Review article

American civil–military relations today: the continuing relevance of Samuel P. Huntington's *The soldier and the state*

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The soldier and the state: the theory and politics of civil–military relations. By Samuel P. Huntington. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press / Harvard University Press. 1957. 560pp. Pb.: £24.95. ISBN 978 0 67481 736 4.

Fifty-five years after it was first published, Samuel P. Huntington's *The soldier and the state* remains an essential starting point for serious discussions of American civil–military relations. This is remarkable for two reasons. First, the United States has seen enormous changes in its strategic environment in the past six decades. The country has gone from fearing for its survival during the Cold War to enjoying a concentration of military and economic power arguably unprecedented in human history. Second, the field of civil–military relations has been an active area of research in which political scientists, military sociologists and historians have made important and valuable contributions. However, even as these scholars have critiqued and built upon Huntington's work, they have not transcended it. To this day, a course in civil–military relations would be incomplete if *The soldier and the state* did not appear on the syllabus. It needs to be there not just to enable students to see how the field of civil–military relations has moved on, but also to expose them to concepts that remain foundational.

One of the reasons why *The soldier and the state* has remained a seminal work undoubtedly lies in the boldness and ambition of its author. As Huntington explains in the preface, at the time he was writing there was very little theory to guide the study of civil–military relations. Huntington was at the forefront of the effort to fill this vacuum, bringing rigour to a field in which it was generally lacking and laying out a theoretical framework and formulating concepts that are still useful today.[1] Whether those who later followed in his footsteps agreed with him or disagreed with him, his arguments had to be addressed.

* The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect the position of the United States Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or the Department of Defense.

[1] Peter D. Feaver and Erika Seeler, 'Before and after Huntington: the methodological maturing of civil–military studies', in Suzanne C. Nielsen and Don M. Snider, eds, *American civil–military relations: the soldier and the state in a new era* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), pp. 72–90; David R. Segal and Karin De Angelis, 'Changing conceptions of the military as a profession', in Nielsen and Snider, eds, *American civil–military relations*, pp. 194–212.

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A second reason why Huntington's work continues to resonate is that the urgent policy concern that motivated his study retains relevance. Huntington was worried about whether the United States would be able to create and sustain the strong military institutions it needed during a protracted Cold War struggle. Despite the end of the Cold War, a different manifestation of this concern still exists. The United States did not demobilize after the Cold War as it had after previous conflicts; the US military continues to receive the single largest share of discretionary spending within the federal budget and to play a significant role in US foreign and security policy. While Americans are not as concerned about an existential threat to the survival of the state as they may have been in Huntington's time, tensions created by the need to reconcile a powerful military, democratic political institutions and a liberal polity persist.[2]

This article will argue for the enduring relevance of *The soldier and the state* by briefly revisiting some of its main concepts and showing how they continue to illuminate central concerns of American civil–military relations today. The three concepts to be examined here are the conceptualization of the military as a profession; the articulation of the two central forces shaping the nature of military institutions as the functional and societal imperatives; and the formulation of subjective and objective control as distinct approaches to civilian control.[3]

I will also argue that Huntington's contributions were productive but not perfect. Some of his specific definitions, such as the content of military expertise, are debatable. Some of his driving concerns, such as whether the United States could maintain a strong military over a sustained period of time, no longer seem vital today. Finally, in some places the literature has moved beyond what Huntington offered. An example is the ongoing scholarly debate over how the country's political leaders and its most senior military officers should interact. Nevertheless, even where subsequent scholarship has moved beyond the limits of *The soldier and the state*, Huntington's framing of the issues involved remains an essential foundation on which evolving understandings rest.

Huntington presents the case that the military is a profession in the very first chapter of *The soldier and the state*. He argues that, like other professionals, the officer corps of the military exhibits the traits of expertise, responsibility and corporateness. With regard to expertise, Huntington argues that the 'central skill' of the officer is 'best summed up in Harold Lasswell's phrase "the management of violence"', and goes on to say: 'The function of a military force is successful armed combat' (p. 11). The special responsibility of the military officer is to use this expertise only at the direction of the state. Finally, the certification to use this expertise belongs to the officer corps as a distinct, bureaucratized body, with a common identity fostered through shared educational, training and service experiences.

With this formulation, Huntington offered a valuable construct, but one that was not destined to become the final word. Just three years after the publication

[2] Richard K. Betts, 'Are civil–military relations still a problem?', in Nielsen and Snider, eds, *American civil–military relations*, pp. 11–41.

[3] Suzanne C. Nielsen and Don M. Snider, 'Introduction', in Nielsen and Snider, eds, *American civil–military relations*, pp. 4–7.

of *The soldier and the state*, the first powerful challenge to Huntington's arguments about the military profession came from Morris Janowitz in *The professional soldier*.[4] Janowitz argued for less separation between the military and American society and for a broader conception of military expertise. *The professional soldier* was also destined to become a classic, and together Huntington and Janowitz changed the field of civil–military relations as their works became touchstones for researchers following in their footsteps.[5]

The idea that the military is a profession has also fostered debates that have extended beyond academia into policy and practice. The armed forces in the United States have embraced the concept that military service is professional but still grapple with exactly what that designation means and why it matters.[6] The US Army, for example, launched a campaign in November 2010 'to study the profession of arms'; one of the phases of this study consisted of a dialogue within the service about what it means for the army to be a profession and why that status is important.[7]

While there are many important issues surrounding the professional nature of the military, in this article the focus is on Huntington's view of military expertise. After giving the definition cited above, Huntington argues that military expertise is 'universal in the sense that it is not affected by time or location' and that it is important that 'military professionals be permitted to develop their expertise … without extraneous influence' (pp. 13, 57). Both of these formulations are problematic and both touch on current US defence policy debates.[8]

On the first point, even within Huntington's own text there are tensions associated with the idea that military expertise is universal. Huntington also argues that officers require a broad, liberal education because cultural factors and advances in science shape the application of force in particular historical periods. Therefore, some elements of military expertise cannot be constant across time. It also does not make sense to argue that the content of military expertise is universal across different countries. It seems doubtful, for example, that the same expertise is appropriate in both the officer corps of the United States (which focuses on external threats) and that of Jordan (which embraces a domestic nation-building role).

The US experiences in Afghanistan, beginning in 2001, and Iraq, beginning in 2003, provided new fuel for debates over what expertise the US military really needs. These two wars demonstrated that a military that was capable of toppling an adversary's regime might nevertheless still struggle in post-conflict environments. Too narrow a focus on expertise for the former at the expense of expertise

[4] Morris Janowitz, *The professional soldier* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1960).
[5] Segal and De Angelis, 'Changing conceptions', pp. 194–212.
[6] An important intellectual leader on these issues for the US army has been Don M. Snider. See Lloyd J. Matthews, Don M. Snider and Gayle L. Watkins, eds, *The future of the army profession* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2002); Don M. Snider and Lloyd J. Matthews, eds, *The future of the army profession*, 2nd (rev. and exp.) edn. (New York: McGraw-Hill Primis, 2005).
[7] Carroll Kim, 'TRADOC launches profession of arms study', 1 Nov. 2010, http://www.army.mil/article/47458/, accessed 19 Feb. 2012.
[8] These ideas are also critiqued in Suzanne C. Nielsen, 'Civil–military relations theory and military effectiveness', *Public Administration and Management* 10: 2, 2005, pp. 5–28.

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for the latter could create a military ill-suited to achieving the country's political purposes.[9] As a matter of policy, the Department of Defense (DOD) responded to this mismatch between capabilities and requirements by declaring in September 2009 that 'stability operations are a core US military mission that the DOD shall be prepared to conduct with proficiency equivalent to combat operations'.[10] This policy directive alone, however, has not settled everything. As just one example, the ongoing debate about what expertise is necessary in US ground forces is likely to continue for some time. Some will argue for the primacy of capabilities for conventional war; others will focus on the need to preserve hard-won expertise in counterinsurgency and stability operations. Those who argue for both will be confronted with recent experience that suggests that forces optimized for one type of conflict will be less capable in others.

Huntington's claim that an autonomous military profession should be free to develop its expertise free from outside involvement is also problematic. For one thing, it underestimates the impact of service culture and service parochialism. Left to their own devices, the services may focus on the capabilities they would like to have rather than the capabilities the country needs. Even beyond this concern, an emphasis on autonomy heightens the risk of creating a military unable to meet the requirements set out in the US military's own doctrine, which talks of the need to integrate all instruments of national power (diplomatic, informational, military and economic) to further US national interests. The capstone manual also recognizes that US commanders 'must consider the potential requirements for interagency, IGO, and NGO coordination as a part of their activities across the range of military operations'.[11] Effective partnerships in war are likely to require collaborative education, training, planning and capabilities development during peacetime. This applies to foreign partners—military and civilian—as well as American ones.

The larger issue which encompasses these smaller ones is Huntington's failure to address adequately the intertwined nature of politics and warfare and the deep influence of national political purposes on military institutions.[12] While he clearly recognized the imperative of civilian political control, he also strove to carve out space for professional military autonomy. In the end, he tried to draw his lines too starkly.

Nevertheless, it would be unfair not to recognize the practical value in Huntington's point of view. On the issue of expertise, 'the management of violence' may be too narrow a definition, but there is a need for some limits. If the US military seeks the expertise to accomplish all tasks, it will be expert at none. And if policymakers attempt to employ the military to accomplish tasks for which it is not best

[9] Nadia Schadlow and Richard A. Lacquement, Jr, 'Winning wars, not just battles: expanding the military profession to incorporate stability operations', in Nielsen and Snider, eds, *American civil–military relations*, pp. 112–32.

[10] Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, US DOD, Instruction 3000.05, 'Subject: stability operations', 16 Sept. 2009.

[11] US DOD, *Joint Publication 1*, *Doctrine for the armed forces of the United States* (Washington DC: DOD, May 2009), p. VII-1.

[12] Suzanne C. Nielsen and Don M. Snider, 'Conclusions', in Nielsen and Snider, eds, *American civil–military relations*, esp. pp. 295–8.

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suited, the results are likely to be less than optimal, and needed investment in other capabilities across the US government may be delayed. The idea of professional autonomy also has merit. As with all public institutions, outcomes are likely to be better if the US military is transparent and held accountable. At the same time, the US military is likely to be more capable and to inspire more loyalty if there is room within it for leaders to have some degree of autonomy in the development and application of expert knowledge and in the exercise of discretionary judgement. Professional autonomy is undoubtedly of value; it is just not an absolute imperative in a context where other values must be weighed.

This issue of competing values offers a nice transition to Huntington's formulation of the societal and functional imperatives, the second of the two major concepts that constitute the focus of this article. Huntington argues that militaries will be shaped by 'a functional imperative stemming from the threats to the society's security and a societal imperative arising from the social forces, ideologies, and institutions dominant within the society'. He goes on to note: 'Military institutions which reflect only social values may be incapable of performing effectively their military function. On the other hand, it may be impossible to contain within society military institutions shaped only by functional imperatives' (p. 2). Huntington's fear in 1957 was that the United States would need a powerful military in which the functional imperative held sway in order to be secure against the Soviet threat, but that the hostility of American liberalism to all things military would make this difficult to achieve.

This logic led Huntington to the extraordinary argument in his concluding chapter that the solution was for American society to become less liberal and more like the military in its culture and values. This proposed solution is extraordinary because it is a clear reversal of ends–means logic: instead of the military serving to protect American values, American society should change its values to serve the interest of military effectiveness. Only the existence of an existential threat would seem to justify such a proposition.

Disturbing as that last chapter may seem today, it is a good place to begin an exploration of the continuing resonance of Huntington's ideas as well as their shortcomings. Those who have read the last chapter of *The soldier and the state* may have found it eerie to hear President Barack Obama express similar ideas in his January 2012 State of the Union address. For example, after beginning his speech by lauding the achievements of the US armed forces, he said: 'At a time when too many of our institutions have let us down, they exceed all expectations. They're not consumed with personal ambition. They don't obsess over their differences. They focus on the mission at hand. They work together. Imagine what we could accomplish if we followed their example.'[13]

President Obama's remarks are understandable as the comments of a political leader calling for national unity to mobilize support for his agenda. Yet it is interesting to ask what they also indicate about contemporary American civil–

[13] Barack Obama, 'The 2012 state of the union', 25 Jan. 2012, http://www.whitehouse.gov/state-of-the-union-2012, accessed 19 Feb. 2012.

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military relations. The United States was born with a distrust of standing armies, yet today the confidence of Americans in their military is quite strong. In fact, in Gallup polling that asks respondents about their confidence in a broad range of public institutions—including the Congress, public schools and the police—the US military 'has ranked No. 1 or No. 2 … almost every year since the measure was instituted in 1973, and has been No. 1 continuously since 1998'.[14] Given that an ever smaller proportion of society serves in uniform, Americans seem to be expressing high confidence in an institution they know less and less about.[15] It is not clear that this is a good thing. When people are ignorant of something, they may hold extreme views. While irrational fears about the armed services are not likely to lead to good policy, neither is an uncritical embrace.

Huntington's formulation of the functional and societal imperatives provides a valuable starting point for the examination of a whole host of important questions about American civil–military relations. A partial list includes: whether a gap exists between the values and belief systems of those in uniform and those in the broader American society; whether, to the extent that there is a gap, it should be a matter for concern; whether there are functional requirements of the military that justify exceptions to society's rules or norms; and finally, what standards of evidence should be required when the military makes the case for such exceptions. Each of these issues has been the subject of important scholarly and policy debate.

However, Huntington's fear that the functional imperative would receive insufficient deference in the United States no longer seems compelling. Instead, some of the weightiest questions in civil–military relations today relate to whether the all-volunteer composition of the military and the manner in which it privileges the functional imperative pose dangers to the very character of American democracy. To put the question simply: has the functional imperative acquired too much weight at the expense of the societal imperative?

Several articles in the summer 2011 edition of the journal *Daedalus* probe this concern. Defence consultant Robert Goldich argues that the all-volunteer force has become a 'force of legions', with great expertise but little empathy with the broader American society; indeed, that the US military has become an 'alienated shield' that could eventually threaten democracy itself.[16] Defence policy expert Lawrence Korb and military sociologist David Segal argue that the failure of military and political leaders to activate the draft during the sustained conflicts of the last decade represents a 'moral outrage' and reinforces a disturbing trend in which the military goes to war while the country as a whole does not.[17] Finally, historian Andrew Bacevich fears that the abandonment of the citizen-soldier model in favour of a volunteer, professional military has been costly. Over the past decade, he argues, it has become clear that American citizens 'retained

[14] Lydia Saad, 'Americans' confidence in military up, banks down', Gallup, 24 Jun. 2009, http://www.gallup.com/poll/121214/americans-confidence-military-banks-down.aspx, accessed 19 Feb. 2012.
[15] Mark Thompson, 'The other 1 %', *Time*, 21 Nov. 2011, pp. 34–9.
[16] Robert L. Goldich, 'American military culture from colony to empire', *Daedalus* 140: 3, Summer 2011, pp. 65–9.
[17] Lawrence J. Korb and David R. Segal, 'Manning and financing the twenty-first century all-volunteer force', *Daedalus* 140: 3, Summer 2011, pp. 81, 85.

negligible say in the employment of an army over which they had forfeited any ownership'.[18]

Perhaps what these analyses suggest is a need to rethink the societal imperative. It is still worth pondering when the values of society ought to be reflected in the military and when functional requirements should take precedence. However, it is also worth considering whether a distinct, isolated military could undermine democratic accountability regarding some of the most important decisions the elected leaders of the United States make—those relating to the use of force. Preserving that accountability may in itself be the most important societal imperative.

The issue of political decision-making leads naturally into the third and final of Huntington's concepts to be discussed in this article: the patterns of subjective and objective control. To Huntington, civilian control requires minimizing the political power of the military. One means of achieving this is subjective control, which involves efforts by one particular civilian group—defined by factors such as governmental institution or social class—to pursue power relative to other civilian groups through military institutions. The military is under civilian control, but a form of civilian control inconsistent with military professionalism. Under subjective control, military affairs are governed according to what furthers the power interests of the dominant civilian group within society, unchecked by functional requirements pertaining to military effectiveness against external threats. Huntington advocates instead objective control. In contrast to subjective control, 'the essence of objective control is the recognition of autonomous military professionalism' (pp. 80–85). Under objective control, a politically neutral and autonomous professional military gives its obedience to whatever leader obtains legitimate political power within the state. Political power struggles among civilian groups do not play out within the military, which is divorced from them and operates according to functional military requirements. This arrangement is beneficial, Huntington argues, because it maximizes both civilian control and military effectiveness.

Huntington's principle of objective control has both merits and shortcomings. On the positive side, it preserves democratic political control, speaks to the importance of an apolitical military and protects military professionalism. On the negative side, this conceptualization fails to recognize adequately the degree to which political and military affairs are inevitably intertwined.[19] The objective control model presumes a separation between the political and military realms that does not exist.

Subsequent scholarship has taken on this weakness in Huntington's formulation. In emphasizing the need for pervasive political influence over military operations, security studies scholar Eliot Cohen argues for an 'unequal dialogue' in which political leaders immerse themselves in the details of military operations to ensure

[18] Andrew J. Bacevich, 'Whose army?', *Daedalus* 140: 3, Summer 2011, p. 132.
[19] Nielsen and Snider, 'Conclusions', pp. 291–3.

strategic success.[20] Political scientist Richard Betts has also weighed in, arguing that practitioners seem to have picked up on the 'unequal' component of Cohen's argument while devaluing the 'dialogue'. As a corrective, he proposes an 'equal dialogue and unequal authority'.[21] Most recently, civil–military relations theorist Peter Feaver has drawn a distinction between 'professional supremacists' who emphasize the need for the military voice in the dialogue and 'civilian supremacists' who fear that there is already too great a natural deference to uniformed leaders on operational matters.[22] Against Eliot Cohen and Peter Feaver, political scientist Michael Desch argues that civilian failures to take heed of military advice and to value military expertise contributed to the costliness of America's post-9/11 ventures in Afghanistan and Iraq.[23]

Despite their differing views, these scholars have made valuable contributions in raising the character of appropriate civil–military interactions at the elite level as an important national security issue. Whether the best formulation is 'unequal dialogue' or 'equal dialogue, unequal authority', it is hard to argue against the idea that open, unconstrained exchanges of assessments and expert knowledge have the better chance of producing wise choices about the development of military capabilities as well as about the actual employment of force. Indeed, given that most informed analysts and observers see democratic political control as fundamentally secure in the United States, perhaps the best phrase for capturing what is needed is simply the 'necessary dialogue'. As security studies scholar Mackubin Owens has pointed out, events since 9/11 have made even more starkly evident the value of judging civil–military relations on their ability to foster the development of 'a practical military strategy that properly serves the ends of national policy'.[24]

As important debates in American civil–military relations continue to rage, it is valuable to recall that in many respects the stage for them was set by Huntington in *The soldier and the state*. It is true that many of the concepts and arguments proposed in this book have subsequently been challenged, and some of these challenges have been convincing. It is also true that the United States is in a very different place today from that in which it stood 55 years ago and therefore different policy concerns seem urgent. Finally, in some areas the debate has advanced, as in analyses of elite civil–military interaction. Despite these developments, core concepts from Huntington's work remain central to current research and to the deeds of today's practitioners.

The day may come when *The soldier and the state* becomes irrelevant. Until it arrives, discussions of American civil–military relations are likely to be more reasonable and useful if Huntington is given a fair hearing.

[20] Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme command: soldiers, statesmen, and leadership in wartime* (New York: Free Press, 2002).
[21] Betts, 'Are civil–military relations still a problem?', p. 35.
[22] Peter D. Feaver, 'The right to be right', *International Security* 35: 4, Spring 2011, pp. 93–4.
[23] Michael C. Desch, 'Bush and the generals', *Foreign Affairs* 86: 2, May–June 2007, pp. 97–108; Desch, 'Correspondence', *International Security* 36: 3, Winter 2011–12, pp. 180–191.
[24] Mackubin Thomas Owens, *US civil–military relations after 9/11: renegotiating the civil–military bargain* (New York: Continuum, 2011), p. 8.