

# Warriors, Scholars, Diplomats: The Role of Military Officers in Foreign Policymaking

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**PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP HAS APPOINTED AN UNPRECEDENTED** number of former military officers to top political posts in his first months in office.<sup>2</sup> His appointments for secretary of defense, secretary of homeland security, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, and director of national intelligence have all worn the uniform, while his national security adviser, H.R. McMaster, is an active duty three-star general.<sup>3</sup> Such appointments have stoked fears that the administration is violating long-standing norms of civil-military relations in the United States.<sup>4</sup> As David Graham wrote in *The Atlantic*, “too many military leaders, critics say, warp national priorities at best and slouch toward a junta at worse.”<sup>5</sup>

These fears assume that civilian policymakers and military personnel operate in separate spheres: statesmen plan policy, and soldiers execute it. Such a relationship is ideal, proponents say, because military personnel lack the strategic perspective and interagency experience necessary to take on political advisory positions.<sup>6</sup> However, this argument paints a simplified picture of the policymaking process, while also reducing the role of the military officer to that of a tactician. The

civil-military “spheres” are intimately intertwined in a way that is often overlooked, and officers are, in fact, well-equipped to handle these overlapping responsibilities. Rather than shy away from these responsibilities, the military can better meet them by adopting a more meritocratic promotions system, promoting officers who are best suited to handle these responsibilities.

*Military personnel have historically been involved in policymaking*

The foreign policymaking process is a joint effort in two ways. First, it is common for presidents to appoint former military personnel to political positions. President Harry Truman appointed George Marshall, a general and chief of staff of the army, first as secretary of state and then as secretary of defense. Two of Ronald Reagan’s national security advisers, VAdm. John Poindexter and Gen. Colin Powell, were both active duty officers. Air Force Lt. Gen. Brent Scowcroft served as national security adviser under both Gerald Ford and George H. W. Bush, after holding lesser advisory positions while still in uniform. George H. W. Bush also appointed Lt. Gen. Douglas Lute, an active duty

general, to his policymaking team. More recently, President Barack Obama selected a former commandant of the Marine Corps as his national security adviser, and appointed Gen. John Allen to work on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. There Allen played a key part in the negotiations from 2013 to 2014 and spearheaded the development of solutions to Israeli security concerns.<sup>7</sup> These appointments demonstrate that military faces in “civilian” spaces is nothing new.

Second, civil-military collaboration has long been institutionalized in the policymaking process. This became particularly pronounced with the passage of the National Security Act of 1947. The law created the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), National Security Council (NSC), and what soon became the Department of Defense (DoD). While the law subordinated the military to a civilian secretary of defense, it also streamlined the national security apparatus, officially incorporating military personnel into the foreign policy decisionmaking process. That generals were involved in decisionmaking at the operational and strategic levels is perhaps unsurprising. But the new process also cleared the way for the JCS and DoD to influence grand strategy and policy planning. One early example was NSC-68, which described a strategy to contain the Soviet Union and informed Cold War policy for decades. This foundational strategic document was drafted through a joint State Department, DoD, and NSC research process.<sup>8</sup>

The policymaking power of the military was further institutionalized with the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986. This formally removed the JCS from the military’s chain of command, effectively reaffirming their formal presidential advisory role. This change was intended to ensure that the JCS provide broad, objective advice to the president.<sup>9</sup> The law effectively mitigated a primary concern regarding military influence in policymaking, namely the fear that individual services’ bureaucratic interests (i.e., relevancy, independence, budgetary power) might eclipse the security interests of the United States. The influence of the JCS varies with each president, but the law ensured that service chiefs would act as general advisers rather than as representatives of their respective services. Scholars Eliot A. Cohen and Janine Davidson have acknowledged this military influence in policymaking, referring to it as an “unequal dialogue.”

*Officers do not see grand strategy only through a security lens*

Some argue that the problem with military influence in policymaking is that officers tend to see foreign affairs purely through the security lens. That military personnel effectively lack a sufficient understanding of diplomatic and political tools, and are thus more inclined to rely on force to conduct statecraft.<sup>10</sup> However, this characterization disregards the diverse

responsibilities of modern officers, which require a broad strategic perspective. Today's complex threat environment already requires that officers understand and work with military, diplomatic, and political tools of statecraft.

**The military must continue to build an officer corps capable of meeting the demands of the modern threat environment and of their overlapping responsibilities.**

Military personnel today experience unprecedented exposure to professionals in other agencies and organizations. Strategies in Iraq and Afghanistan incorporated a number of different civilian-mil teams, such as the provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs). Bringing military personnel together with expert scholars and representatives from the U.S.

Agency for International Development (USAID), the State Department, and other civilian agencies, PRTs were conceived to “extend the reach and enhance the legitimacy of the central government into the provinces of Afghanistan,” according to Army Counterinsurgency Field Manual 3-24.<sup>11</sup> Other modern military undertakings, notably humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations such as during the 2014 Ebola response, show that most modern military missions require considerable civil-military collaboration. In reaction to this trend, the military has introduced efforts aimed at facilitating civil-military coordination and cultural competency like West Point's Center for the Study of Civil-Military Relations (CSMR) and ROTC's Cultural Understanding and Language Proficiency (CULP) program. Further, State Department political advisers are now embedded in combatant commands, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and many civil servants are included at centers of professional military education, like the military war colleges. These efforts, along with officers' personal experiences working on these missions, has greatly increased the military's familiarity with other agencies, NGOs, and even academics, as well as officers' understanding of grand strategy.<sup>12</sup>

An extension of this reality is that many military officers are often expected to play many roles besides “warrior.” This is exemplified in combatant commanders. Combatant commanders oversee all assets in their respective areas of operation, coordinating all military, diplomatic, intelligence, and even development assets in their commands. Thus, they must have an intimate understanding of the command's political context, often playing a regional political or diplomatic role themselves. One well-known example is the military's response to the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, Operation Unified Assistance. When disaster struck, the head of the U.S. Pacific Command, Adm.

Thomas Fargo, immediately began working with counterparts at the State Department and USAID to coordinate a response with the resources of host nations Indonesia and Thailand.<sup>13</sup>

Officers are also trained managers within a bureaucracy. In her critique of the appointment of James Mattis as secretary of defense, *War on the Rocks* author Erin Simpson wrote that “warriors rarely make good bureaucrats.” She explained that Mattis, like many officers, hates bureaucratic responsibilities such as managing a budget and meeting with politicians.<sup>14</sup> But, as described above, officers are in fact well acquainted with interagency meetings and budget management. Many are responsible for millions of dollars in equipment even as junior officers. While military personnel do inevitably lack the congressional contacts of seasoned political operatives, an officer is no less likely to have such contacts as other siloed national security professionals, such as foreign service officers. In this way, the real question is whether positions such as secretary of defense are best filled by national security experts or political figures.

*The training of modern officers prepares them for policymaking roles*

The expectation that officers be prepared to work in a variety of roles within the national security establishment is evident in the curriculum at service academies, opportunities for post-graduate and mid-career training, and the culture of scholarship that is fostered by today’s services. Service academies have adopted a liberal arts curriculum. At West Point, for example, the curriculum is constructed with the intention of equipping students with the “knowledge and skills necessary for service and continued growth” as Army officers.<sup>15</sup> Cadets are required to take courses across various disciplines, including international affairs, foreign languages, and writing, and students are encouraged to study abroad. The service academies now host prestigious conferences on foreign policymaking and national leadership, such as the Service Conference on U.S. Affairs at West Point, the Naval Academy Foreign Affairs Conference, and the Naval Academy Leadership Conference. In this way, the academies provide an excellent foundation for national public service. Furthermore, these opportunities represent a commitment to developing officers as scholars of foreign affairs and grand strategy.

This training is also reinforced through post-graduate and mid-career opportunities. While officers have a wide variety of opportunities to learn tactical skills at schools such as Ranger School and Airborne School, they are also encouraged to develop their understanding of U.S. foreign policy, especially as they move from junior to senior officers. Between 2009 and 2010, the Navy funded more than 1,300 full-time master and doctorate degrees,

and each year the DoD sends a number of officers to fellowship programs at Washington-based think tanks and to special educational opportunities such as the Harvard National Security Fellows program or Olmstead Fellowship.<sup>16</sup> In 2015, the DoD announced plans to push more senior military leaders into civilian graduate-degree programs in order to ensure that officers receive top-notch educations.<sup>17</sup>

This top-down emphasis on shaping military officers to be strategic thinkers has been embraced and modeled by military personnel throughout the ranks. Soldiers and sailors regularly contribute to publications like *Defense One*, *Small Wars Journal*, and *War on the Rocks*. West Point boasts its own research center for combating terrorism, which produces a monthly publication on terrorism and political violence. Many senior military officers advise junior officers to practice reading and writing, the same advice given to other young professionals entering government. Such a culture is representative of the military's efforts to develop officers as strategic thinkers, rather than solely as specialists in the execution of warfare.

*The military must do more to retain its top talent*

The military must continue to build an officer corps capable of meeting the demands of the modern threat environment and of their overlapping responsibilities. As discussed above, today's officer must be ready to work closely alongside other governmental agencies, foreign governments, and nongovernmental organizations. This requires a refined understanding of international affairs and inter-organizational coordination, and a commitment to seeking innovative solutions to solve complex problems. While today's military attracts and does equip officers with such skills, it is failing to benefit from its best talent, and much of that talent is choosing to leave the military.

Military personnel are unhappy with the promotions system, and they are leaving because of it. Surveys show that retention rates are closely tied to the military's stifling personnel management system. When asked, veterans attribute their decision to leave to "frustration with military bureaucracy." They say they would have stayed if the military was "more of a meritocracy," according to a survey conducted by Tim Kane of *The Atlantic*.<sup>18</sup> The current promotions system evaluates soldiers in a standard, black-box manner. It requires that each soldier reach certain career milestones, called designated key developmental assignments, on a standard timeline to be eligible for promotion, regardless of their individual experiences. For example, earning a graduate degree is effectively time "lost." Thus, officers are incentivized to keep to the standard track. While this system aims to encourage meritocratic appointment by evaluating officers in standard, measurable ways, it also reduces the room for risk-taking and discourages nontraditional career paths

and opportunities, such as the pursuit of a master's or PhD, or even unusual military assignments like a foreign area officer position (a diplomatic liaison).<sup>19</sup> It is impossible to know how many promising officers have seen their careers stunted by this promotions system; but perhaps more disconcerting is the message that such a system sends: it is better to be risk-averse rather than be curious, inventive, or intellectual in the Army.

Even junior officers are well aware of such problems. One nationally top-ranked Army ROTC cadet says that he will join the reserves rather than going active duty next year for such reasons. The cadet, who serves as a battalion commander, maintains a 3.9 GPA, and is proficient in two languages, says that he plans to work in a government agency or think tank where his skills will be used. Emphasizing his fear of losing his language proficiency, he says, "If the Army valued the expertise that some cadets acquire in college [and] opened up civil affairs or foreign area officer roles to second lieutenants, I would definitely reconsider my decision to join the reserves."<sup>20</sup> This cadet has received more language and cultural training than most civil affairs and foreign area officers, and yet is unable to compete for such positions until reaching the rank of captain. It makes sense that the Army would require that officers have spent some time in active duty before applying to these specialty positions so that the individual has time to learn the ways of the Army. However, 5 to 10 years seems arbitrary, and leads talented individuals like the cadet described above to say goodbye to the Army even before joining.

Though military personnel are today already deeply involved in the policymaking process, there are potential pitfalls to this role. Political leaders must avoid relying too heavily on them for advice, and senior diplomats, aid workers, and academic experts can all provide alternative strategic perspectives. Likewise, there is a real danger in politicians using the military for electoral gain. Should politicians make promises to support the appointments of officers to top national security positions or otherwise support their careers, officers will face an incentive to make decisions based on that politician's agenda rather than the national interest. Officers should consider the political impact of their national security advice only insofar as the policy depends on favorable political conditions; for example, officers must assess whether the public would be amiable to a long war before engaging in one. That being said, the reality of today's complex threat environment and bureaucratic structure requires that officers be prepared to take on policymaking roles. To meet this challenge, the military must promote and nurture strategic thinking in the officer corps.

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## Endnotes

- 1 The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.
- 2 Carol Giacomo, “Why Donald Trump Shouldn’t Fill the Cabinet with Generals,” *New York Times*, November 30, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/30/opinion/why-donald-trump-shouldnt-fill-the-cabinet-with-generals.html?mcubz=0&r=0>.
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- 4 Phillip Carter and Loren DeJonge Schulman, “Trump is surrounding himself with generals. That’s dangerous,” *Washington Post*, November 30, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trump-is-surrounding-himself-with-generals-thats-dangerous/2016/11/30/e6a0a972-b190-11e6-840f-e3ebab6bcdd3\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.c8b075eae55b](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trump-is-surrounding-himself-with-generals-thats-dangerous/2016/11/30/e6a0a972-b190-11e6-840f-e3ebab6bcdd3_story.html?utm_term=.c8b075eae55b); Stanley L. Falk, “The National Security Council under Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 79, No. 3 (September 1964): 403–34.
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- 6 Erin Simpson, “I Love Mattis, But I Don’t Love Him as SECDEF,” *War on the Rocks*, November 26, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/11/i-love-mattis-but-i-dont-love-him-as-secdef/>.
- 7 Amir Tibon and Amos Harel, “Exclusive: Trump Officials Studying Obama’s Security Plan in Case Israeli-Palestinian Peace Push Works,” *Haaretz*, June 3, 2017, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.793178>.
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- 9 Lisa Ferdinando, “Carter Proposes Updates to Goldwater Nichols Act,” *DoD News*, April 5, 2016, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/713930/carter-proposes-updates-to-goldwater-nichols-act/>.
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- 11 U.S. Army Counterinsurgency Field Manual, December 15, 2006, <http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/Repository/Materials/COIN-FM3-24.pdf>.
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