



KNOWING WHEN TO SALUTE

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The other morning, about 100 colonels and a handful of civilians assembled for our annual Army War College staff and faculty photo. We were arranged on the outdoor steps of one of the many historic buildings on post and faced the flagpole which dominates the entire campus. Unlike other Army posts, the flag at the Army War College is illuminated day and night and flown continuously—eliminating the need for junior soldiers (who are rare at the Army War College) to raise and lower the flag during daily reveille and retreat ceremonies.

As the photographer gave final positioning instructions to the crowd, the loud notes of a bugle call suddenly pierced the air. The Army War College, like other military bases, regulates the rhythm of military life with recorded bugle calls. In this case, the music was *Retreat* which signals the end of the official day. This was odd because it was not even eight o'clock in the morning. The automated bugle call system had been acting erratically the previous week, so this appeared to be another malfunction. The *Retreat* bugle call was followed immediately by *To the Colors* which is sounded when the flag is lowered at the end of the day.

At this point, something interesting happened. Someone near the foot of the steps called the group to attention. The chit-chat ceased. After a pause, the command, "Present arms!" followed. With that, 100 senior officers raised their arms in a crisp salute. Never mind that the flag at the Army War College is never lowered, or that it was not the end of the day, or even that the automated bugle call system had not been functioning properly for over a week. Instead, we all stood there in an awkward, uncomfortable silence. Admittedly, a few officers did not salute, but not a soul (us included) thought to point out that we were heading down the wrong path. Halfway into the bugle call, the strains of *To the Colors* stopped in mid-note. There was a collective embarrassed chuckle, arms raised in salute were dropped, and we resumed with the photo session.

While many of us would rather forget the entire incident, the episode raises some interesting questions about military culture. Why would so many senior officers silently salute when so many indicators were signaling a flawed decision? Why didn't anyone speak up to challenge the decision or at least inform the group of the relevant facts involved in the situation which may have led to a different judgment?

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There are several aspects of the military culture that can help to explain this tendency towards quiet obedience. First, saluting without questioning exemplifies the military's "Can Do" attitude that can create an optimist out of even the most skeptical naysayer. Many officers recounted that although they knew the many reasons not to salute, there was always the tiniest of chances that there was something they didn't know—maybe that day was different, maybe there were factors involved in the decisionmaking to which they were not privy. In any case, the solution was to salute and make the best of it.

Second, military culture defers to authority. When someone takes charge and gives a command, the natural military reaction is to support the decision. The adage of "Lead, follow, or get out of the way!" leaves little room for discussion or debate on the soundness of the decision. The military adores decisiveness, so the focus is on executing, not on consensus building.

Consequently, the instinctive military response to a decision—even when there is doubt about the fidelity of that decision—is not to publicly discuss the merits of the decision, but to defer to authority, salute, and then make the best of the situation. Of course, senior officer reticence in the midst of questionable decisionmaking is not isolated to photo sessions at the Army War College.

Last April, a handful of recently retired Army and Marine generals created a stir when they publicly criticized the nation's approach to the war in Iraq. Although their criticism of the Secretary of Defense and his war strategies garnered most of the public's attention, it was noteworthy that part of the generals' message was to urge senior military leaders still on active duty to speak up. For example, retired Marine Lieutenant General Greg Newbold stated:

I offer a challenge to those still in uniform: a leader's responsibility is to give voice to those who can't—or don't have the opportunity to—speak . . . It is time for senior military leaders to discard caution in expressing their views and ensure that the President hears them clearly.¹

Retired Army Major General John Batiste echoed the call and said, "I think that the principles of war are fundamental, and we violate those at our own peril. And military leaders of all ranks, particularly the senior military, have an obligation in a democracy to say something about it."²

The irony of generals safely ensconced in retirement calling for active duty peers to speak up highlights the degree to which military officers in general—and general officers in particular—have reservations about speaking their minds about questionable decisionmaking. Cynics are quick to claim that the cause of this reluctance is rampant careerism. According to this line of thinking, the senior officer ranks are full of status conscious, prima donnas who will succumb to anything to retain their stars. While the rarefied air of the flag officer culture can be intoxicating and subtle pressure from friends and family to get just one more star is palpable for many up-and-coming two- and even three-star generals, there are too many other general officers with nothing to

lose in the twilight of already very successful careers to make careerism the main reason for why senior leaders are reluctant to publicly debate policy.

Another reason often offered for senior military leaders remaining silent is that the former Secretary of Defense, purposefully or not, created a compliant, acquiescent general officers corps. Proponents of this perspective claim that the Secretary suppressed candor within senior officer ranks through personal involvement in approving flag-level personnel actions and perceived dismissive treatment of officers who contradicted OSD positions, such as General Eric Shinseki. With over 300 general officers in the Army alone, however, one could question whether the claimed chilling effect would have pervaded the entire general officer corps.

One often hears another reason for senior officers not providing challenging advice to civilian leadership. Traditionally, senior officers have felt it necessary to distance themselves from politics. They offer two reasons for that belief: (1) the military must remain above politics if it is to retain its position of prestige within the larger society, and (2) the U.S. armed forces must be able to equally support the policies of any administration, regardless of political party. Ironically, the first reason proceeds from the assumption that politics—the life blood of a liberal democracy—is something bad, or at least beneath the dignity of a professional soldier, and is to be eschewed. The second reason is simply non sequitur. The U.S. armed forces serve the politics of the administration in office. Presidential nomination and Senate confirmation of senior military officers are political acts. Senior officer participation in policy formulation is a political act. And, when a senior officer engages the public through the media to support and reinforce a policy position of an administration, it is inherently a political act.

Instead of careerism, pathological compliance, or apolitical notions being the root of senior officer reluctance to speak up, the most likely reasons are the same as those that compelled 100 Army War College colonels to salute against their better judgment—a prevalent “Can Do” attitude and an enduring deference to authority. At the strategic levels of the military, however, the deference to authority shifts from yielding to someone who takes charge to a deeply rooted sense of loyalty that encourages acquiescing to civilian authorities appointed over the military.

The unquestioned acceptance of the concept of civilian control of the military develops early in officers’ careers. As cadets, they are taught that military professionals are obligated to render their expert opinion to their civilian overseers. After their expert advice has been given, however, officers are socialized to believe that they are bound by oath to execute legal civilian decisions as effectively as possible or they must request relief from their duties, or leave the service entirely, either by resignation or retirement.

Interestingly, because most officers never come into contact with an appointed civilian superior and instead interact with a military chain of command far removed from the policy debate, the concept of civilian control becomes an abstract academic ideal instead of a practical professional reality. Case studies of near-mythical characters such as General Douglas MacArthur or General George C. Marshall clashing with presidential policies reinforce the belief that civilian control of the military is about a

senior officer's choice between obedience or falling on one's sword through resigning or retirement.

In reality, the choice is moot. For general officers, resigning involves forfeiting everything important to a soldier—rank, military benefits, retired pay, and most importantly, membership in the profession. Resigning is such a drastic action that it has been over 40 years since a general officer resigned from the Army (and he later requested reinstatement). Retirement, on the other hand, is inevitable and ubiquitous in the senior ranks. Anyone serving at least 20 years eventually retires.

As a result, when confronted with flawed policy formulation, there is a tendency to view civilian control over the military as three very simple options: (1) silently execute the policy, (2) resign—which has not happened in recent history, or (3) retire—which everyone does eventually anyway. The romanticized notion of falling on your sword is replaced by the harsh reality that old soldiers don't die; they really do just fade away (although some may hope to reappear in retired status as "talking heads"). If resignation is not a viable option, except perhaps in the most extraordinary circumstances, and simple retirement is relatively ineffectual, what can senior officers do to ensure they provide their best military advice effectively?

With a strong "Can Do" spirit and a well-engrained, albeit simplistic, notion of civilian control over the military, it is not surprising that senior leaders of the military profession are disinclined to share their views publicly. And yet, the military profession shirks its responsibility to the nation by claiming that its only obligation is to render military advice when requested and otherwise execute what it knows to be flawed policy. Surely the obligation to provide military advice to civilian authorities logically implies the obligation to do so effectively.

The solution is not to disregard the directives of the civilian authorities. The military profession will always execute, in the most effective manner possible, when the order is given. The solution rests in the realization that alternatives exist beyond acquiescence, resignation, or retirement. Figure 1 illustrates some of the options available to senior military leaders when confronted with policy formulation that, in their professional opinion, they believe is flawed. The vertical axis is the degree to which the civilian authorities resist military advice. The horizontal axis addresses the extent of the threat to national security involved in the policy.

Of course, the determination of the degree of resistance to military advice and the extent that the policy in question will threaten national security is subjective. The intent of the figure is not to precisely prescribe definitive actions in assorted situations. The figure is intended to merely introduce options for senior officers other than just executing, resigning, or retiring when confronted with bad policy formulation. Only the conscience of a senior officer will determine the appropriate action. It should also be noted that the options presented are intended to be considered *before* a directive is issued. Once a decision is reached, senior officers—as with all officers—are obligated to execute. That is not to say, however, that senior officers may not pursue one or more of the options to seek modification of the decision, in light of unfolding events.

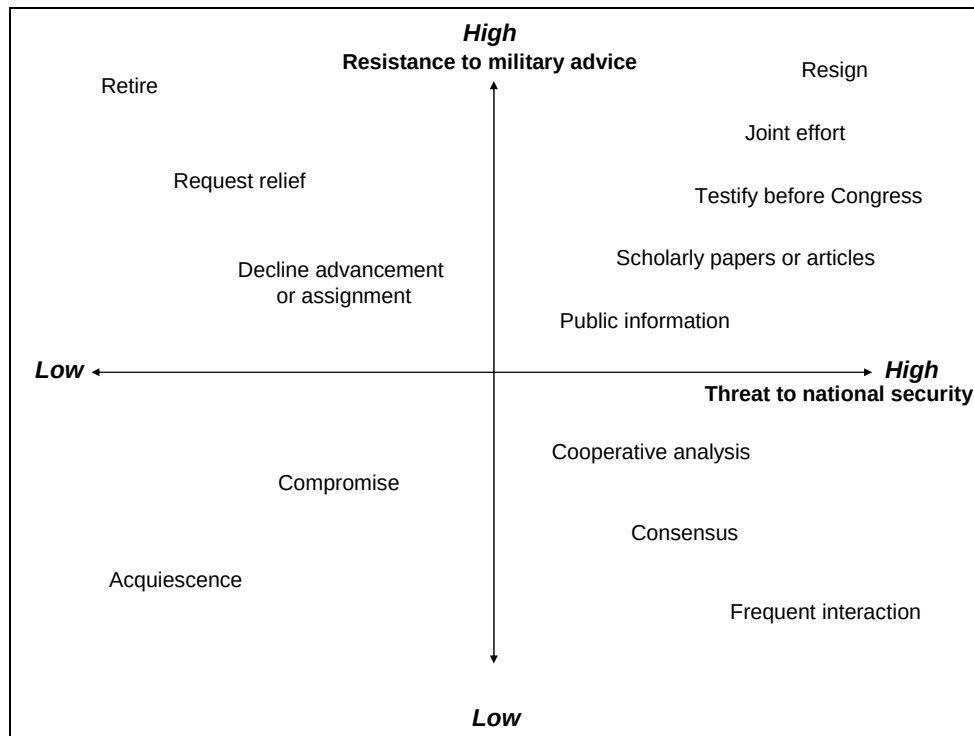


Figure 1.

The bottom quadrants represent conflict between the military senior leaders and their civilian overseers when resistance to military advice is usually minimal. In the lower left quadrant, the flawed policy will result in a relatively minor threat to national security and thus the available options include quietly acquiescing to the policy or perhaps attempting to gain a compromise. In the lower right quadrant, because policy implications will have a greater impact on national security, the role of the senior military leader is to continue educating the civilian appointees through interactive decisionmaking.

The upper quadrants represent a civil-military relationship characterized by frequent resistance to military advice. In the upper left quadrant, the flawed policy will have minor impact on national security. In that case, options for senior leaders who realize that their military advice will be unheeded include requesting reassignment or retiring. The message sent with these options is essentially, "I don't want to be a part of this decision."

The upper right quadrant concerns those rare occasions when military advice is being disregarded, and the stakes for national security are extreme. Note that retiring should not be an option when the threat to national security is high. Retiring removes the officer from a position of influence during a critical time to the nation. It may be personally satisfying to leave the distasteful aspects of policy battle, but it ignores a responsibility to the nation and the profession to do what is right.

Together, the four quadrants serve to elevate the level of discussion on the topic of civilian control of the armed forces beyond the simplistic notions of remaining above

politics and “saluting and executing” once the decision is made. As an area of inquiry, civilian control is nested within a larger body of civil-military relations. Unfortunately, the civil-military relations national dialogue has been largely silent over the past half century. Much has changed since Samuel Huntington penned *The Soldier and the State* in 1957. Similarly, Morris Janowitz’ *The Professional Soldier* is a scant 3 years younger. Civilian control of the military and other equally important civil-military relations issues cry out for in-depth, contemporary analysis. The admittedly provocative points advanced in this paper are offered in the hope of beginning a new dialogue on those issues.

Finally, it is easy for those inside and outside of the profession of arms to blame the generals for not questioning what they should have realized were bad policy decisions. The generals should shoulder much of the responsibility, but 100 Army War College colonels saluting a flag against their better judgment suggests that the crux of the issue lies in the culture that surrounds all the ranks in the military – not just the generals.

ENDNOTES

1. Lieutenant General Greg Newbold, USMC Retired, “Why Iraq Was a Mistake,” *Time*, Vol. 167, No. 16, April 17, 2006, p. 42.

2. Major General John Batiste, U.S. Army Retired, as cited in “Generals Speak Out on Iraq,” *The News Hour with Jim Lehrer*, April 13, 2006, available from www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/military/jan-june06/iraq_4-13.html#, accessed on May 21, 2007.

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