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Good for the Military - Bad for the Nation?

George Fust | 08 August 2019

The purpose of this article is to consider the possibility that we are moving toward a world of "garrison states"-a world in which the specialists on violence are the most powerful group in society. From this point of view the trend of our time is away from the dominance of the specialist on bargaining, who is the businessman, and toward the supremacy of the soldier. We may distinguish transitional forms, such as the party propaganda state, where the dominant figure is the propagandist, and the party bureaucratic state, in which the organization men of the party make the vital decisions. There are mixed forms in which predominance is shared by the monopolists of party and market power.

Written by Harold Lasswell in 1941, the above paragraph served as an introduction to his paper titled "[The Garrison State](#)." Has the US become such a state? Has Lasswell's prediction finally become reality? Are the conditions now set for the United States on this irreversible course? Has an overreliance on the military as a one-size-fits-all solution become so engrained that we no longer consider alternatives? Are domestic politics so intertwined with foreign affairs that the citizenry has no choice but to accept veterans to fill the ranks of the executive branch? Is there hope for the future? Can we rebalance the general orientation of our government? The outcome to all these questions can be arrived at in a favorable way if our military continues to embrace the [Huntingtonian](#) notion of objective control. If professionalism continues to guide the actions of our military's senior leaders and those who serve in decision making bodies such as the National Security Council, there is hope for a reversal in what Lasswell describes as a "picture of the probable."

There is no shortage of analysis and research available to demonstrate the increasing number of cabinet and senior administration officials with prior military service being appointed to serve. The recent [elevation of Mark Esper](#) from Army Secretary to Secretary of Defense is just one prominent example. He joins his USMA 1986 classmate Michael Pompeo, the Secretary of State, as one of six veterans serving in President Trump's Cabinet. Despite what the [Brookings Institute](#) describes as "serial turnover" in the Trump administration, [veterans are continually selected](#) to fill key billets. Case in point: Mattis, Kelley, McMaster, Flynn. The critique of the "[militarization of foreign policy](#)" and the administration doesn't end at the cabinet level. In Jim Golby's recent [article](#), he highlights "Mattis's choice to delegate responsibilities to uniformed military leaders, rather than empowering the civilian officials that remained in the Pentagon." The impact of which caused the balance of power to shift towards the military. Additionally, there is an increasing trend for active and retired military to have a sizeable representation on the National Security Council. One insider gave an estimate of around 30%. Lasswell argues when the Defense establishment is "filled with active or retired military, there is a profound impact on its general orientation." Military service has a way of influencing one's perspective.

The evidence proves an increasing trend for the executive branch to be staffed by veterans or active duty service members. Contrary to this, the legislative branch has "[seen a steady decline of Veterans in congress since the mid-1970s](#)." If you extend that back to WWII the [trend in the macro](#) is also downward. Despite record numbers of veterans running for Congress, why is the electorate [refusing them office](#)? Voting is based on individual preferences and is thus difficult to determine in the aggregate, yet the effect is a counter-balance to the executive branch regarding

military representation. Is this enough to prevent Lasswell's "Garrison State"? Hardly. Lasswell explains:

"Decisions will be more dictatorial than democratic, and institutional practices long connected with modern democracy will disappear... Rival political parties will be suppressed, either by the monopolization of legality in one political party (more properly called a political "order") or by the abolition of all political parties. The ruling group will exercise a monopoly of opinion in public, thus abolishing the free communication of fact and interpretation."

Numerous contemporary examples can be leveraged as evidence to support this theory. For example, the recent partisan gerrymandering [decision by the Supreme Court](#) solidifies the power of one party, thus suppressing the party not in control. Additionally, society's skepticism of facts and the use of the term "[fake news](#)" to prevent discussion lends support to Lasswell's criteria.

What then is the result if we are trending towards a garrison state? Does foreign policy subsequently interpret everything as a nail? We only have one option with nails, use the hammer. Recent [rhetoric](#) from the executive branch towards Iran and North Korea is evidence of the reliance on military options first. Diplomacy and sanctions seem to be back-up options when the threatened country refuses to back down.

Admittedly, these examples and loose academic rigor are not strong enough to decisively prove the garrison state has been achieved. However, this should not preclude us from having a conversation about the impact of the increased military voice in policy decisions. Has the likelihood of war increased? Maybe. But then maybe not. The two individuals now tasked with leading our Nation's hard and soft power apparatuses are both graduates of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. It was there they were indoctrinated with Duty, Honor, Country. During this formative period, they learned to place the country above all else. Let us hope the lessons stuck. Let us trust that those active duty and veterans who populate the hierarchy of government return to our nation's founding principles when creating and executing policy.

U.S. history is replete with moments of crises where skeptics have sounded alarm bells. In 1941 Harold Lasswell identified a phenomenon occurring in foreign governments and sought to develop a model to explain it. The United States does not meet the criteria of a garrison state as he outlined. Our nation's long standing civil-military relationships are strong. The rule of democracy is still intact. Voter preference is still the outcome. We must however remain vigilant as citizens and servicemembers. We must understand our roles and fulfill them accordingly.