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Civ-mil in Danger? Blame the pundits, not the academies.

By [George Fust](#) | 06 August 2019

I teach civil-military relations at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. While searching for readings for an elective course taught in the spring semester, I came across a 2010 [article](#) written in the L.A. Times, “An increasingly politicized military.” One passage stood out:

“By all accounts, the curricula of the service academies and the war colleges give remarkably little attention to the central importance of civilian control. They do not systematically expose up-and-coming officers to intensive case studies and simulations designed to give them a sense of the principle’s real-world implications.”

So where are we now? Nearly a decade later, those cadets have graduated and are now mid-career officers. Do civilians have less control over the military as a result of the claim that the military received poor instruction on proper civ-mil relations? Can curriculum “fix” broken civil-military relations? Curriculum can inform and inspire but it is not the keeper of the culture. The academies, and the military itself, have developed a unique conception of professionalism. The belief in service and placing the country above one’s own need reinforces healthy civil-military relations. Those who join the military’s ranks don’t require academic literature and theory to understand their role in the system. As evidence, the majority of officers who commission into the military ([around 80%](#)) do so through R.O.T.C. This commissioning source does not have any curricula on the importance of civilian control and yet, the system works.

To an outside observer seeking to determine a cause for weakened civil control, the academies are a logical starting point. To an insider, it is misguided. The halls of the academy are lined with portraits of civilian leaders. Congressmen and other officials are routinely invited as guests of honor. The history of famous generals is kept alive at the academies. This includes the knowledge and circumstances of incidences of military insubordination. A discussion of MacArthur always includes the reasons he was fired by President Truman. Bring up General Pershing and a cadet will know why he overstepped his role as a military leader at the end of WWI. General Colin Powell can also be invoked with a conversation about the inappropriate political nature of the Powell Doctrine sure to follow. Say something about General Stanley McChrystal and you will surely get reverence as a response. However, you will also get regret at his violation of healthy civil-military practice.

In all these examples, cadets at the academy regret that the incident occurred. They are angered that a military leader would so blatantly violate civil-military norms. The academies meet the discussion of civilian control head on. Hallway conversations surrounding a retired general’s participation in politics is a routine occurrence. Cadets grapple with the implications of these actions. It only takes a year or two for most to understand the importance of a non-partisan military. And this happens *before* their formal curriculum on civil-military relations.

By the time I receive second-year cadets most of them already know the expected answer for proper civil-military relations. They often don’t know why they believe what they do, but that’s how indoctrination works. It is difficult during class discussions to have cadets play devil’s advocate and argue against military subordination. Afterall, why should the guys with the all the guns obey those privileged politicians without any? Because, the cadets argue, “that’s how it is in America.” Service academy curricula on civil-military relations thus has the effect of

providing evidence to support an argument the cadets already knew to be true. They can speak intelligently about [Huntington](#), and [Feaver](#), and [Washington's Newburgh Address](#) but their true belief and understanding comes from the engrained military culture that surrounds them. The pressure to conform is constant. This includes the idea that civilians are in control.

The [author](#) of the 2010 L.A. Times article may have been correct that the curricula were lacking (although this too is a stretch), but they missed the point. This is not a civil-military relations issue. It is a political one. The pundits, not the military are to blame.

In December of last year, my colleague, [Mike Robinson](#) published an [article](#) titled “What the Mattis resignation tells us about how Trump is damaging the military’s credibility.” He suggests “how difficult it is to keep the military looking nonpartisan in the age of ‘Trump’s generals.’” Mike’s framework for the discussion, like the L.A. Times article, is misdirected. He applies a civil-military relations lens when the discussion has always been a political one. The constant suggestion that any action involving a retired general is somehow related to civil-military relations is the cause of erosion in the relationship. Anyone in the orbit of the inner circles of D.C. is inherently political, especially those appointed to senior positions in the administration. This most definitely includes retired military generals.

The American public’s default is to associate anything in Washington D.C. (and certainly the upper echelons of the Administration) as political, not military. Retired general officers who have recently been in the spotlight, such as Kelly, Mattis, or Flynn, were acting in political positions within the Executive Branch. Even H.R. McMaster who served as the National Security Advisor while on active duty was serving in a political advisor role. His actions while in this position did not represent the military writ large. Pundits who decried the cadre of generals surrounding the President as a threat to civil-military relations created an issue where there was none. Again, the average American citizen does not associate political appointees’ actions as representative of the military until they are told to.

The resignations of “Trump’s generals” were subsequently personal decisions, not military ones. Secretary Mattis fundamentally disagreed with the policy outlined by his boss and thus resigned. His resignation [letter](#) outlines his policy disagreement and in no way should be attributed to the military.

Ultimately, the President is the decider on policy. He is the elected representative of the American people. The [Constitution](#) grants him the roles of both head of state and commander in chief. His role is therefore to make foreign policy choices and to direct strategy. Those in his cabinet who disagree with his directives or vision have the option of resigning. If U.S. policy is wrong, the blame inherently lies with the American people. They get to decide at a future election how to proceed. The military however, does not have the right to resign. At present, there is no evidence to suggest the military has refused to comply with an order. Recent examples, such as the [General McChrystal case](#) highlighted in the 2010 article, demonstrate the health of the relationship, not its weakness. The U.S. version of civil-military relations is still intact. The only thing the military is partisan about is national security. Their bias lies in keeping America safe. The actions of individuals should not represent the institution as a whole.

If an increasing politicization of the military is occurring, the academies are not to blame. The academies are more representative of the population than ever before. The most recent graduating class is the [most diverse](#) in the history of the academy. [Research](#) published in *Armed*

Forces and Society in 2012 demonstrates “a relatively disperse distribution of ideological leanings among its members, which if anything, can be characterized as moderate, if not somewhat liberal, in nature.” This evidence runs counter to the notion that the academies are increasingly becoming affiliated with one political party or are encouraging partisanship as suggested in the 2010 L.A. Times article.

I teach civil-military relations at the U.S. Military Academy. Every cadet is required, without exception, to take SS202: American Politics. During this course, multiple lessons are dedicated exclusively to ensuring future military officers understand the central importance of civilian control. They are tested on their ability to demonstrate an understanding of U.S. civil-military theory. But it doesn't end there. Cadets are required to learn and explain the political activities they are authorized or prohibited from performing according to [Army Regulations](#). This is in alignment with one of the five primary outcomes of the American Politics Program in the Department of Social Sciences that it will educate, train, and inspire cadets to: “characterize U.S. civil-military relations by emphasizing the roles, responsibilities, and culture of the military profession.” Elsewhere at the Academy, cadets will also interact with civil-military relations. The history department will reinforce historical vignettes, the legal studies department will offer legal implications, the Modern War Institute will host panels and speakers on the subject. All of these inputs help reinforce the cultural identity that the military is subordinate to civilian control.

The academies are not to blame for the politicization of the military. Pundits and politicians are. If you still doubt this, come sit on my class in the spring. I'm confident America's future officers will convince you otherwise.