



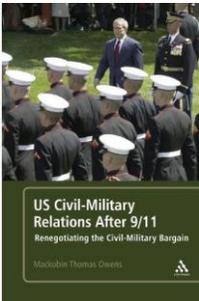
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## Effective Civil-Military Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

### Book Review by F. G. Hoffman



Mackubin Thomas Owens, *US Civil-Military Relations After 9/11: Renegotiating the Civil-Military Bargain*, New York: Continuum Books, 2011, 211 pgs, \$22.95.

Protracted and indecisive conflict often generates serious fissures between policy makers and military leaders. It can also lead to profound cracks between societies and the military institutions they raise up and sustain to defend themselves. The United States has been at war for about a decade against enemies whose fighting style and tactics confound us, challenge our view of warfare and thwart our traditional sources of power. Victory has been elusive, but the costs are tangible and growing.

Against such a backdrop, one would have expected the oft conflicted elements inherent to American civil-military relations to have produced some crisis or dysfunctional undertow by now. In fact, even before the war, distinguished historians concluded that relations between our uniformed leaders and senior elected officials were “extraordinarily poor” and that the national fabric had been rent. There have been alleged crises; the purported Revolt of the Generals during the Bush Administration, Admiral “Fox” Fallon’s apparent public policy disagreement with the White House over Iran, and the fallout from the Rolling Stones article where General Stan McChrystal’s staff torched his career with what can only be charitably described as diarrhea of the mouth.

Despite the elongated situation in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the extraordinary pressures that have been placed upon the Armed Services by its constant deployment cycle and the personal costs of the war, the supposedly rent fabric is holding up. Flawed operations and strategic missteps there have been, but the sort of crisis predicted even before 9/11 has not emerged. But war is both an arbiter of and influence upon societies and military institutions, and long wars, conclusive or not, generate pressures to national institutions. Thus, Dr. “Mac” Owens’ refreshingly lucid book is well timed to explain the foundation and evolution of U.S. civil-military interactions over the past decade.

Professor Owens has been a serious scholar in this field for more than a generation. In an earlier life, he was a Marine infantry officer in Vietnam, serving with distinction and earning a Silver Star. Subsequently, he was appointed as a professor of national security affairs at the U.S. Naval War College in Newport, RI where he currently teaches. (Full disclosure, “Mac” Owens was my thesis advisor in 1993-1994) In addition to his academic duties at Newport, Dr. Owens is a prolific writer and political commentator, most notably at the *National Review*, and currently is Editor of the Foreign Policy Research Institute’s *Orbis*.

*US Civil Military Relations After 9/11* is organized in five chapters around a specific question. After a brief introduction, the opening chapter provides a concise survey of the current literature on civil-military relations, ranging from the dominant, normative American theory of Professor Samuel Huntington, to more modern theories including Duke’s Peter Feaver agency-based theory and Rebecca Schiff’s conception of concordance. In addition to establishing a useful foundation for subsequent analysis, this chapter introduces the author’s own perspective of civil-military relations as a bargain, one “involving the military, the American people and the civilian leadership of the U.S. government.” For Owens, these parties interact or “bargain” in the midst of a constantly changing relationship and complex interplay of international, political, cultural, and bureaucratic maneuvers.

After that theoretical basis, the second chapter jumps directly into current debates from ongoing wars. Here Dr. Owens tackles the concept of civilian control, and the degree to which military leaders can challenge or dissent from that control. These pages draw from many contemporary debates over the proper role of active and retired generals seeking to influence policy decisions, making the discussion lively and relevant to today’s audience. The section on dissent and legitimate forms of public discussion may have been better placed near the end of this book in greater detail. It is an important issue in its own right.

In his third chapter, the author addresses the various missions and functions that might be assigned to the U.S. armed services, and what pattern of civil-military control best supports those missions. Lightly addressing the influence of military and service culture since Vietnam, Owens goes on to explore the compound impact of that war and the U.S. military’s subsequent emphasis on the operational level of war. As noted by leading strategists, including Colin Gray and Hew Strachan, the preoccupation with operational matters left American strategic thinking skewed at best and unchained the strong links that should tightly connect political aims with military ways and means.

Leaning heavily on recent conflicts, Owens concurs with the British historians and concludes “The combination of the dominant position of the normal theory of civil military relations in the United States and the US military’s focus on the nonpolitical operational level of war means that all too often the conduct of a war is disconnected from the goals of the war.” The author is aware that such a shortfall could be complicated in an age where the most frequent conflicts are complex irregular warfare or wars fought by hybrid threats.

The author ventures into controversy in his fourth major chapter, which answers the issue of “Who Serves?” Owens traces the de-evolution of the country’s citizen soldier ethos, and the emergence of a post-modern era in the military. Here, the author explores how the acceptance of

women in combat units, the inclusion of homosexuals, and the rise of religious diversity can impact the military's functional imperative to provide for our security. For Dr. Owens, the issue of "who serves" can undercut the military's effectiveness. This chapter notes the emergence of tensions in the military from a growing sense of isolation from the larger society it serves. Some of this is a natural output of the All Volunteer Force, and some is a frustration borne from concerns inside the military community that only one percent of the country is paying any true price for our country's extended foreign policy interventions. The implication of this issue bears further study.

The concluding chapter is a superb synthesis of the preceding theory and historical material. Professor Owens recognizes that both sides of the bargain need to adapt. The "military must recover its voice in strategy-making while realizing that politics permeates the conduct of war." For their parts, "civilians must understand that to implement effective policy and strategy requires the proper military instrument," and inputs from military leaders.

*US Civil-Military Relations After 9/11* is a highly relevant, insightful, and scrupulously balanced depiction of the current state of what Eliot Cohen famously called the "unequal dialogue" between military leaders and their civilian masters. It is a rich and readable synthesis of history, political theory, and policy analysis. It will stand the test of time and is strongly recommended as an invaluable text for university and war college use, as it offers a comprehensive understanding of the fundamental tensions of American strategic culture and the gritty issues inherent to the formulation of strategy. The ambiguity and risk of decision making in war will not go away anytime soon, nor will the need for the brutally candid but respectful dialogue that is the central output of good civil-military relations.

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