



## General Malaise

By Eliot A. Cohen

*Retired generals jeopardize the public trust in a politically neutral military by campaigning on behalf of candidates.*

The Kerry campaign has announced its list of retired generals and admirals endorsing their candidate; the Bush campaign will soon produce its list, and no doubt both will mobilize more retired stars for the coming fight. One need not be paranoid about civil-military relations to think this a bad business, reckless on the part of the politicians and destructive on the part of the former flags. By serving as props for presidential candidates, the retired generals put at risk the confidence that citizens and officials alike place in the political neutrality of the armed forces. They have every legal and constitutional right to behave this way, of course, as they have every right to make second careers as pole dancers in Vegas. But in so doing they diminish American politics and damage the national defense.

Out of a 1.4 million-person military, the United States has fewer than a thousand generals and admirals on active duty; it is an elite group of men and women who have risen to the top of a remarkably meritocratic system. Once they retire they deserve, and usually receive, a degree of deference and opportunity unmatched by those in other professions. They may wear civvies but continue to go by their military titles (unlike, say, sergeants and captains, who revert to Mr. or Ms. the day after they doff the uniform), and they find a warm welcome in boardrooms and television studios. When

the country is at war, they get a respectful hearing on strategy and tactics. Informally they exert a great deal of influence on today's military, filled as it is with their former subordinates and protégés. They appear prominently in the web of consultancies, advisory panels, congressional hearings, and defense contractors that makes up the informal defense establishment. They carry weight because of their experience and the expectation that they speak with the voice of disinterested patriotism.

### New Battlegrounds

In a way, then, generals never retire. When they become openly political, endorsing one candidate or denouncing another, they create the notion that the military is a constituency—the unfortunate word reportedly used by the late secretary of defense Les Aspin—rather than a neutral instrument of policy. In 2000, there was far too much suspicion on one side, and glee on the other, at the likely impact of military votes on the outcome of the election. If the public becomes accustomed to thinking of the military as the uniformed equivalent of the National Education Association, it will be treated as such by politicians—romanced or paid off, marginalized or denounced as circumstances suggest.

The endorsing generals have an effect on the troops. The captains and sergeants get the impression that although more discretion is allowed retirees than active-duty soldiers, there is nothing wrong with a military person articulating partisan

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views. And from there the leap is not so long to obstructing policies with which one disagrees, while the distance lengthens to becoming a professional who can be relied upon to give objective advice on sensitive matters.

If recently retired generals get into the endorsing business, it must be assumed that a secretary of defense will have, as one of his considerations in promoting or easing out a general officer, the likelihood that today's four star is tomorrow's political problem. That, in turn, paves the way for a flag officer cadre led either by political sympathizers or colorless bureaucrats, which spells death to the brutal but confidential candor that strategic decisions require.

It makes all the sense in the world for retired general officers to offer public commentary on professional matters, although history suggests that even on military affairs that judgment is far from infallible. But as judges of political horseflesh, they have nothing over their fellow citizens. If as a class the retired flags had a keen political sense and a keener appetite, one might expect them to run for the House, Senate, and governors' mansions, or at the very least seek second careers in political journalism, polling, and the party organizations. They do not, and for a good reason: they are not, by and large, very good at domestic politics, and they recoil at its necessary ambiguities and deceptions.

Molded by a hierarchic, orderly, technical culture, they have decidedly mixed records at the open and chaotic business of running for office and governing. Which explains why more than one retired general has evinced an embarrassing buyer's regret at endorsing one candidate or the other. There are exceptions, no doubt, to the rule that generals make poor political activists. Who would want to exclude Eisenhower from American politics? Then again, does anyone really think there is an Eisenhower out there? And are the records of Grant, MacArthur, LeMay, and Westmoreland so inspiring that retired flags should be encouraged to plunge into politics?

The politicians will woo the flags: in the contest for office, most scruples mean little. As in so many other cases, the burden falls upon the retired generals themselves to hold the line, to adhere to standards of professional conduct that civilians may not even understand. The vast majority of the retired flag officers remain discreetly silent during political campaigns, because they know that partisanship does no good to the armed services or the country. The United States has more than enough real battles for the military to fight, and the political neutrality and discretion of our generals is too valuable at any time—but during wartime above all—to jeopardize for passing partisan advantage.