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James Stavridis
U.S. Navy

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SET AND DRIFT

THE TALE OF THE RED KNIGHT

Rear Admiral James Stavridis, U.S. Navy

Let me begin with a story.

Once upon a time, a mighty king held a banquet at his great court in central Europe. He had worked very hard over the previous decade to gather a superb collection of loyal knights. One evening, a particularly enthusiastic and powerful knight clad in red armor returned to the king's castle after several months away, the marks of much battle apparent on his armor.

The Red Knight presented himself to the king before all in the court. The king was pleased with the obvious efforts of the Red Knight and immediately asked him where he had been fighting. The Red Knight leaned on his sword and proudly said, "My Lord, I have been fighting in the west, laying waste to the enemies of the king!"

The king pondered this for a moment, looking around the great hall, then replied in a puzzled voice, "But good sir knight, I don't have any enemies in the west."

The Red Knight thought about that, straightened up, saluted the king, and said, "Well, sire, I think you do now."

This is a wonderful story, with a variety of lessons about the enthusiasm of subordinates, the importance of geopolitics, and perhaps even court etiquette, but I would like to focus on a different aspect of the story—"civil-military relations."

Rear Admiral Stavridis, a 1976 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, holds a Ph.D. in international affairs from The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University. He was commander of USS Barry (DDG 52) and Destroyer Squadron 21. He served ashore as executive assistant to the Secretary of the Navy and chief of the Policy Branch on the Joint Staff, J-5. Admiral Stavridis is currently Deputy Director for Requirements on the Navy Staff, N81.

Over the past several years, much has been written in the general press, books, academic journals, and specialized defense literature popularizing the theory that there is an increasing gap between civilian and military sectors in U.S. society. It is an important subject with implications for both society in general and the military in particular.

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Interestingly, the entire subject of civil-military relations has a long history of discussion in the United States, one that is reflected not only in scholarly theory but also in popular culture. Books like *Seven Days in May* (1962) by Fletcher Knebel and Charles Bailey II, *Guard of Honor* (1998) by James Gould Cozzens, and the recently published *A Soldier's Duty* (2001) by Tom Ricks come to mind, as well as three recent films, *No Way Out*, *G.I. Jane*, and *A Few Good Men*.

A variety of scholarship exists on the subject. Samuel P. Huntington wrote the classic, *The Soldier and the State*.¹ In it, he focuses on the relationship between “two active directing elements” in the military and society at large—the officer corps and the state. Huntington finds the military ethic realistic and conservative, stressing the supremacy of society over the individual and “the importance of order, hierarchy, and the division of function.”² On the other hand, the civilian outlook in America tends to emphasize individuality and initiative in a loosely joined heterogeneous whole.³ Clearly, there is potential for conflict and miscommunication between civilian and military actors in our society.

One sociologist who has taken a broad look at how societies are structured is Jane Jacobs. Her *Systems of Survival* identifies two structural approaches in society—one facilitates governance and exhibits a “guardian” culture, and the other facilitates commerce and displays a “trader” culture. Essentially, her theory is that many actors in a society function as either “guardians” or “traders.”

Guardianship evolves from the very human tendency to protect territory. Jacobs argues that the guardians in a society—the police, firefighters, politicians, teachers, and the military, for example—have a basic need for boundaries, stemming from their desire to distinguish between insiders and outsiders. In such a culture we find clear rules of conduct, a code that requires adherence to those rules, and an appreciation for respect and authority. The guardian code, according to Jacobs, includes exhortations to shun trading, exert prowess, be obedient and disciplined, adhere to tradition, respect hierarchy, be loyal, show fortitude, and treasure honor.⁴

On the other hand, traders—largely encompassing the rest of society—are less concerned about boundaries. In fact, the commercial world usually acts to reduce barriers and enhance the opportunities for trade. A trader will welcome knowns and unknowns alike into the shop. What matters most is selling. Traders include businessmen, merchants, producers of goods and services, entertainers, and entrepreneurs. Their moral code, according to Jacobs, emphasizes honesty, competition, thrift, optimism, initiative and enterprise, inventiveness and novelty; traders wish to shun force, come to voluntary agreements, respect contracts, collaborate easily with strangers, and promote comfort and convenience.⁵

Clearly, the differences between guardians and traders in a society create contrasting views of how the world should be structured. All societies face this kind

of division, and they have dealt with it in a variety of ways. Looking back over history, it appears there are three basic models of the civil-military relationship.

The first model might be termed “military dominated.” In such a construct, the guardians—in this case the military—hold the greatest influence in the society. Historical examples include, most famously, Sparta in the Hellenic era. Many other examples exist, of course, among the praetorian societies of Europe, Asia, and South America. In the modern era, the Soviet Union was to some extent dominated by the military, although individual civilians tended to use the military instrument to further their personal and political agendas rather than creating a culture of pure military domination. During the post–World War II period, many Latin American, African, and Asian dictatorships were essentially military dominated as well. Certainly there can be various levels of military domination within a society, from military influence with civilian control, through extensive military participation, to military control, either with or without partners from the civilian sector.⁶

A second model around which some societies have developed the relationship of the military and civilian sectors might be termed that of the “citizen-soldier.” In this construct, military forces are largely made up of citizens who leave their ploughs, so to speak, and report for combat when required to fight for the state. The Athenian society during the mid-Hellenic period offered such a structure. Other examples include the early Roman republic, the United States in its colonial era, and Switzerland today. This construct generally has been found in smaller states with democratic ideals.

A third model could be termed “separate camps.” This approach consists of military forces that are professional in nature but are somewhat fenced off from the larger society. While not disenfranchised or disadvantaged, they certainly do not dominate or direct the activities of society. The military has only slight influence in the affairs of the society it protects. Examples might include the British Empire in the nineteenth century or many modern European military forces today.

In assessing the relative value of each of these models, curiously, the greatest strength also tends to create the greatest weakness.

The great strength of a “military-dominated” society is its military readiness and combat power. Yet the rigidity of the military culture generally leads to totalitarianism (Sparta and the Soviet Union spring to mind) and a concomitant downward spiral in mercantile activity. Economic problems tend to lead to the eventual unraveling of the international position of the state and the collapse of the internal political system.

In the “citizen-soldier” model, there is exceptional balance between the military and civil sides of society, generally strengthening democratic norms and

processes. But there is a trade-off in combat capability and power because farmers and merchants are not always effective as part-time warriors. Military unpreparedness can then lead to the rise of “the man on horseback,” usually a dictator. This type of individual is capable of dominating the society and destroying democratic norms, as was the case in early Rome and in many weaker, loosely organized states in the post–World War II period.⁷

The world of “separate camps” holds promise and can create an effective compromise position, but there seems to be a growing gap between the two camps in many societies today, which can often lead to misunderstanding, political turmoil, and other tension. It can also make it increasingly arduous to recruit and retain men and women to serve in what is perceived as a very separate and difficult world.

Huntington, writing with retired Army general Andrew Goodpaster, has identified three theoretical options for civil-military relations in a society: extirpation, transmutation, and toleration. Extirpation so reduces the power of the military that it exists at the edge of a society; the two sectors rarely come in contact. Transmutation requires the military to morph, essentially becoming more liberal, more fully in synch with society. Finally, toleration entails that the values of society shifting from liberalism toward those of the more conservative military. In U.S. history, there have been periods in which each of these solutions has manifested itself.⁸

So where does America stand today, and for what should it strive?

There is less of a gap between civilian and military sectors in our society today than many pundits and observers think. Nevertheless, there are, and need to be, differences.

The best approach for the United States would be to have what might be termed a “permeable membrane” between its civil and military worlds. Such an arrangement would permit a free and steady flow of individuals between both worlds, who would encourage the exchange of ideas, creating a balance between traditional military conservatism and a more liberal society at large. Also necessary in this approach would be “translators,” who can explain military culture to civilians and vice versa. Such translators could be individuals, organizations, and other informational mechanisms, such as publications, Websites, and exhibits.

In terms of flow between the two sectors of society, the all-volunteer force brings nearly two hundred thousand young men and women into the military service every year. About two-thirds return to civilian life after five years—a good thing, by and large. The vast majority take back with them much of what is thought of as the “good things” the military instills in its people: self-confidence, discipline, teamwork, and an equitable approach to race relations.⁹

Of course, one must recognize that although two hundred thousand sounds like a large number, more than four million Americans turn eighteen every year, so in the end only one in twenty serve.¹⁰ When compared with the United States fifty years ago, as the Korean War was ending, the contrast in numbers is startling. In 1954 more than half of all living American males had served in the military.

Given this dramatic reduction in the proportion of citizens with firsthand experience in the military, it seems clear that the United States must work hard to improve the permeability of the membrane between both sides of society while doing all it can to facilitate translators. Doing so will sustain the most fundamental and important aspect of the civil-military relationship, which is civilian control of the military. It will also permit the flow of values between the two. From the military can come the benefits of teamwork over prejudice, the values of self-discipline over hedonism, and the satisfaction of service before self; from the civilian community, the achievements of personal initiative, the satisfactions of a good life well lived, and the glories of individual liberty.

So the questions are: how can the United States facilitate such a “permeable membrane,” and how can we improve, at the same time, mechanisms of translation so that the cultural and moral strengths of each sector are meaningfully explained to the other?

First, we need people who can explain to those in uniform the essence of current civilian perspectives. These individuals are generally civilians operating within the Department of Defense who work at all levels in the bureaucracy. The Secretary of Defense and the leadership in the Pentagon spend a good deal of their time doing this kind of translation. Many elected officials on Capitol Hill and their staffs are involved in the same efforts.

Conversely, and at least as important, we need people who can present the values that strengthen the very structure and substance of an effective fighting force. Representatives must explain why these different—not “better,” not “higher”—qualities are required and appropriate in the American armed forces. Some senior military personnel are involved in this process in formal ways—giving speeches, writing articles, and offering testimony. There is an important role here for those in academe, particularly those on the distinguished faculties of various war colleges and military academies around the country. Finally, this call for greater representation of civilian and military perspectives recognizes and applauds the enormous amount of informal translation that occurs in the day-to-day interaction of military and civilian citizens in their homes and civic organizations. Today, however, we need more, because the military itself is becoming notably smaller, more geographically concentrated, more economically homogeneous, and more politically uniform.

This also implies that American service members should participate more fully in civilian society through voluntary service, exchanges with schools, home ownership, civic participation, and savings. The opportunities are rife. Many military commands now give various forms of recognition to service members who do volunteer work. Some commands have formal programs, such as helping a school with tutors, mentors, and coaches.

An additional approach would be to encourage private civic organizations that facilitate translation in the accomplishment of their mission. Each of the services is supported by comparable organizations that are well positioned to function as part of the effort to create meaningful communication between the military and society. Additionally, various organizations that support retired military personnel and veterans have a positive role to play.

Certainly the national and state Guard organizations and the various reserve units also have an important function here, both in facilitating the flow of personnel between both sectors and in providing communication between them. The close relationship between the Guard, the reserves, and Capitol Hill can pay big dividends to our society.

Programs that put retired service members in the schools as teachers by waiving certain formal teaching requirements are an exceptional means to help keep the civilian and military sectors aligned in our country. While this must be done carefully to ensure only qualified individuals are selected, there are clearly many in the services with exceptional teaching credentials based on their experiences in uniform. We should tap into this national resource and put such people in a position to help large groups of young people while also facilitating their better understanding of the military.

Resources and command attention on public affairs functions of the military should be increased. Within the Department of Defense today, we do a reasonably good job of telling the military's story to the larger civilian sector, but we could do better. Some privatization would be helpful, and "information campaigns" would also help our fellow citizens understand what their military does, how it does it, and why.

Let me close by going back to the Red Knight. Like the U.S. military of today, he was full of enthusiasm and sure of his purpose. However, the king in our story did not have control of the knight, probably through his lack of understanding, or a tendency not to pay close attention, or perhaps a narrowness of experience. In our story, the Red Knight did what militaries are trained to do, and a disaster ensued. The United States must be a country whose knights are fundamentally part of the fabric of society. When they fight, they do so with the knowledge, support, and understanding of those who govern—the people. Only by ensuring that the United States maintains a constant flow of people and ideas between our

civilian society and our military, and that the two sides understand each other, will this nation be able to guarantee that it has established the best possible level of civil-military relations.

NOTES

1. Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1957).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 144–61.
4. Jane Jacobs, *Systems of Survival: A Dialogue on the Moral Foundations of Commerce and Politics* (New York: Random House, 1992).
5. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
6. Claude Welch, *Civilian Control of the Military* (New York: State Univ. of New York Press, 1976), p. 3.
7. S. E. Finer, *The Man on Horseback* (New York: Praeger, 1962).
8. Andrew Goodpaster and Samuel Huntington, *Civil-Military Relations* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1977), pp. 7–13.
9. Richard Danzig, Secretary of the Navy, speech to Reed College, May 2000.
10. *Ibid.*