



SMALL WARS

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A Caution on Civil-Military Relations

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This brief post represents only a few quickly dashed thoughts in the hope of getting something on paper that might morph into a longer and more useful essay on civil-military relations. I believe that civil-military relations in the United States are deeply troubled. The issues are lurking mostly in the background right now. On the surface, our leadership—civilian and military—has been able to negotiate some relatively complex rapids without any of the major drama that has cropped up in the past. The falling out between Truman and MacArthur comes to mind. Nonetheless, there are serious background issues that will only get worse in 2014 and beyond. There are several reasons for concern.

The all-volunteer force has fought two brutal wars for over a decade while a (guilty or thankful) American population has stood by with very little involvement. There have been no war bonds, no victory gardens, no bandage wrapping drives, no air raid drills—nothing to make them feel a part of the conflict other than the human interest stories about killed and wounded veterans and the once-nightly footage of shattered HMMWVs and burning convoys. This has created an inequality in experience and sacrifice that the public has generally attempted to repay through extreme deference and ever-multiplying shows of thankfulness, the likes of which have never been seen in American society. Part of this is as a corrective to the disgraceful treatment of our Vietnam veterans, to be sure, but it has consequences nonetheless. In the face of such an inequality of experience and service and in such a deferential environment, public criticism of the military is all too easily dismissed as unpatriotic. Not only is this foil used to deflect criticism, but its threat deters many from bringing up much needed commentary and dissent. Likewise, unquestioning support of the military plays no small factor in making any discussion of rationalizing military budgets and targeting wasteful military spending difficult, if not impossible.

Late addition: This dynamic plays out in media coverage of the military, as well, leading to an insufficient criticality, or at least a lack of perspective, in much coverage. At worst, the media becomes a propaganda arm or engages in a cult of hero worship that perpetuates the dynamics above. As this coverage creates narratives that impact critical national security decisions, it likewise skews civil-military relations. The media is a central part of any civil-military dynamic in a democracy, providing the information that informs public discourse and shapes the decision-making space. If the media is incapable of being a relatively objective arbiter, this contributes to a flawed civil-military dynamic.

The military, itself, has internalized much of this adulation. When ushered to the front of boarding lines at the airport, offered discounts at a myriad of establishments, proffered all sorts of swag at any number of appreciation venues, and even venerated daily on cable news with the incredibly self-centered practice of surprise homecomings, it is difficult for members of the military not to fall victim to a culture of creeping narcissism. Faced with lengthy, rapid fire deployments that placed some military members away from the stabilizing influences of family and normality for years of their lives, the military itself had to play up a narrative of sacrifice and exceptionalism to help keep the trains running. This narrative was drummed into

the military and reinforced by its members who saw themselves deploying again and again as society stayed home and placed them on a pedestal. This is not to say that the sacrifice was insignificant, but to acknowledge that there were second order effects of the adulation. Even within the military, there was a significant inequality in hardships faced, from “FOBbits” with daily access to all the comforts of home to infantrymen living in squalor and under the constant threat of not only death, but horrific dismemberment. This additional dynamic, as an aside, has led to a significant insecurity on the part of some (but surely not most or all) of those servicemembers who operated in support roles. You can see it in those who make cryptic references to their “special operations” background or play up training that they never rightfully received. You see, even within the military there is a distinct hierarchy of who has truly “been there and done that” and those who feel they must insinuate that they did. I may be wrong, but I get the sense that the post-WWII culture just assumed that everyone had done their part and little need be said about it.

In all, this adds up to a military that at least in part feels it has earned entitlement, that it deserves the deferential treatment it receives, and that America needs to sacrifice to provide for the military—whether that be benefits or budget outlays. This is an incredibly dangerous cultural artifact, especially in light of the coming period of adjustment. As America’s involvement in Afghanistan winds down and as the nation is forced to adjust to new fiscal realities, the military will face a time of significant adjustment and likely austerity. A military with an entitled culture and an inability to countenance searing introspection will be unable to properly adjust to these new realities and will fail to make the necessary reforms, corrections, and resets that the strategic situation demands. More critically, the prospects for an unfavorable outcome in Afghanistan, coupled with significant budget cuts, will open the door for a “knife in the back” narrative that might argue that the civilian politicians and the American public “lost” the conflict by giving up on the great sacrifice and heroic efforts of the American military there and, furthermore, the government then slashed the military budget (and perhaps restructured some *entitlements*) betraying a military charged with facing a plethora of threats around the world. Such a narrative would be dangerous—poisonous—for civil-military relations.

In this it is important to recognize that our political institutions are undergoing a crisis of their own. Trust in government is at its lowest ebb in recent history. Political polarization is at its highest mark since the Great Depression. Demographic and economic pressures will multiply in coming years not only on the US, but more significantly on its key allies in Europe. The world will see a significant transformation of its power structure in the coming decades, all of which will put great strain on the country’s civil-military relations. Thus, it is of critical importance that we discuss, address, and correct any flaws in this dynamic now before they reach crisis proportions in the years to come.

About the Author



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Peter J. Munson is a Marine officer, author, and Middle East specialist. He is the author of *War, Welfare, and Democracy: Rethinking America's Quest for the End of History* (Potomac, 2013) and *Iraq in Transition: The Legacy of Dictatorship and the Prospects for Democracy* (Potomac, 2009) and . A frequent contributor to multiple journals and blogs, including [his own](#), he was also the Editor of the Small Wars Journal from January 2012 to June 2013. You can follow his Twitter feed [@peterjmunson](#) and find his LinkedIn profile [here](#). He is leaving the Marine Corps in summer 2013.

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