

The Civil-Military Gap: Why It Exists And What Should Be Done About It

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Title: The Civil-Military Gap: Why It Exists And What Should Be Done About It

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Thesis: A balanced, multi-pronged approach is necessary to mitigate any negative effects of the civil-military gap.

Discussion: There has been a great deal of literature and discussion recently about the civil-military gap and whether it represents a crisis or not. The gap does indeed exist, but it has existed since the creation of the United States and is an inherent result of the difference between the liberal democratic values of society, and the conservative values required for military efficiency. It is also a function of the combination of various factors, many of which have lately served to widen the gap. The fact that it exists is not negative, but it cannot be ignored as simply a fact of life and allowed to fester and widen to the point of dysfunctionality. The Marine Corps recruits from, is supported by, and serves society, so it cannot divorce itself totally from society and proceed along the course it deems best. It also has to deal with other services who recruit from the same society, but indoctrinate their recruits according to their own standards, which results in different service cultures.

Conclusion: The Marine Corps needs a balanced, multi-pronged approach that emphasizes civil-military relations education at all levels. This education needs to focus on the nature of U.S. society, the nature of apolitical service to that society, and the nature of the different service cultures the Marine Corps comes in contact with. The formulation and enactment of this approach is vital in order to successfully navigate today's turbulent times and progress into the future rather than backing in to it and potentially becoming irrelevant.

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Introduction

The founding father's of the United States drafted a constitution for a liberal, democratic society that has flourished for over 200 years. It has in many respects been one of the most successful examples of enlightened governance in history. Any society founded upon such liberal democratic principles can be expected to have those principles become the bedrock values that a nation cherishes. Unfortunately, those values, individualism, equality and the right of self expression, are not necessarily conducive to military success. The requirement to form a defense establishment with a value system that emphasizes obedience, self-sacrifice and devotion to duty, has caused a gap to develop between the military and the society it serves. The width of this gap has fluctuated throughout the years, but it has always been present in some form.¹

During the past decade or so, the gap seems to have become much more pronounced, perhaps due to the amount of time and energy scholars have spent focusing on it. There are many reasons for the perceived widening of the gap, and these will be examined, but the actual width may be narrower than generally portrayed. It has merely been perceived to be wider due to the friction that existed between the military establishment and the Clinton Administration. Under the current administration, there seems to be less friction, but this could change as the transformation process moves forward. Clearly, this lull may only be temporary.

Given the situation indicated, it is imperative that the Marine Corps fully understands the implications of the civil-military gap with regard to its impact at the national level, its impact on the Corps' ability to deal with society as a whole, and lastly the Corps' ability to deal with other services that it comes in contact with during the pursuit of mission accomplishment. The bottom line is that the gap that exists between society and the military is not as serious as some depict, but it requires a balanced, multi-pronged approach by the Marine Corps in order to mitigate any negative effects and prevent it from widening to a point where serious damage can occur.

Liberal versus Conservative Values

To set the groundwork for looking at the implications of the civil-military gap, it is first necessary to look at the difference between liberal and conservative values and why they are important to the study of civil-military relations. As stated above, this nation was founded upon liberal, democratic principles which give primacy to a set of “self-centered” values - independence, individualism, equality, and self-expression.² These values have become even more pronounced in the last few decades as Americans have become more liberal and the moral standards that predominated with society in the past have loosened considerably.³ While this may be a disturbing trend for some, it is also society’s right to determine what values it adheres to or replaces.

While liberal values have proven acceptable with the general population of the United States, in an organization such as the military, they would prove a disaster to efficiency if they predominated. Conservative values that are more “group centered” and focus on loyalty, obedience, discipline, and responsibility are much more conducive to military efficiency since they foster an atmosphere of teamwork and cooperation that is essential for mission accomplishment. This is true for any organization that requires it to function as a team, but the military embodies these conservative values to a greater degree. This is due to its “functional imperative” which is defined as the responsibility for safeguarding the nation from military threats.⁴ When national survival is at stake, organizational efficiency is a vital concern since, “foreign policy is not about the relationship among individuals living under the rule of law, but about the relationship among states and other groups operating in a largely lawless realm.”⁵

Since the establishment of the standing military in the early stages of this nation, the gap between societal and military values has not been much of an issue. The reasons for this are that the military was mainly small and isolated during peace time, and during war, the influx of

citizens into the service was from a generally more conservative society focused on winning the war, then going home. The friction that has led to much of the current literature about the civil-military gap has been due to both a large standing military during peace-time conditions, and the fact that while society is becoming more liberal, the military itself has tended to at least remain, and by some reports, has actually become more conservative.⁶ Since the people recruited to join the military come from society, their more liberal tendencies are coming in with them and this has forced the military to adjust to those tendencies, not always gracefully. These conditions will not only continue, they will gain in strength and must be dealt with effectively in the interest of continued military efficiency.

National Leadership

The relationship that receives the most attention from civil-military relations scholars is that between the military and this nation's political leadership. In a country where the tradition of civilian control predominates through constitutional mandate, this relationship is a key barometer. One of the biggest factors in this relationship is the percent of political leaders with uniformed military experience. It has been well documented that over the past few decades this percentage has been steadily decreasing. The Triangle Institute for Security Studies (TISS) conducted a survey which, amongst other facts, found that the percentage of veterans in the House of Representatives fell from over 75% in 1971, to about 25% in 1999. The numbers for the Senate were about the same.⁷ While in some ways important, in others, it is not as significant as some would like it to seem. It is also not a new phenomena since the actual percentage of veterans has fluctuated considerably over the years. There also happened to be an abnormally large percentage who served in World War II and Korea, as did the largest percentage of our population since the Civil War.⁸

When looking at the experience of political leaders, a pertinent issue to consider is what constitutes “meaningful” military experience for them? Does the fact that many of the “veterans” spent a few years in the military at the lowest enlisted and officer ranks render them a better understanding of national security affairs than those without military experience? A more important set of questions is what experiences have they had in their civilian careers, and what reading and self study have they conducted during their time as national leaders and decision makers. One could certainly make the case that close study and involvement in national security affairs while in a national decision making role may be more important than actual military experience at a previous time.

While the impact of actual military experience may not be as relevant, there is a pattern in U.S. behavior when it comes to a dwindling number of veterans in our national political elite and it has a direct impact on the military. Since 1816, when there have been more veterans amongst the elite, the US has been less likely to initiate the use of force in the international arena.⁹ It has also been demonstrated that political leaders without military experience tend to have a more aggressive view of the utility of military force than military leaders themselves.¹⁰ What these trends point to is an inadequate understanding of the implications and consequences about the use of force amongst those leaders without military experience. It also leads one to conclude that as the percentage of veterans decreases, the importance of military officers advising political leaders increases. This is where the issue becomes challenging for military leaders.

Advisor Role

When approached for advice from civilian political leaders, military officers try to remain apolitical,¹¹ but the line between partisanship and objective advice can be hazy, a danger for military professionals. Increased involvement with political leaders can lead to an increasing

politicization of the officer corps. Such politicization could tend to cause civilian leaders to suspect a military leader's views as biased thereby decreasing the level of trust required for a good working relationship. In addition, the lessening of the percentage of political leaders with military experience has a tended to draw military leaders out of their traditional constitutional role as disinterested professional advisors to civilian authority, and has contributed to turning them into "policy advocates and decision makers"¹²

Several additional factors complicate the advisor/advisee relationship. With the changing of administrations, especially from one party to the other, new political appointees enter their positions with extremely steep learning curves, and in many cases, positions remain unfilled for extended periods. Both of these factors increase the influence of military advisors. This has led to an increased role, not necessarily voluntary, for military officers in policy making which has eroded the traditional understanding of civilian control in some areas since in the situations noted above, it can be seriously questioned whether civilians are really making the decisions.

There is an additional complication. Whereas in the past national leaders had time to formulate strategy and try to make effective decisions, the instantaneous nature of reporting world events today has significantly decreased that vital time window. Less knowledge and experience amongst political leaders may require more time for explanation from military advisors, time that may not necessarily be available. The shortage of time available, coupled with perceptions of increased politicization of the officer corps may lead civilian leaders to suspect the advice rendered at crucial times with potentially disastrous consequences.

Lastly, and potentially most disturbing, when a polling of elite military officers recently revealed that the majority of them believed that due to the low level of military experience amongst political leaders, it was proper for the military to insist rather than advise (or even to advocate in private) on key matters, particularly those involving the use of force,¹³ it is no

wonder that there is a good deal of alarm within some sectors of the civilian community. When the term insist can be defined with words such as “will not take no for an answer,” or “be adamant,” it can easily be perceived as a challenge to civilian control.

Society at Large

The declining percentage of society at large with any military experience has a large impact on the military’s ability to accomplish assigned missions. Though more subtle and slow moving than at the national leadership level, lack of military experience amongst the nation as a whole has led to several trends that have served to widen and solidify the gap between society and the military. These trends fall into several categories, each with their own contribution to the gap and the Marine Corps’ ability to successfully bridge it.

The number of veterans with wartime service has been declining steadily as the World War II – Korea generation literally dies out. This trend will continue since less people overall served in Vietnam, and the Persian Gulf war was fought in the absence of a general draft. These facts have all played a role in the declining veteran population, but there are two other factors that have had an even more serious impact. The first was the transition to the “All Volunteer Force” which has limited the percentage of the population with military experience simply because they were not required to serve. When the draft ended, those volunteering for service largely became those that either found military life appealing or were content with the lower pay offered by the military. “In both cases, the self-selection process encouraged the formation of a force less representative of the society at large.”¹⁴ Those with more liberal tendencies, or who are better off financially, have no incentive to serve. As a matter of fact, it never even occurs to many that the military is an option until a national emergency occurs, or they are directly approached by a recruiter.

The second factor has been the downsizing of the military and the concomitant closing and consolidation of military bases throughout the nation. The downsizing led to the departure of the least socialized members of the force since they were the most willing to leave if given the opportunity. Base closings led to fewer bases at more remote locations which has led to less contact between civilians and military personnel.¹⁵ Combined, these trends have led both to a more conservative force and an even more limited number of Americans that have any first hand experience with the military.¹⁶ To make matters somewhat worse, for those Americans who have no contact with the military, the only image they get comes from either the news media, or Hollywood. While the news media tend to be favorable in their coverage of the military,¹⁷ Popular fiction and film tend to stereotype the military without any sort of uniform effect.¹⁸ Though this is not as bad a situation as some might think, can the military afford to allow their image to be determined solely by the media or Hollywood?

In addition to physical isolation, there is also an increasing trend towards social isolation. More and more, today's recruits, both officer and enlisted, are coming from families that have made the military a career which is resulting in the perception that the military is becoming almost a caste by itself.¹⁹ Another factor in this equation is that the percentage of officers entering the military from service academies has increased from only about 10 percent during the Cold War, to about 25 percent today.²⁰ While not necessarily a negative factor, and still a minority percentage, it represents a contribution to the conservative trend in the services since service academies tend to offer a more conservative education with regard to less emphasis on liberal arts type courses and less exposure to the civilian population in general. This is especially true when compared to the education an ROTC produced officer gets from civilian universities.

On top of the increased social and physical isolation of the military from society, additional factors complicate the picture even further. Whereas before the nation could rely on

citizens who could join during time of war, serve effectively, then get out when the war was over, this is no longer necessarily the case. The higher percentage of technical MOS's, more career-oriented personnel,²¹ and the changing nature of warfare itself as conducted by the US have caused the military to become more of a profession than a temporary patriotic obligation. Increasingly technical MOS's require longer training and longer payback tours to repay the training received. High levels of job satisfaction from better pay and benefits result in more career oriented people staying in for longer periods. These factors will continue to be important as the US military becomes more technically oriented to fight in the information age.

The Effects of Isolation

The increasing physical and social isolation noted above has led to a number of problems that are becoming increasingly difficult to solve. The military recruits from a society that it is perceived to be separated from and that gap is making it harder to acquire quality individuals. The TISS survey noted that the public's respect and admiration for the military is still high, but it no longer translates into a willingness to join the armed forces.²² Once people are recruited into the military, they have a large cultural gap to adjust to which makes assimilation difficult. Correspondingly, military members getting out have an increasingly large cultural gap to adjust to in order to lead a successful civilian life since they are no longer a member of the disciplined and ordered military society they have become accustomed to. Lastly, it is harder to implicitly trust an organization that one has no knowledge, experience, or contact with. The TISS study indicated that society respected and trusted the military to a significant degree, but upon closer examination, it turns out that,

“while much is made of the public's respect for and confidence in the military, this confidence is brittle and shallow, and may not endure. Personal connections to the military among civilians are declining. And because the gap

in opinion tracks closely with the presence or absence of such contacts, support for national defense could diminish in the future.”²³

The Joint Environment

The gap between typical societal values, and the generally more conservative values that predominate in the military have also had an impact on the ability of the services to work together in a joint environment. The widening of the cultural gap between society and the military makes the indoctrination process of each service all the more important since entry level recruits no longer join with the same values they once had. The closer one gets to the firing line in combat, the more imperative it is to inculcate new recruits with the values and traditions that will enable them to succeed on the battlefield. Correspondingly, the further away one gets, the less the need to strongly indoctrinate new recruits. Service culture and the type of combat each service has the prospect of facing determine the nature of their initial indoctrination for new recruits, which in turn results in significantly different service cultures.

The differences in service cultures account for much of the friction that results in the joint environment. One example of this would be whereas the Air Force has the lowest standards for military conduct, and the least demanding combat training overall, the nature of its doctrine and the type of combat the majority of Air Force personnel have the potential to face allows for their training and discipline philosophy to succeed. They are much more technically oriented and therefore, orient their forces on technical, rather than physical solutions to the problems they encounter. It is almost the opposite for the Marine Corps which is more physically oriented due to its tendency to be the first service on the ground in crisis situations. These times tend to be the most austere, support wise, so they are designed to operate and support themselves in an expeditionary environment. Naturally, there are exceptions to these examples, but they serve to

briefly illustrate the fact that different standards and requirements can result in different service cultures.

The point where friction occurs, particularly in expeditionary environments, is that different standards can be perceived as inequality. Different cultures also result in different traits being seen as “important” to either mission accomplishment, or individual career enhancement. Taken together, these factors can interfere with services cooperating in a joint environment without the knowledge, understanding and acceptance of other service cultures.

Potential Solutions

The gap that has received so much attention over the last decade is indeed present, but it is not at crisis proportions as some depict. It is serious and needs attention, but it does not need to be closed completely since that “might create a greater problem – one that the military will look too much like society.”²⁴ The gap does need to be monitored and managed though, because if left to fester and develop along current trends, it will have an increasingly serious impact on the Marine Corps’ ability to achieve its assigned missions.

On the national level, there is not much that can be done about the level of military experience amongst political leaders, but the Marine Corps can ensure that it adequately fulfills its role as **advisors** to them. It must remain as objective and apolitical as possible (like the professional as defined by Huntington in his book *The Soldier and the State*). This tone must be set by senior Marine leaders who should take every opportunity to reinforce the professional military ethic of no open political activity²⁵ and an emphasis on the ideal of apolitical service to the nation.²⁶

The physical attributes of an apolitical policy do not mean that Marines should not be voting since this is a personal choice conducted as a private act. The divide between citizenship and partisanship is crossed when Marines, especially officers, make their views and voting

records public, even if only to subordinates. Examples of this type of conduct would be the expression of derogatory comments towards political leaders, or having a bumper sticker on a personal car which supports one party or candidate over another. This even applies to retired military officers who allow their rank and any reputation they have acquired while on active duty to be used for political endorsements. Despite the fact that they are retired, they still wield considerable influence within the military and their prestige value to a party or politician comes from the active service they performed and the rank they achieved.

The danger of open political activity is that the Marine Corps, or the military in general, can come to be viewed as just another interest group. The party that does not receive their support writes them off as opponents, while the party that receives their support panders to them for their votes. This activity can also cause the military to lose both public and congressional support because of perceived partisan activity.²⁷ Evidence that this is already a problem was seen after the last Presidential election when military absentee ballots were described by the media as “certainly for Governor Bush because the military are predominantly Republican.”²⁸ Granted, the media seldom provides the complete picture of a given situation, but as stated before, when the only contact many people have with the military is through the media, perceptions can become reality for many.

The importance of maintaining an appropriate distance from the political process is amplified in the case of officers in particular since they have an absolute obligation to act responsibly. They are the only ones in society that have the power to physically challenge civilian authority and act in their own self interest. Officers must ensure that they are clearly recognized by all to be acting at the command of society and for its protection. In this day and age, for military officers to be truly effective in their advisory role, it is necessary that they have

some degree of political awareness, but when they lose their self-restraint about both political identification and actual participation in politics, a line has been crossed.²⁹

As advisors to civilian leaders, officers not only need to be careful not to be drawn into the political fray, they must also be better prepared to render quality advice about the issues affecting military efficiency. A specific area where this is particularly important is in dealing with societal changes as they impact the military. Since the requirements of military service cannot be adequately squared with those of society at large without rendering it ineffective, what is needed is “a redefinition of core military virtues, an explicit understanding of how they differ from (and may not necessarily be superior to) those of civil society, and a plan of action to guard them.”³⁰

The Marine Corps will be able to render better advice if it has formulated a strategic approach to its need to be different from society. This strategic approach would entail the listing of changes that should be anticipated, and then placing those changes into one of four categories: 1) those that should be embraced as necessary changes that are inevitable, but do not necessarily detract from the ability to fight and win wars; 2) Those that are inevitable and need to be accommodated despite being less than desirable; 3) Those that should be resisted through the normal channels with an emphasis on the difference between valued traditions and the need to be different from society due to the functional imperative of the military; 4) Those that negatively affect the “need to be different” issues that delineate not only differences from society, but also the Marine Corps’ difference from the other services. These last two items can almost be referred to as “Red-Line” issues that form the bedrock of what are deemed essential to mission accomplishment. The implications and consequences of these types of changes need to be fully explored by both civilian and military officials, in public, before any implementation.³¹ In the

end, since the military salutes and carries out its orders when directed, each category should have detailed plans for implementation of the anticipated changes to minimize any friction.

The Marine Corps must also become better at understanding the nature of American civil-military relations. Understanding the political system and the society it comes from enables the Marine Corps to more effectively provide military advice and protect the country.³² It must also make sure that all members are educated with regard to civil-military relations on an increasing basis from junior to senior. While there currently is an emphasis on civil-military relations at PME schools, the systemic shortcoming is that there are several areas that receive little or no attention. These areas are the differences between advice, advocacy and insistence, the appropriate use of these terms, the evaluation of what exactly constitutes “political” behavior, and lastly, “the special responsibilities of a senior officer in determining and disseminating the norms of proper civil-military relations.”³³ Civil-military relations training with an increased emphasis on the areas noted should become an integral part of the Marine Corps’ training program from entry to general level.

With regard to relating to society, education is the key. The military cannot expect society to change significantly, nor should the military move to conform with societal values inimical to mission accomplishment unless directed to do so. As a service, the Marine Corps needs to reach out to society and attempt to explain its functional imperative and why it needs to be different from the society it serves. The approach could be couched in terms of informing the public as to how their tax dollars are spent. There already exists a cadre of active duty Marines out in the community in the form of Inspector-Instructor staffs who are to a degree performing this function, though nowhere near as programmatic as it might be. They have both the time and the inclination to reach out to society and are seen as much less threatening than recruiters. This approach may even help recruiters by loosening up some of the misperceptions about military

service that exist amongst society. This is important because society supplies both the treasure and personnel and therefore must be convinced the sacrifice is justified. Since the military forms only one leg of the Clausewitzian triad, “without all three legs engaged, the military, the government, and the people, the enterprise cannot stand.”³⁴

Another area that can assist the Marine Corps in improving its understanding of the society it serves would be the formation of a Civil-Military Relations Officer MOS. Officer’s with this MOS would preferably have a Masters degree specializing in civil-military relations from a civilian institution after several years of practical military experience in another MOS. He or she should also have participated in the Year Out program, or a fellowship tour at a civilian strategic think tank, congress, or the National Security Council. Officer’s with this background and experience could be key players on high level staffs, especially in the formulation of strategic plans for dealing with anticipated changes. In a way, it could be treated similar to the Foreign Area Officer program, but would have an internal focus.

In the joint environment, the balanced approach is again the answer. The Marine Corps must not change its standards, but neither should it be expected that the other services will change theirs. The Marine Corps should spend more time educating those Marines that will be going to joint billets about service culture, what to expect, and how it expects them to act (the last is more important with junior Marines). The attitude of mission accomplishment with minimal friction must be inculcated for those going into the joint environment.

Conclusion

The current picture of civil-military relations in the United States is not the crisis that some depict. The military is not usurping civilian control, and society is not so out of touch with international reality that it is demanding the total abolition of the military. Civil-military relations constitute a changing dynamic that evolves over time and reacts to both world and

political changes within the country. It is a relationship that while not a crisis now, requires constant attention to ensure that it does not reach that point. This constant attention can also minimize the inherent friction that exists between a society that, as a whole, glorifies liberal democratic values, and a military that adheres to the conservative values it feels are absolutely necessary for continued efficiency.

The constant attention required can be achieved through a balanced approach emphasizing the following: first, the education of military members in the nuances of civil-military relations rather than strictly the constitutional facts, accompanied by a rededication to the requirements of apolitical military service; next, a more programmatic attempt to stay in touch with society as a whole and provide information to them as to what the Marine Corps is doing and why. In the joint environment, the emphasis should be on the maintenance of Marine Corps standards, while not expecting others to achieve those same standards. There is a mission to accomplish and each service can make a vital contribution despite any perceived lack of military virtue.

Lastly, the United States can be likened to a gigantic machine. It has many parts that function at high rates of speed and perform vital tasks regardless of size or position. In order for those parts to operate continuously at any rate of speed, lubrication is necessary to reduce friction and prevent the machine from freezing up or breaking down. Education oriented at a better understanding of the various parts is the lubrication that is needed. The machine is functioning effectively at the present time, but it was never designed to operate unattended.

Endnotes

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- ⁵ Samuel Huntington quoted by Robert Kaplan in "Looking the World in the Eye: Samuel Huntington," Free Republic, <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/fr/589375/posts>, 1.
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- ³⁴ General Colin Powell, quoted in Steven D. Volkman, Understanding the Dynamics of the Civil-Military Gap, (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2001), 11.

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