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About Face: A Perspective of Civil-Military Relations through the Lens of Principal-Agent Theory

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This essay uses the principal-agent theory to offer a framework for explaining shirking tendencies by the U.S. military in civil-military relations. Through the lens of the framework presented here, the principal-agent theory explains why shirking tendencies by the U.S. military is more likely to occur when a Republican occupies the White House, than when it is occupied by a Democrat. Besides providing a framework for conceptualizing civil-military relations, the importance of this work lies in the manner in which the principal-agent theory is applied. While the majority of inquiries into principal-agent theory focuses on executive control of bureaucratic agencies that have domestic policy agendas, this is one of the few—if any—that uses principal-agent theory to examine executive control of an agency (the U.S. Military) that has a foreign policy related agenda.

Ever since 2003 when the United States invaded Iraq, civil-military relations has eroded and the tradition of civilian control of the military has been undermined (Sulmasy and Yoo 2007; Perlstein 2012). One of the obvious reasons for this erosion has been the prolonged state of war and disagreements between military brass and civilian elected and appointed political leaders over the conduct of the war (Kohn 2008; 2002; Meyers et al. 2007; Owens 2006). Disagreements between soldiers and politicians are just one of the causes of the erosion of civil-military relations in the United States. Even before the commencement of the war on terror, there were cracks in the tradition of civilian control of the military (Ricks 1997). This illustrates the precarious nature of civilian control of the military in the United States. While the principle of civilian control of the military is firmly entrenched in American civil-military relations, it has not gone unchallenged at various times. This begs a larger question of whether discernible patterns that affect or contribute to the erosion of the principle can be identified.

The purpose of this essay is to propose the argument that partisan control of the White House is an important determinant of civil-military relations, in general, and whether

the tradition of civilian control of the military is more likely to be undermined more specifically. Moreover, this essay proposes that the principal-agent theory is the appropriate lens through which to assess civil-military relations in this country. Principal-agent theory was imported from the field of economics to explain how political actors in the executive and legislative branches of government control the behavior and output of the bureaucracy (Miller 1997; Worsham et al. 1997). According to the theory, principals refer to the president—as the constitutionally recognized chief executive—and congressional committees that control the purse strings of federal agencies who provide direction and oversight to executive branch agencies, who as agents, are expected to be responsive to the directives of their political superiors.

According to the theory, the agents have informational advantages by having technical expertise and knowledge in the particular field that pertains to the federal agency's policy jurisdiction (Wood and Waterman 1994). An important concept in principal-agent theory is the concept of shirking, which occurs whenever an agent subverts or dilutes the wishes and intentions of the principal. This concept makes principal-agent theory ideal for conceptualizing and examining civil-military relations and civilian control of the military. Utilizing principal-agent theory to conceptualize and examine civilian control of the military relations marks an important contribution to studies on civil-military relations in that, few—if any—inquiries into civil-military relations have done so through the lens of principal-agent theory. Yet, given that the military can be viewed as a politicized institution that has a “conservative and group centered bias” it seems fitting to apply the theory to this study (Hooker 2004, 6).

In the sections that follow, I review previous work on principal-agent theory and then review the history and literature on civil-military relations. Then, a theoretical proposition that undergirds the primary purpose of this work—that partisan control of the presidency and related executive branch agencies, affects civil-military relations in general and responsiveness to civilian control—is presented. One of the shortcomings of this essay that will be elaborated on further in the conclusion is that this work constitutes a theoretical supposition that proposes a theory—long utilized for examining presidential and congressional control of executive branch agencies—for making assumptions about civil-military relations and the principle of civilian control of the military, but does not offer testable hypotheses at this time.

Previous Research on Principal-Agent Theory

One of the obstacles that elected officials must overcome in controlling bureaucratic agencies is the expertise that bureaucrats have in their respective policy arenas. Because of the expertise they have amassed through education and a career spent in mastering the technical and professional contours of their profession, individuals who have spent decades climbing bureaucratic ladders are in position to wield tremendous influence by the time they have reached the highest echelons in executive branch agencies. The academic discipline of public administration has examined the considerable influence that bureaucrats are able to wield (Stivers 1994). This research, however, is more concerned with enhancing and upholding agency responsiveness to the public in response to Wilson's call for a politically neutral bureaucracy (Bryer 2007; Wilson 1887). The larger issue of explaining how political institutions at the federal level control and influence the output of administrative agencies has been largely examined by political scientists.

McCubbins and Schwartz (1984) found that Congress overcomes information

asymmetry by relying on agency constituents to alert them whenever the agent deviates from the policy stipulations outlined by the principal. According to McCubbins and Schwartz (1984), the relationship is analogous to firemen at a fire station responding to fire. The constituencies of congressional representatives are like fire alarms, when they complain about treatment or lack of responsiveness from an executive agency. When congressional representatives receive multiple complaints from their constituents about a particular department or agency, it signals to them that there is a serious problem that needs to be addressed. Thus, like firemen in a firehouse who are alerted by a firehouse alarm that there is a fire somewhere in their district, complaints by legislative constituents about an executive branch agency function as an alarm informing that something is amiss within a particular executive branch agency. The response options available to legislatures range from investigations to hearings. Calvert and Weingast (1982) found that agencies are responsive to the budgetary leverage wielded by Congress and that federal agencies will adjust their outputs to reflect the preferences of newly elected members of Congress. When these new members were appointed to congressional committees with oversight responsibility for the executive agency's policy jurisdiction, the executive agencies, according to the authors, adjusted their ideological stance and agency outputs to reflect the political ideology of the new committee members.

The example they used in their research is the case of the Federal Trade Commission in the 1970s. During the course of the decade, this commission went from having a pro-business orientation to a strong consumer activist orientation and as a result, suffered a budget cut in 1979. The authors tell how the congressional sub-committee responsible for the FTC's oversight had a turnover in membership and the new members' ideological preferences were pro-business, which was totally opposite the pro-consumer orientation of the previous committee members. The turnover in personnel on the congressional committee, with its new ideological orientation, placed the FTC out of step, ideologically speaking, with the new members on the subcommittee. As a result of the ideological mismatch between the principal (new members on the congressional subcommittee), the agent—the FTC—experienced a reduction in its budget. In other instances, federal agencies that failed to moderate their outputs fast enough to reflect the shift in policy preferences of congressional committee members also experienced similar fates (Calvert and Weingast 1982). Calvert et al. (1989), Moe (1985), and Wood and Waterman (1991) found that the president wields considerable power in affecting bureaucratic outputs through the power of appointment. Calvert et al. (1989) found that the chief executive's power of appointment and the threat of legislative sanctions are both powerful influences on bureaucratic output. Because policy making authority is occasionally delegated to professional administrators because of their technical expertise, the tendency to shirk—activity that undermines or mitigates the authority of political superiors—on the part of bureaucrats is always a realistic possibility (Gailmard and Patty 2012).

Based on the research, one can surmise that whenever an ideological mismatch occurs between principals and agents as result of personnel changes in the institutions that act as principals, we can expect heightened degree of tension between the two actors. In the research examined thus far, the heightened tensions have resulted in the principal imposing budget cuts in the budgets of agents. Another cause of increased tensions between principals and agents are changes in established policies that have existed for so long that they have come to be viewed as property rights by clients served by agencies and bureaucracies (Kasternberg 2013).

Previous research on Civil-Military Relations

Research on civil-military distinguishes between civil-military relations and civilian control of the military. Civil-military relations refers to the relationship between a nation-state's military and the society it serves while the concept of civilian control of the military refers to the extent to which elected politicians are able to exert authority over the armed forces in democratic societies (Hooker 2004). One of the primary concerns of scholars who study civil-military relations is how to maintain the integrity of civilian control of the military and the identification of factors that are likely to upset or threaten the tradition of military subservience to elected political leaders (Hooker 2004). Huntington (1957) points out that the tradition of civilian control of the military in the United States can be found in George Washington's refusal to use his military power to grasp political power. His surrender of his sword to Congress and the subsequent disbanding of the Continental Army showed unusual restraint that set the precedent for military subservience to civilian political authorities. Huntington's research (1957, 231-233) goes on to illustrate how General William T. Sherman's example further solidified the tradition started by George Washington. Today, Sherman is almost as famous for his disavowal of public office—"If nominated, I will not accept, and if elected, I will not serve"—as he is, for the military exploits he accomplished on the battlefield. For Sherman and the generals who followed him in administering the army in the decades after the Civil War, the subordination of the army to civilian political leadership was an important starting point for building a professional officer corps.

After World War II, the increasing trend towards limited war resulted in pressure by political leaders—concerned with the larger geo-political objective of détente and the prevention of armed conflict with the U.S.S.R.—resulted in conflict between generals and admirals and elected politicians (Nix 2012). The mismatch in political necessities and military objectives first became evident during the Korean War. MacArthur's flagrant challenge to the Truman Administration's conduct of the Korean War is well documented and came about because of the former's insistence belief that Truman's will to win had been compromised by political considerations (Nixon 1982). But what is less known is that there was near unanimous resentment among the major army field commanders towards Truman's strategic objectives on the Korean Peninsula. This trend was further exacerbated during the Vietnam War. The root cause of tension in civil-military relations during these wars was the inability of military commanders to make tactical battlefield decisions without interference by civilian political leaders (Huntington 1957; Nix 2012). Under President Lyndon Johnson, the level of meddling the tactical decision making by generals were viewed as particularly egregious as the president imposed restrictive rules of engagement on generals and in some cases selected bombing targets himself. Johnson's micromanagement of the war cast a pall of over civil-military relations that would last until the presidency of Ronald Reagan.

The success of the US Army in dispatching Iraq's military afforded General Colin Powell, serving at the time as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and H. Norman Schwarzkopf an unusually high favorability rating in public opinion. General Powell used his popularity to oppose President Bill Clinton's policy on homosexuals serving in the military—"Don't Ask, Don't Tell." In addition to the individual role General Powell played, several authors have stated that the military's particular disdain for Clinton had a negative impact on the civil-military relations and the tradition of civilian control of the military (Kohn 1997; Desch 1998; Weignly 1993; Ricks 1997; Kohn 1997). More than

Powell's actions in publicly coming out against President Clinton's policy on homosexuals serving in the military, the end of the Cold War and Clinton's use of the military for missions that seemed to depart from the traditional mission of fighting wars—such as nation-building and humanitarian missions, seems to have had a more detrimental effect on civil-military relations (Ricks 1997; Nix 2012). The end of the Clinton Administration and the advent of the war on terror since the presidential administration of George W. Bush, civil-military relations appears to have been shaped by the politics of budgeting as well as asymmetrical warfare that has accompanied the fight against terrorism (Nix 2012; Owens 2006; Sulmasy and Yoo 2007).

Feaver (1996) disagrees with the Huntington approach to theorizing civil-military relations. Huntington's approach to civil-military relations is based on realism, one of the prevailing theories of international relations (Feaver 1996). Instead, a more optimal approach, according to Feaver's argument, is to view the military—and the political actors charged with providing oversight to the military—as rational actors. In a subsequent work, Feaver (1998) outlines the conditions in which civilian principals are likely to monitor the military and when shirking is likely to occur by the latter. In clarifying the concepts of working and shirking, Feaver (1998) defines shirking as any behavior taken by the military that connotes incompetence, insolence, or implementing orders of political principals in a way that undermines the ability of the principals to make future decisions. He also proposes that monitoring by the principal goes hand in hand, with shirking tendencies because unless the actions of agents are monitored by principals, shirking is of no consequence and therefore irrelevant (Feaver 1998). Moreover, the more likely the military's actions are monitored by political superiors, the more likely shirking behavior will be detected.

Justification for Principal-Agent Theoretical Approach

The major contention of this essay is that although the principal-agent theory has rarely been used to frame the study of civil military relations and civilian control of the military, it should be. With the exception of Feaver (1998), the majority of analysis on civil-military relations and civilian control of the military takes a realist approach. It is time to bring civil-military relations into discussions of executive branch control of bureaucratic agencies using principal-agent theory as the major paradigm for these discussions.

Based on the analysis of the extant work on civil-military relations and the tradition of civilian control of the military, the ability on the part of political institutions to control and influence the actions of the military have been most readily apparent in situations and circumstances that seem to have a recurring theme. The first common denominator on potential conflicts between principals and agent in our study is militarized conflict. Whether the conflict was the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the first Gulf War—operationally named Operation Desert Shield—or the current war on terror, militarized conflict since the middle of the twentieth century appears to always have been attended by confrontation and disagreement between principal and agent over the conduct of the war.

The second theme that seems to be a recurring pattern in the erosion of civil-military relations is disagreement on policies directly affecting military personnel, or changes to established policies perceived by soldiers to have a deleterious effect on their well-being. Clinton's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" is the most glaring, but not the only example of this occurrence. Recent proposals to change the military's retirement system has been vociferously opposed by military brass and has the potential to widen the rift between elected politicians and the military they are constitutionally charged to direct and provide

oversight (Kastenberg 2013). George H.W. Bush's proposal to reduce the size of the military following the end of the Cold War was met with disapproval by the military as well.

These recurring themes, while not directly lending themselves to the argument that the party identity of the occupant of the White House is a cause for shirking by the military, does, however, bode well for analysis of the question through the lens of principal-agent theory. The assumptions of the theory have been verified in political science research on the nature of American political institutions (Worsham, Marc and Ringquist 1997; Wood and Waterman 1991; Moe 1985; Calvert et al. 1989), and therefore seems to be but a leap, conceptually speaking, to apply these lessons to the ability of Congress and the presidency, as political institutions to control and influence the military and to assess the circumstances when its authority is challenged or undermined. The specific incidents that have been used as anecdotes to describe the violations of established civil-military protocol can be operationally defined as shirking.

In making the leap to the party label of the president being a potential factor in predicting shirking tendencies, it should be pointed out that civil-military relations appear to be more tenuous when a Democratic president occupies the White House. If one were to review civil-military relations during the decades from 1950—when Democratic President Harry Truman relieved General Douglass MacArthur of his command in Korea—through the 1990s during the presidency of Bill Clinton, this most certainly seems to be the case. An assumption that undergirds principal-agent theory is that party control of the executive branch matters when considering principal-agent relationships. The close monitoring of the FTC, that eventually resulted in the commission experiencing a budget cut in 1979 can best be explained by partisan and ideological changes in the composition of the congressional subcommittee responsible for providing oversight to the FTC (Calvert and Weingast 1982). This is perhaps the strongest argument that the party label of principal matters and is likely to lead to increased levels of monitoring by principals. Because military tradition and culture is inherently conservative and the political ideology of the officer corps tends towards conservatism, more so than it does liberalism, it is easy to see why civil-military relations might be especially tenuous when a Democrat is Commander-in-Chief (Ricks 1997; 22-23). The most recent anecdote that supports the rationale that partisanship should be included in models that analyze civil-military relations in the United States as principal-agent relationship is the resignation of General Stanley McChrystal because of unflattering comments he made about Vice President Joseph Biden.

If one were to use partisan control of the White House as a research baseline, the literature on civil-military relations contains subtle clues as to how to best empirically test these assumptions. A cross-sectional research design might be used to determine if presidential ideology is an appropriate predictor of military shirking. Officers at the pay grade of O-7 and above who have resigned or retired from the Army, Navy, or Marine Corps between 1972 and 2000 could be identified and used as a measure of the military's officer elite. Retired officers are included in the analysis because they wait until after they are out of active duty status to give their opinions about the military or government policy that may have adversely affected their service. There have been previous incidents where retired colonels and generals waited until they were in retirement to criticize their civilian superiors.

David Hackworth (1989) is an example of an officer whose disillusionment with the direction the Johnson Administration was taking in Vietnam resulted in a memoir in which he chronicled his discontent and disdain for his former political superiors. If viewed as an attempt to undermine the ability of civilian principals to make future decisions,

Hackworth's work (1989) could qualify as shirking behavior. Moreover, Hackworth also suggests that while he always followed orders, in some cases to his discontent, he followed them in a way that would result in mission accomplishment—that met his satisfaction as required of a professional soldier. Referring again to Feaver (1998), this could qualify as shirking:

The agent is said to shirk when the military, whether through laziness, insolence, or preventable incompetence, does not do what the civilian has requested, or not in the way the civilian wanted, or in a way so as to undermine the ability of the civilian to make future decisions (1998 409-410).

Thus, any time a general publishes a book or is quoted in the press in a way that undermines authority; it can be operationally defined as shirking. A content analysis of national media for comments that could be considered negative or hostile to presidential policies would enable one to make a comparison of comments that could be construed as undermining the president's policy objectives.

Thus, comments such as those by General Boykin equating the religion of Islam to idolatry could be counted as a shirking incident. After the articles have been analyzed for their negative or injurious content, a comparison could be made between comments made by generals and admirals during Democratic and Republican presidential administrations, during the time period specified above to determine if such comments are more likely to occur under a Democratic or Republican presidency.

Thompson (1985) proposes a solution available to public servants who become disillusioned with policies that provide another possible method of operationalizing shirking tendencies—resignations. Resignation rates of generals and colonels, especially generals occupying positions of political significance would undoubtedly undermine the President's policy agenda. One could identify the number of officers at the pay grade of O-7 and above who resigned, were relieved of command or retired during the specified time period and make comparisons between presidential administrations. One might expect a higher rate of resignations and retirements of senior officers during the administrations of moderate Democratic presidents. Referring again to relations between Colin Powell and Clinton over their disagreement on Clinton's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy," it is questionable as to whether Powell would have announced his retirement in 1993 had George H.W. Bush not lost the 1992 presidential election. It seems likely that Bush's reelection in 1992 would not have led to Powell's retirement from the military. Statistical analysis could be undertaken to analyze rates of retirements and resignation occurring during the administrations of two liberal presidents, Lyndon Johnson and Bill Clinton, and two conservative presidents, Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan. Results from this analysis could be used to make more concrete inferences about the likelihood of Powell's retirement from military service under Clinton's presidency, versus whether he would have stepped down had Bush senior retained the presidency.

Summary and Conclusion

The primary purpose of this work was to strengthen the argument for making principal-agent theory the paradigm for analyzing civil-military relations and the tradition of civilian control of the military. Furthermore, this work argues for examining the role that the party identity of the occupant of the White House in patterns of civil-military relations. My contention is that monitoring and shirking is more likely to occur when a Democrat occupies the White House.

The shortcomings of this work—to be improved upon in future research—are the lack of testable hypotheses. It was not the intent of this work to present concrete operational definitions that lend themselves to testable hypotheses, but rather to simply propose a theoretical proposition. Many anecdotal references were presented to augment the literature review and theoretical proposals, but it is understood that until theories are empirically verified, it is difficult to validate them.

Future efforts to define monitoring and shirking behavior in a manner that is measureable and concrete might include the number of vacancies in top civilian posts in the Department of Defense, perceived foreign policy experience of presidents, prior to taking office—as measured by foreign policy experience on Senate or Congressional committees, positions held in defense establishment bureaucracies—i.e., Vice President Dick Cheney’s previous experience as Secretary of Defense—and the political party affiliation of presidents. As an independent variable, the president’s party affiliation can be compared to a range of monitoring and shirking behaviors such as changes in military budgets, cuts or increases in military personnel, and actions that high level generals take—media statements, publication of memoirs, writing opposite the editorial page (op-ed) articles in major newspapers, among others—to try to influence military policies like “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” and missions imposed on the military (Feaver 1998).

Patterns of civil-military relations have evolved and changed throughout American history, starting with George Washington’s submission to civilian authority after the American War for Independence. Since then, the tradition of civilian control of the military has been upheld although at times tested. Every time the tradition has been tested, the end result has been the validation of the tradition. The Korean War, the Vietnam War, the First Gulf War, and the Second Gulf War all saw variations in patterns of civil-military relations and potential—as well as real—threats to the tradition of civilian control of the military. Principal-agent theory can be a fruitful lens from which to analyze and examine these patterns. As the war on terror trudges on in its second decade, the principal-agent theory, more than a realist approach to studying civil-military relations in the United States, can show that that the United States military is amenable to analysis that purports to explain the dynamics of executive-bureaucratic relationships.

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