

Book Reviews

American Civil-Military Relations: The Soldier and the State in a New Era

Edited by Suzanne C. Nielsen and Don M. Snider
Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009
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Our Army: Soldiers, Politics, and American Civil-Military Relations

By Jason K. Dempsey
Princeton University Press, 2009
266 pp. \$26.95
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REVIEW ESSAY BY JOSEPH J. COLLINS

Civil-Military Relations: Theory and Practice

Civil-military relations are a hardy perennial in the study of politics, international relations, and inter-agency policymaking. In the Clinton era, we worried about a military too big for its

camouflaged britches and a potential “crisis” in civil-military relations. Compounding the strife was statistical proof that the officer corps increasingly self-identified as Republicans. In the post-9/11 era, we worried about an overreticent military leadership whose professional expertise was muffled by civilians, who allegedly micromanaged military plans and operations. Much of the recent analysis reads like a political version of *People* magazine with larger than life admirals and generals—Anthony Zinni, William Fallon, and David Petraeus, for example—jousting with cabinet officers and making “power plays.” Retired officers have created their own controversies, endorsing political candidates and even calling for the resignation of cabinet officers. Often absent from these vivid articles are an analysis of the theoretical foundations of civil-military relations or accurate data on what the military actually thinks and believes. Two new books do a great job in filling in some of those blanks. Both books came from officers associated, as I was years ago, with the Department of Social Sciences at West Point. All three of the authors are from the Military Academy’s “second graduating class,” alumni officers who came back to teach at the Academy and then returned to the Army to reinforce its corps of Soldier-thinkers.

Suzanne Nielsen and Don Snider’s book is an edited volume. Such works are too often uneven and not worth the time or tedium to read. The best edited volumes, however, compound the wisdom of the individual authors and are worth their weight in gold. To get to this stage, the book has to be organized along a clear theme, be an original work, and be well designed, and it has to be tightly edited.

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American Civil-Military Relations: The Soldier and the State in a New Era is such a volume, and it is a highly valuable addition to the theoretical literature on civil-military relations.

The book contains original contributions from experts who attended the West Point Senior Conference in 2007, a *festschrift* on the 50th anniversary of the publication of Samuel Huntington's epic, *The Soldier and the State*. Huntington's classic is best remembered for suggesting that the optimum division of labor is for civilians to make policy and for the admirals and generals to give military advice, avoid politics, and, in return, be accorded professional space in the conduct of tactical and operational affairs. After a few days of discussion and months of subsequent editing, the contributors to this volume—including Columbia's Richard Betts, the University of North Carolina's Richard Kohn, and Duke University's Peter Feaver—had thoroughly analyzed the classical issues, not only critiquing Huntington's basic theory but also bringing the analysis forward to the present day.

New issues are also well covered in this edited volume. Colonel Matthew Moten, USA, of West Point's History Department, wrote an excellent chapter filled with new material on the Shinseki affair, where General Eric Shinseki, the serving Chief of Staff of the Army, was harshly criticized by senior civilians in the Department of Defense for giving an honest answer (which turned out to be presciently correct) to a pointed but fair question about postinvasion Iraq from Senator Carl Levin, now the Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee. Nadia Schadlow, of the Smith-Richardson Foundation, and Colonel Richard Lacquement, USA, of the Army War College faculty, discussed with skill and passion how the Armed Forces should broaden their

view of themselves and include stability operations in their concept of military professional competence. Unfortunately, even this large collection was not able to look at the other side of that coin. While many today accept that stability operations are a part of the military's competence, the importance of the whole-of-government approach was not covered in this volume, which was focused only on the military. Noted historian Williamson Murray made important recommendations for future professional military education, and Colonel Chris Gibson, USA, and Richard Kohn suggested commonsense (but generally conservative) rules for active and retired officers to build trust with their civilian superiors, and vice versa. In the end, the civil-military game and its rules belong to the elected and appointed civilian officials in the chain of command. Professor Kohn laid out the conservative interpretation of civil-military interaction that is also pertinent to civil servants, intelligence professionals, and Foreign Service officers:

Civilians determine the extent of military responsibility and authority and what will be delegated, and even whether to listen or to consult. They are subject only to the limitations they impose, for various reasons, upon themselves; to the legal checks of other branches of government when they disagree; and to the military and political conditions at any given moment. . . . Thus, civilian control means that the elected leadership, and those whom they appoint, have both the right and the authority to be wrong.

In the end, no plan survives contact with the enemy, and no classic work from 1957 could endure for 50 years without serious corrections

and amendments. Each of the authors builds on and rejects aspects of Huntington's original theory. In their excellent conclusion, Don Snider and Suzanne Nielsen summarize nine major conclusions on Huntington's theory. In their words, "The most significant shortcoming of Huntington's construct was its failure to recognize that a separation between political and military affairs is not possible—particularly at the highest levels of policymaking" (p. 291). Politics, policy, and strategy are strands in the same rope. To be immersed in the politics of national life at the highest levels of government, a senior officer cannot be a neutral vessel of knowledge who limits his or her input to strictly military concerns. Nearly 200 years ago, Carl von Clausewitz recognized the same phenomenon. He wrote that the most senior military officers required a "thorough grasp of national policy" and, without losing sight of their professional role as generals, they had to become statesmen. And therein lies the rub, as well as the importance of studying civil-military relations in general and this new book on Huntington's theory in particular.

Lieutenant Colonel Jason Dempsey, USA, adds current data and analysis to Nielsen and Snider's treatment of the basic theory of civil-military relations in his excellent book, *Our Army: Soldiers, Politics, and American Civil-Military Relations*, which focuses on the political and social attitudes and behaviors of officers and enlisted personnel in the U.S. Army. The author not only seeks to understand Soldiers, but he also wants to remind those same Soldiers of the "importance of political neutrality" (p. xv). Dempsey gives us an invaluable insight into the complexities of political attitudes within the officers and enlisted personnel of the entire Active Army. In the process, he demolishes a number of commonly held myths about a monolithic, politically active officer corps. His book

is one of the first to look analytically at the attitudes and behaviors of the enlisted ranks as well as the officer ranks.

Dempsey begins by tracing the history of U.S. civil-military relations and covers George Washington with special attention. General Washington while still in uniform began our tradition of a nonpartisan military and established the principle of subordination to civil authority. Over the years, with some ups and downs, the nonpartisan, apolitical tradition became so strong in the 20th century that many senior officers such as Omar Bradley and George Marshall never even voted. The author describes the breakdown of this apolitical, nonpartisan ethos in the Cold War era, paying particular attention to the period from the Carter presidency to the present. Throughout his excellent volume, almost every observation is backed up by detailed analyses of survey data, some of which Dempsey gathered in the 2004 Citizenship and Service Survey that he himself designed.

Dempsey expertly traces the dominance of Republican Party preference identification in the Army officer corps. Citing various surveys done under the supervision of Duke's Ole Holsti and Peter Feaver, Dempsey chronicles the gradual "Republicanization" of senior officers from 46 percent after the Carter presidency, to 61 percent a decade later, to 67 percent in 1998. (New, less scientific surveys by the *Military Times* suggest that this trend may be changing and that political party preferences among officers are becoming more balanced.) Dempsey's own data partly confirms the Republican leanings of the officer corps, but he points out that enlisted personnel, ignored in most other surveys, have different and more balanced political preferences than their superior officers. On top of that, newly commissioned officers are shown to be politically savvy, more active than their

predecessors, but “almost evenly split” (p. 150) in their political leanings between the parties. In an interesting side note, Dempsey’s surveys showed a majority of cadets enter West Point as self-identified Republicans and that some cadets sensed peer (but not institutional) pressure to identify with the Republican Party.

Political identification, however, is not political participation. Dempsey found that overall, “Members of the army participate in the political process to a lesser degree than their civilian counterparts” (p. 149). Contrary to unscientific declarations in the media, only the officer corps appears “to vote at rates approaching those of their civilian counterparts. Members of the Army are also less likely to display a button, bumper sticker, or sign in support of political campaigns or candidates. . . . Finally, the Army overall appears to donate money at a lower rate than the civilian population” (p. 149). Again, officers were more likely to donate than enlisted personnel or civilians.

Dempsey strongly makes the point that the Army today should serve in the nonpartisan manner exemplified by George Washington. In particular, he decries the activities of retired flag and general officers who, using their military titles, endorse political candidates and make speeches at Presidential conventions. He notes: “At times it seemed as if a virtual arms race had been initiated as both parties sought retired members of the armed forces to sit onstage behind their candidates” (p. 3). These appearances, which are clearly within the civil rights of private citizens, may reflect poorly on the force, sow confusion among its members, and make life more difficult for serving officers who have to deal with insecure civilian superiors.

While the Nielsen and Snider volume tells one how to think about the theory of civil-military relations, Dempsey’s book analyzes the political orientations and behaviors of the people in the Army today. While these two books were markedly different in their subject matter and approaches, they share a number of commonsense recommendations on civil military recommendations. First, the military is a distinct profession with its own areas of expertise. The most senior officers participate in decisionmaking with civilians, who at the limit are superior to even the most senior uniformed personnel. Civilian prerogatives derive from the will of the people and are clearly recorded in the Constitution and various laws. Civil-military discourse is thus characterized by “equal dialogue, unequal authority” (p. 293), as Richard Betts reminded us in the Nielsen-Snider volume. To succeed in the highest councils, the leaders of the Armed Forces must know their subject matter, present their arguments convincingly, and earn the trust of their superiors. To do so, they must be scrupulously nonpartisan in word and action. Anything that casts doubt on the nonpartisanship of our most senior leaders is likely to harm the profession and the Armed Forces.

Potential conflicts between citizenship and service have been a constant in our history. Secretary of War Elihu Root told the officers of the Army War College in 1908 that they should serve in a manner characterized by “self-abnegation.” He enjoined these Army officers to “never forget your duty of coordination with other branches of service” and ended with a thought on the duty of citizenship: “Do not cease to be citizens of the United States. The conditions of army life are such as to narrow your views. Strive to broaden your sympathies by mingling with those outside of the service and learning from them the things they can teach you. As you are good soldiers, be good citizens.” **PRISM**