

Maintaining Political Neutrality in the Officer Corps

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Introduction

The United States Constitution has stood the test of time as a flexible conceptual framework for governing the country. The document makes demands on its citizens at the same time it guarantees their rights. Some of the demands are not obvious, but implied. For instance, the Constitution does not contain any language mandating political neutrality of the officer corps, but a politically disinterested military is necessary to provide for the common defense. This concept of neutrality took a long time to make its way into the heart of the United States officer corps' value system. Military officers must maintain political neutrality to ensure civilian control of the military, effectiveness of national security policy, and authority of uniformed leadership.

Part I:

History of Political Neutrality as a Military Value

Military officers in early America did not immediately value political neutrality. In fact, the idea got a rather rocky start and took almost a century to take root in American military culture. Early presidents screened officers for their political loyalty prior to granting commissions. In the sharply partisan years soon after the

Revolution and writing of the Constitution, President Jefferson used Army Capt. Merriwether Lewis to ensure other Army officers shared the president's political views.¹ Presidents selected some officers for their agreeable politics because there were other officers actively plotting against the government. From 1800 to 1812, General James Wilkinson was the highest ranking officer in the Army. He received a pension from Spain in exchange for his efforts to undermine the American government by getting the "southwest United States" to secede.² Recognizing the dysfunction of a politically motivated officer corps, President Jefferson took steps to correct the problem. He established the U.S. Military Academy at West Point to professionalize the officer corps and, after time, the emphasis on creating a professional officer corps slowly began to pay dividends.

Sixty years after Jefferson founded West Point, the Civil War provided examples of officers who had clear political ambition and others who did not. The U.S. was hungry for stability after years of bitter war. Many citizens thought the country would be better off abandoning civilian control by any political party and establishing a military dictatorship under the like-minded Major General Joseph Hooker.³ President Lincoln offered Hooker command of

the Union Army with a warning that "Only those generals who gain successes, can set up dictators. What I now ask of you is military success, and I will risk the dictatorship."⁴ Hooker could not win and there was no dictatorship. Conversely, General U.S. Grant coupled military success and deference to his civilian superiors without regard for party affiliation. After a number of battlefield successes, members of both parties wanted Grant as their presidential candidate in 1864. Grant declined. Four years later and after he left the Army, he won the presidency.⁵ After the Civil War and through the beginning of the 20th century, military officers began to internalize political neutrality as a core professional value.

By World War II, officers were largely politically neutral. General George Marshall, like most other officers of his era, did not even vote in elections while he was on active duty. He believed that any participation in politics degraded the value of an officer's professional recommendations to policymakers.⁶ His generation of officers were mostly neutral, but not totally. General MacArthur famously involved himself in politics during the Korean war.⁷ The President eventually and publicly relieved MacArthur for his insubordination, reinforcing the value of officer neutrality.

Roots of Current Movement Towards Politicization

The war in Vietnam and its fallout was the beginning of the current trends in the politicization of the military officer corps. After the war, the two main American political parties themselves both changed. The Democrats "abandoned the military, offering antimilitary rhetoric and espousing reduced defense spending."⁸ Republicans acted to consolidate conservative voters who had previously been loyal Democrat voters. President Nixon brought conservative Southern Democrats into the Republican party by embracing "traditional patriotism and strong national defense."⁹ At the same time that the parties were changing their platforms, the demographics inside the military shifted.

A number of significant events occurred after the war that affected the political sympathies of the officer corps. First, the draft ended. A volunteer force effectively brought two kinds of people into the military: those who looked favorably on military service and those with no other choice.⁹ Second, the way officers earned their commissions changed. More and more officers trained as cadets and midshipmen at the Academies and ROTC programs moved from colleges in the northeast to the south.¹⁰ These

developments both increasingly isolated the officer corps in conservative institutions away from the general public. As the country increasingly espoused liberal ideals, the military became more homogenous and divorced from the society it protected. It also began to play a larger part in American political life.

Changes in law increased the role that military voters had in politics. The passage of the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act of 1973 and its later revision required states to accept absentee ballots for Federal office elections. For military voters this eased participation and they began voting in numbers that exceeded their civilian counterparts by as much as ten percentage points in national elections.¹¹ The Republicans took notice of the new demographics and moved to gain political advantage in the last part of the 20th century.

From 1976 to 2002, the percentage of active duty officers identifying themselves with the Republican party almost doubled from 33 percent to 64 percent.¹² Changes in demographics in the military and in society played a part, but so did Republican strategy. Republicans seized the opportunity to court a solid bloc of conservative and active voters. They sought endorsements from former flag officers in elections. In 2000, eighty-five flag officers

lent their prestige to candidate Bush.¹³ Not to be outdone, Democrats sought their own military endorsements. While the military advocates political neutrality, it is often used by both parties to advance political agendas. In part "politics has been thrust upon soldiers, and not vice versa."¹⁴ In the 2004 presidential election, each party tried to project patriotic support for the troops. With the country at war, the military is again divorced from the society at large. There are serious consequences when the military is not a politically neutral institution.

Part II:

Effects of Politicization

The politicization of the military officer corps could have serious repercussions for the United States. It sets conditions hazardous to civilian control of the military, to the effectiveness of national security policy, and to the authority of uniformed leadership.

Civilian Control of the Military

Civilian control of the military depends on the people's trust of the military and the military's willingness to submit to being controlled. A politically active military operates counter to both ideas and soils

the civil-military relationship. The people must be able to trust the military. All military officers take an oath to protect the U.S. Constitution which codifies civilian control of the military by naming the president as Commander in Chief. The officer corps must stay out of politics because it is the one group in society with the power to physically destroy or coerce the society for which it exists to protect.¹⁵ A politically active military isolates itself from American society to the degree that society sees it as a partisan institution. As Colonel Lance A. Betros wrote:

While most Americans are oblivious to the debate over civil-military relations, they are clear about their distaste for partisan politics. Accordingly, the institutions that received the highest confidence ratings were consistently the most avowedly apolitical; Congress and the Presidency, on the other hand, routinely inhabited the bottom of the list.¹⁶

The military holds very different values from society already. Aggravating the differences through political activity only isolates the military from the trust of those it protects. The military must also avoid political activity which attempts to instill its values in society. In 1998-99, almost 90 percent of elite officers agreed that "the decline of traditional values is contributing to the breakdown of our society," and 75 percent said "civilian society would be better off if it adopted more of the

military's values and customs."¹⁷ A military which believes itself morally superior to the society it serves cannot remain a disinterested executor of security policy. And, if it starts professing to the civilian population how to live better, the result is a militarism similar to that which existed in 20th century France and Germany.¹⁸ Civilian control of the military is an essential aspect of the American Constitution, and politically active officers can affect the civil-military relationship in overstepping their professional norms.

Effectiveness of National Security Policy

Officers are charged with executing the nation's security policies, but politicization can hinder the policies they must implement. Military officers are routinely called on at many levels to provide recommendations and assessments to civilian decision makers. The value of an officer's estimate is decreased if the civilian receiving the input believes the officer has any agenda opposed to the considered policies.¹⁹ The effects of officer bias extends beyond national government and affects the U.S.'s role as a world leader. As servants of the state, the military is obligated to execute violence on its behalf whenever and wherever the state determines

necessary. In the 1990's, the relationship between the military and the administration was notably hostile and untrusting. One result of contention between military officers and President Clinton's administration was that the 1999 Kosovo campaign was misconceived, poorly coordinated, and longer lasting than it should have been. In fact, the "consequences could have undone the NATO alliance, and they certainly stiffened Serbian will, exacerbated divisions within NATO councils," all because of a dysfunctional relationship between the military commanders and civil authorities.²⁰ Such dysfunction is one reason why Jefferson had Capt Lewis vet his officers so many years ago. However, if the civil-military relationship degrades too significantly, presidents again may begin vetting officers for their political views.²¹ The impact of officers' political activity can affect much that happens between the military and external organizations.

Authority of Uniformed Leadership

Military effectiveness is compromised when its leaders do not display political neutrality. Officers are charged with leading the service members assigned under them and it is harder to motivate troops at any level to support a mission which they know their commander does not support.

Political bias can undermine support for “unpopular missions or those in which the U.S. national interests are unclear (such as Bosnia, Somalia, or Haiti, to name just a few deployments Republicans opposed).”²² Political activity among the country’s military officers can have serious negative impacts on the Constitution they swore to support and defend.

Conclusion

The United States’ form of government depends on the political neutrality of its military force. There have been challenges to the idea in the country’s past, but the Constitution has always prevailed. Today, the officer corps is increasingly politically active and it must act to stop the trend. Political activity among officers alienates the military from its people and adversely impacts civilian control of the military and effectiveness of national security policy. Ultimately, an officer corps which fails to remain neutral undermines the system for which it exists to defend.

Word Count: 1868

Notes

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