and mistrust the purposes of such oversight. By fostering the idea autonomy is a right and not a privilege, prevailing norms create a mindset potentially contrary to political-strategic success in armed conflict.

One final feature of these norms is potentially contrary to strategic effectiveness: they may undermine military leaders' sense of responsibility or ownership over the political effects of military operations. This is an insidious byproduct of the transactional model. Military leaders proffer advice; civilians then choose whether to accept the proposed options for the use of force, ask for modifications, or decline to act. In any

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46.   Rapp, "Effective Military Voice," 16.
47.   Biddle, *Strategy and Grand Strategy*; and Carl H. Builder, "Keeping the Strategic Flame," *Joint Force Quarterly* 14 (Winter 1996–97).
48.   Builder, "Keeping the Strategic Flame"; and Mackubin Thomas Owens, "Military Officers: Political without Partisanship," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 92.
49.   Risa Brooks, "Introduction: The Impact of Culture, Society, Institutions, and International Forces on Military Effectiveness," in *Creating Military Power: The Sources of Military Effectiveness*, ed. Risa A. Brooks and Elizabeth A. Stanley (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

scenario the military's role in the decision-making process is complete once options are supplied.

In effect this dynamic absolves the military of taking responsibility for the outcomes of the decisions politicians make with respect to military action. If the military's responsibility is merely to outline options, the successful implementation of any chosen option becomes the metric for success, not the larger consideration of whether the success of that mission or campaign translates into some enduring political benefit. The assessment of military success devolves into an evaluation of operational and tactical achievements. The war—to win or lose—becomes civilians' responsibility.

## Conclusion

If the prevailing conception of military professionalism is flawed, what should be done? First it would be helpful to reconsider the way current norms of professionalism conceive of a military officer's relationship to politics. The current approach lumps a variety of phenomena together. Particular forms of political activism or engagement in partisan activity during elections are problematic and should be proscribed. But to be a good strategist and participant in strategic assessment, a military officer must think about and engage in politics.

Moreover political acumen is required to keep oneself out of partisan politics. An officer needs to understand him or herself as a (potential) political actor to know best how to minimize his or her impact on political outcomes. Sarkesian, writing in 1981, said it well: "Political knowledge, political interests, and awareness are not the same as political action and bipartisan politics. Indeed the more of the former, the less likely that military men [and women] will develop the latter."[50] In other words it is time to leave behind the reflexive and encompassing call for officers to remain apolitical for a more constructive understanding of how they might best engage with politics and political thinking.

Second, it may be helpful to move beyond the separation-of-spheres conception of civil-military relations. On many levels the notion that there are clear and constant spheres of political versus military activity is flawed.[51] Rather than seeing their roles and responsibilities as fixed, officers might be encouraged to view political and military calculations and roles as fluid—varying with a given situation and as often intersecting. This is especially important at the strategic level where politics and military considerations are by their very nature intertwined.

Finally, it may be time to address the military side of the civil-military gap. More work must be done to address attitudes of disparagement of civilian society, civilian politics, and civilian leadership. That such attitudes are apparently pervasive is a troubling feature of the culture of

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50. Sam C. Sarkesian, "Military Professionalism and Civil-Military Relations in the West," *International Political Science Review* 2, no. 3 (1981): 293.

51. Cohen, *Supreme Command*.

military professionalism today. Addressing the flawed premises of the military's relationship to politics might also help in this respect. As we rethink military professionalism today, Sarkesian, once again, frames the solution well:

> To develop the political dimension of military professionalism . . . does not lessen the need for professional skills aimed specifically at battlefield necessities, but what it does demand is that these necessities also be viewed in terms of their impact beyond the confines of the battlefield. Additionally, it means that all military men must be socialized into reinforcing their commitment to the political system and in their understanding of the political-social dimensions of their role as soldiers. How well this is accomplished is primarily a function of military professionalism. The attitudes of the officer corps and their acceptance of a new concept of professionalism will, in no small measure, determine how well the military system adopts to the political-social environment.[52]

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52.  Sarkesian "Military Professionalism," 294.