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Deciding on Military Intervention

What Is the Role of Senior Military Leaders?

John Garofano

DELIBERATIONS ON THE POSSIBLE USE OF FORCE have usually failed to provide U.S. leaders with the information and advice necessary to make informed decisions. In Korea, Vietnam, the Dominican Republic, Panama, and Kosovo, among other interventions, decision makers were enlightened about certain political and military realities only after the fact of military involvement. Even in cases where intervention was avoided, such as Laos in 1961, or where it achieved significant success, as in the Gulf War, historical inquiry shows that policy makers labored in various shades of darkness about the costs and risks of various courses of action. How can this be improved?

The counsel offered by senior military leaders has long been recognized as central to making informed decisions on using force. Yet for both analysts and policy makers, prescriptions hinge to a great extent on transient historical interpretation rather than on a durable conceptual framework. The John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson administrations concluded from the Bay of Pigs invasion and the Cuban missile crisis that senior military officers ought to view national security issues through the same lens political leaders use. After Vietnam, it was argued that the military leadership should instead focus on winning wars and on making clear what they need to do so. This view was boosted by the experiences in Beirut and Grenada, and it was partly realized with the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act. Kosovo, the 1998 readiness hearings, and revisitations to the Vietnam War are once again stirring the pot. H. R. McMaster's *Dereliction of Duty* (reportedly required reading among military leaders and staffs in Washington) argues that the Joint Chiefs of Staff never made clear

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what they knew to be necessary for victory in Vietnam, in part due to personal failures and in part because scheming politicians outwitted them. During the Kosovo war, some commentators thought the book's message was relevant but was being ignored.

In fact, the performance of the American military leadership in advising the president has varied considerably. In some cases, its views were ignored, and in others it failed to make them known—the Joint Chiefs were not taken into the process as true counselors. In yet other cases, the advice military leaders gave was defective—based on unsound information or faulty analysis. In still other cases, one side of the civil-military equation misunderstood the assumptions and concerns of the other—advice was bound to be ineffective. Among this trio of problems—the military voice, the quality of military advice, and miscommunication—the first has received the most attention.

This article discusses the importance of these problems and how each might be corrected, by examining several cases of deliberations on military intervention. The cases are analyzed in a rudimentary framework based on a Clausewitzian dilemma and on literature suggesting how information and advice is best used by decision makers facing complex tasks. We seek to answer such questions as: How can the military leadership ensure that it provides accurate and effective advice to senior policy makers? At what stages should it be more or less forceful in providing advice? What is the proper balance between making recommendations and providing information and options? By examining pre-1965 cases, we can view decisions on Vietnam and subsequent deployments in a different light than do most current interpretations.

The analysis suggests that we may need to move beyond Goldwater-Nichols requirements in several areas. First, senior military opinion must be given greater autonomy from the bureaucratic-political process. To some extent this can be accomplished by formulating guidelines regarding the nature, form, content, and timing of the advice provided by military leaders. Second, the views of the chiefs—and perhaps other military experts—should be more readily available to political decision makers. Thus, the exclusive nature of the chairman as principal military advisor should be redressed. Third, the services—or, if they fail, the Congress—must commit themselves to excellence in the quality and content of senior military counsel. To this end the services need to take a longer-term view of the training, education, and selection of their senior leaders and military staffs. In sum, high-quality decisions are a function of both the quality of the individuals making the decisions and of a variety of structural and procedural conditions.

The military does not bear sole or even primary responsibility for the quality of the overall decision-making process. Senior military leaders do, however, play a critical and relatively under-studied role in that process. It is important to debate these matters now, as evolving security issues will place senior military leaders in new and unfamiliar roles. As the use of force is considered for terrorist, humanitarian, and alliance-driven tasks, such issues as the balance between informational and advocacy roles or the point at which senior military leaders should "fall on their swords" and resign will only increase in complexity. As the military is asked to depart from its traditional war-fighting roles, for example, its leaders may tend to move from a passive, consultative role to one of recommending specific courses of action (this may explain in part General Colin Powell's preference for intervention in Somalia over Bosnia). Conversely, future experiences with alliance operations like Kosovo may push military leaders toward an informational or general advisory role. Neither of these trends should be allowed to determine the essential nature of military advice and how it is provided.

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The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

The first section of this article discusses what the proper role of senior military leaders should be in strategic decisions, viewing the issue from a Clausewitzian perspective—which continues to frame debate today but has reached the limits of its utility. The article then outlines the components of a healthy foreign-policy decision process and deduces the characteristics of military advice that are conducive to such a process. Then three broad categories that are useful for illustrating problems and pitfalls in the offering of military advice are presented, in brief discussions of decisions on Korea, Laos, Vietnam, and Dien Bien Phu. The article concludes by suggesting directions for study and organizational change that would allow the military to play a more vital and appropriate role in strategic decisions.

The Nature and Proper Role of Military Advice

There is little agreement, within or outside of the military, on the proper role of senior military leaders in counseling political decision makers. Clausewitz explored the issue in Book Eight, chapter 6, of *On War*; he began with the well-known argument that war, as a continuation of politics with the addition of nonpolitical means, must be determined by policy. Policy, he argued, should not extend to operational details, such as the posting of guards or the employment of patrols, two examples that today would be considered clearly in the "tactical" realm. On the other hand, political considerations do shape the "planning of war, of the campaign, and often even of the battle." Thus policy intrudes deeply into military affairs.[1]

The only question, Clausewitz maintained, is whether the political point of view should disappear and be subjugated to the military, or the other way around. For Clausewitz it was one or the other—leaders cannot consider the military, then the administrative, then the political points of view. There is only one vantage point from which the essential truth of a problem can be known, and for Clausewitz on the problem of war, that vantage point was *political*. Policy is and must be "the guiding intelligence" and war only its instrument. "No other possibility exists, then, than to subordinate the military point of view to the political." Yet from this argument flowed his somewhat paradoxical conclusion that there is no such thing as a "*purely military* opinion" that can helpfully serve policy. Indeed, such opinions are "unacceptable and can be damaging."

> Nor indeed is it sensible to summon soldiers, as many governments do when they are planning a war, and ask them for *purely military advice*. But it makes even less sense for theoreticians to assert that all available military resources should be put at the disposal of the commander so that on their basis he can draw up purely military plans for a war or a campaign. . . .
>
> No major proposal required for war can be worked out in ignorance of political factors; and when people talk, as they often do, about harmful political influence on the management of war, they are not really saying what they mean. Their quarrel should be with the policy itself, not with its influence. If the policy is right—that is, successful—any intentional effect it has on the conduct of the war can only be to the good. If it has the opposite effect the policy itself is wrong.[2]

Political imperatives only make for bad policy when they ask military operations to accomplish things "foreign to their nature." The fact that this had occurred repeatedly in history led Clausewitz to conclude "that a certain grasp of military affairs is vital for those in charge of general policy." How is one to make war in a way that follows its essential logic and yet is "fully consonant with political objectives"? He presented two options: combine the soldier and statesman in one person, who presumably will make the decision; or "make the commander-in-chief a member of the cabinet, so that the cabinet can share in the major aspects of his activities."[3]

Clausewitz wanted military views to be known during deliberations but not to determine their outcome. He supported the point with historical examples of disasters that had befallen countries whose war policies were decided upon by generals. He added that the European leaders of the late eighteenth century had failed to understand the revolutionary changes in warfare then emanating from France: they had viewed the elements of warfare through military lenses, whereas political developments in France had been generating a "revolution in military affairs" through the harnessing of nationalism for military purposes. Politicians had relied heavily on military advice, but military leaders had missed the political bases of revolutionary changes in warfare; military advice had been therefore "no corrective" to the "errors of policy" that resulted. This transformation of war based on political developments, and the politico-military misreading of it, Clausewitz argued, shows that military and political views are deeply and irrevocably connected.[4]

> *The Clausewitzian ideal of shared political-military wisdom in conjunction with military subordination, then, is exceedingly difficult in the contemporary world.*

From our point of view, Clausewitz raises several critical issues and leaves several others open to interpretation. Military action must be subordinated to policy, but the knowledge required for wise policy consists of both military and political wisdom. Furthermore, both kinds of wisdom must somehow reside in the body that makes the ultimate decision. How this balance between *shared wisdom* and *military subordination* is to be worked out in a modern democracy is the heart of the matter. A related problem is how to guarantee the requisite wisdom in senior political and military leaders in the first place.

Clausewitz's argument also raises contradictions, both a potential human one and one imposed by contemporary conflict. The human problem is how military leaders—who presumably understand the "essence" of the military problem—can ensure that this essence is fully appreciated in the minds of political decision makers and yet follow orders—political decisions—that violate purely military logic. In effect, Clausewitz leaves this problem unresolved. Notions of ultimate "civilian control" do not address the problem head-on, for these simply force military leaders who feel misunderstood either to follow a foolish policy or resign. In other words, the traditional civil-military *problématique,* focused as it is on control rather than knowledge, does not address the fundamental issue.[5]

The second problem is a more practical one. Terrorism, humanitarian intervention, limited missile strikes, precision weapons, and a host of other technology-driven developments make it unlikely that the "essence" of a political-military problem can be fully understood—at least not across a wide diversity of situations—by the small number of individuals who happen to be members of the National Security Council at any given point. While war has in many ways retained its essence since Clausewitz's and indeed since Thucydides' time, in other ways it has changed; at the very least, it has become much more complex. It is foolhardy to assume that the nation will be so fortunate as always to enjoy service chiefs of staff, their chairman, a secretary of state, a secretary of defense, and (most importantly) a president who can grasp—all in fundamentally the same way—the essential military and political logic of all of today's national security challenges. The failure of political, analytical, and academic circles to produce an overarching strategy; the severe political divisions that have arisen on issues as fundamental as isolationism versus engagement, and on such decisions as national missile defense or a test ban treaty; continuing disagreement over whether American lives should be spent on humanitarian causes; the emergence of threats from weapons of mass destruction, international crime, and terror organizations; and worry about factors still largely unforeseen—all point to the difficulty of locating a Clausewitzian combination of politico-military wisdom in a few individuals whose tenures in office seldom exceed a few years.

"Good" Strategic Decisions: Theory and Organization

The Clausewitzian ideal of shared political-military wisdom in conjunction with military subordination, then, is exceedingly difficult in the contemporary world. We are left with the problem of how the uneven and conflicting stores of knowledge possessed by military and civilian advisors can best be combined to make reasonable policy and strategic decisions. The answers sometimes suggested for the Vietnam and Kosovo cases—"give the military the means to do the job"—is as inapplicable today as it was in the 1860s or 1960s; helpful solutions have not yet been put forward. We may begin to understand the proper role for senior military leaders, however, if we examine what a healthy decision process should look like and then compare this to actual cases.

The Ideal "Type" of a Healthy Decision Process. Foreign policy decisions are said by analysts to be "complex" in that two or more values are affected by the decision; the deciders must make trade-offs between the values, meaning that a gain in one implies a loss of the other; there is uncertainty and ambiguity in the correspondence between information and the environment; and the power of decision is dispersed among a group of individuals.[6]

The study of foreign policy decisions has led to certain conclusions about what constitutes a healthy decision process in such situations of complexity. When confronted with a challenge to important interests, the decision-making group seeks out advice from experts or constitutionally mandated advisors in order to assess the nature of the environment, the interests at stake, the threat to those interests, and the available means of dealing with the challenge. Alternative courses of action are laid out, and the likely outcomes of each are assessed. As the search for information continues, the initial assessment and policy options are revised as appropriate. When a decision is required, deciders are expected to choose the course of action that offers the greatest advantage to the national interest. The decision should be based upon a free and fair hearing of all views as to which course of action should be pursued. The process may be said to fall into five stages: the *diagnosis* of the essential situation; the *search* for relevant information; the *revision* of initial views in response to the information gathered; the *evaluation* of possible courses of action and their outcomes; and the *choice* of a single course of action.[7]

In reality, few administrations have lived up to this ideal in crisis situations. The national command authorities operate collectively as an organic being rather than as a machine performing sequential functions. Personal shortcomings, relations between the president and his advisors, competition among advisors (for intellectual, personal, or bureaucratic reasons), and domestic and alliance politics all impinge on the ideal of a rational decision process. Nevertheless, the ideal type described above offers a useful breakdown of the stages through which foreign policy choices are made, even if the stages are not executed explicitly or efficiently. Even if, for example, a decision-making body expends little effort diagnosing a war on which it is about to embark, we do well to recognize that this step is desirable and that military leaders have a role in seeing that it is taken seriously.

In an ideal world, military opinion should have a role at each stage. While the national leadership diagnoses the situation, military experts would give a rough outline of the dimensions of the problem, the order of battle of opposing forces, the prospects for major changes in the near future, and a sketch of courses of action as possible responses to each foreseen eventuality. The initial estimates would be updated as new information flows in to the decision-making group. As that group evaluates the likely outcome of each course of action, military leaders would project their costs, risks, and requirements. In the final stage, military leaders should advise which course of military action is most likely to achieve national goals if adequate resources are provided. In sum, the military should make its views clear as options are formulated; ensure that the costs, risks, and requirements of each course of action are as clear as they can be made; and do what they can to ensure that the ultimate choice is a fully informed one.

Again, the reality is always different. In some cases, political leaders choose not to listen to the military. In others, the military is overly politicized, in the sense that it loses independence of thought on strategic or operational matters. In still others, the military is ill equipped to provide the information necessary for informed decisions in the national interest. Reasons may include poor training of leaders, lack of time to perform the necessary background work, and overreliance on individuals' views to the detriment of in-depth staff studies.

Implications for Senior Military Counsel. Nevertheless, the ideal type described above is a useful starting point for discussing how accurate advice can be generated by the military and then provided to decision makers when it is most needed. In particular, the ideal type suggests four characteristics of military advice that should be better institutionalized: its *nature, form, content,* and *timing*.

By *nature* of advice we mean whether military leaders provide objective-informational, policy-option, or subjective-advocacy assessments. These may be viewed on a continuum from the most general and passive (basic data) to the most active and specific (recommendation of a preferred course of action). The advice of the chiefs during the Cuban missile crisis, for example, clearly fell into the advocacy category, stating clearly that a full blockade, air strikes, and invasion of Cuba constituted the only proper course of action. Otherwise General Curtis LeMay would not have told President Kennedy that his preferred blockade-only option was "almost as bad as the appeasement at Munich."[8] By contrast, during the months of DESERT SHIELD General Powell appears to have moved from initially advocating the use of sanctions to a more objective presentation of options and associated costs and risks.[9]

By *form* we mean the way in which information and advice is communicated to political authorities. Does the principal military advisor whisper in the ear of the president or secretary of defense? Is a clear estimate of the situation and courses of actions produced and given the imprimatur of the chairman? Are the views of the combatant commander used explicitly? The one example of a high-quality decision process discussed below suggests the need for a written, authoritative *strategic estimate* that plainly lays out the costs, risks, and assumptions of various policy options. Seldom produced, strategic estimates may serve as useful correctives to political pressures that can otherwise skew decisions.

The quality of the *content* of advice may also be made better by committing it to writing. By content we refer to the accuracy with which the military authorities understand the political as well as military aspects of the proposed intervention. Political factors include the readiness of U.S. and "target country" citizens to support their respective governments. Military factors include such issues as determining whether the war is essentially a conventional, guerrilla, or otherwise unconventional one, and anticipating the ability of the enemy to utilize asymmetric strategies.

Finally, the *timing* of advice and counsel can be critical. Particularly for political leaders with fairly little knowledge of military fundamentals, early and frequent advice is important for setting the tone of deliberations and the parameters of possible military action. The longer national policy planning proceeds without strong and clear input from the military, the more difficult it will be to imbue any intervention with military realism, should that be lacking.

Current Organization for Senior Military Counsel. The responsibilities of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff are specified in Section 153 of Title 10 of the U.S. Code, derived from the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986. They include strategic, logistical, mobility, and contingency planning; net assessments of the United States and major potential enemies; the identification of deficiencies, requirements, programs, and budgets for combatant commanders; the development of doctrine for joint training and education; and periodic reports on changing roles and missions due to altered threat environments.

The *advisory* roles of the chairman, on the other hand, are described only superficially. The 1986 law designates the chairman as the principal military advisor to the president, secretary of defense, and National Security Council. Service chiefs may submit divergent opinions to the chairman, who must forward them along with his own advice; the chiefs may also respond individually, with advice or opinions, to requests from the president, secretary of defense, or the National Security Council. The chairman and individual chiefs are also to provide advice on request from the president, secretary of defense, or (after informing the latter) from Congress.

The intent of the law was to remove the reputed civilian filter represented by the secretary of defense and to prevent the suppression of dissenting opinions. Success in this regard and the net benefits of the arrangement are debatable. What is clear is that the law does not describe the nature, form, content, or timing of advice to be expected from the military when the use of force is being considered. It turns out that these aspects of advice matter, sometimes critically, to the outcome of deliberations.

Good, Bad, and Ugly Intervention Decisions

In this section, we will focus on the process itself, in three categories of decisions—the palpably poor, the ambivalent, and the successful.

The Ugly. A truly defective decision process would be one that risked American lives and treasure without satisfactorily fulfilling most of the four stipulations noted above—appropriate nature, form, content, and timing of military advice. Such a decision would involve, at its worst (that is, in its purest, "ideal" form): policy advocacy at the total expense of the presentation of options or contrary information; verbal opinion, perhaps unrecorded, given and accepted at the expense of formal studies of a more objective nature; inaccurate or misinformed assessments; and late input into the decision.

The decisions to intervene in Korea in 1950 and not to intervene in Laos in 1961 roughly match such a model. The commitment of land forces to a war that eventually claimed some forty thousand American lives was made after a decision process characterized by poor military advice and repeated refusal, on the part of civilians, to secure the best advice that was available. The same conclusion holds for the passive, de facto "decision"—a failure to make any decision at all—to allow General Douglas MacArthur to order UN ground forces to march north and unify Korea.

Twice since 1947, the Truman administration and the Pentagon had concluded that American troops should be withdrawn from the Korean Peninsula. With the fate of Europe and the possibility of general war with the Soviet Union its primary concerns, the administration concluded that the peninsula was of no strategic value. It surmised that the North would probably attempt an invasion and the South would not be able to withstand it; nevertheless, there is no evidence of thinking about, much less serious planning for, the deployment of American forces should that happen.[10]

. . . Prescriptions hinge to a great extent on transient historical interpretation rather than on a durable conceptual framework.

Once confronted in June 1950 with a blatant challenge to the U.S. position in Asia, the Truman administration decided in rapid succession to ease restrictions on the Commander in Chief, Far East (General MacArthur, in Tokyo), to use air and sea power, and, within a week, to commit ground forces to combat. The decision to send ground troops was based on a bold but unrealistic assessment by MacArthur, who claimed that a single regimental combat team, along with a "possible" buildup to two divisions, would allow him to launch an "early counteroffensive" and drive the North Koreans back across the thirty-eighth parallel. The North Korean People's Army was already pouring across the Han River and approaching Suwon, routing the Republic of Korea army in its path. In Japan, there was no regimental combat team in a state of combat readiness, and there were insufficient aircraft to airlift supplies and weapons, which meant they would have to be moved by sea. Equipping and landing a full two divisions, which would be green when they arrived, would take even longer. Between 27 June and 9 July MacArthur doubled his estimates twice, eventually claiming that up to eight divisions would be necessary to drive the enemy from South Korea. The Army consisted of ten active divisions altogether, several of them understrength, protecting Europe, or otherwise unsuitable for early combat in Korea. The initial assessment, however, was what mattered.[11]

The original estimate, moreover, had been communicated during a brief teleconference between MacArthur and the Chief of Staff of the Army, J. Lawton Collins, who passed it along to the Secretary of the Army, who in turn telephoned the president, who immediately made the final decision—while shaving, before 5 A.M. There were no civilian or military "second opinions" or independent assessments of the request for ground troops. Not until 28 June—two days before the decision to send troops—had the Army undertaken a study resembling a net assessment of theater forces. The National Security Council did not convene to discuss the introduction of ground troops; the council had met in the previous days, but as was to be the case in 1964 and 1965, the implications of employing air and naval power had not been considered explicitly. Moreover, MacArthur's opinions were not far from those of the air and naval chiefs, who early on told the president that "a terrible pasting from the air" and a blockade from the sea would end the North Korean invasion.[12]

Only a few weeks later, the administration realized that it was in uncharted territory. In the words of Secretary of State Dean Acheson, it had "bought a colt," and it had now to readjust its views of the military and financial requirements of the war it had undertaken. In the months that followed, the approval of MacArthur's plan for the invasion at Inchon, the passive decision to enlarge the war aims to include the unification of the peninsula, and the decision to march American troops to the Chinese border were to be made with equally bad input from senior military leaders, and equally bad use of what was offered.[13]

The problems with such decisions are to be distinguished from what caused the problems. Political decision makers may choose not to listen to military advice, or they may make decisions so quickly that the military has little opportunity to act. There was, in the spring of 1950, a lack of appreciation for the political impact of such military developments as an attack on a country that was a symbol of the U.S. presence in Asia. This precluded adequate planning, which in turn made likely excessive reliance on a single individual when time was short. There was the added problem that no one—even his seniors in the military chain of command—was willing to challenge MacArthur's judgment.[14] The point is not primarily to lay blame but to describe a bad process, so that the sources of the defects can be addressed. In this case, the nature, form, content, and timing of military advice were all inadequate.

Occasionally, as noted, a bad process leads to propitious results. This may be claimed either for the ultimate result of intervention in Korea or for nonintervention in Laos a decade later. Laos was the first major foreign-policy crisis of the newly installed Kennedy administration. By some accounts and readings of the primary documents, prior to January 1961 outgoing president Dwight Eisenhower had warned president-elect John Kennedy that American credibility was on the line in Laos and that he must intervene alone if allies would not go along.[15] Military intervention was considered throughout the spring of 1961, with the chiefs recommending actions ranging from the movement of troops into Thailand to the deployment of a hundred thousand combat troops to Laos, South Vietnam, and Thailand.

Military advice was unimpressive during this crisis and appeared to perplex the new president, who was "appalled" at the "lack of detail and unanswered questions." The chiefs once recommended sending troops, at the maximum rate of a thousand per day, to two airstrips in Laos surrounded by five thousand guerrillas. The president learned after questioning them that the landing zone was only usable by day and that it would take a week for troops to reach the area by land. When asked what would happen if the enemy allowed troops to land for two days and then attacked, the military gave the appearance of not having thought of the possibility. On other occasions, when the chiefs reverted to their then-common claim that they could guarantee victory if given the right to use nuclear weapons, they were unable to provide a meaningful definition of "victory."[16] Primary sources reveal little evidence that senior military leaders even thought in terms of clearly assessing costs and risks of intervention, much less that they conveyed this to policy makers.

In the event, it was not the careful weighing of advice but rather the Bay of Pigs adventure in mid-April that precluded the intervention. The administration's official historian would record that shortly after the failed invasion the president came to a meeting waving cables from the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff regarding an invasion of Laos and remarked, "If it hadn't been for Cuba, we might be about to intervene in Laos. . . . I might have taken this advice seriously."[17] The chiefs appeared to be in disarray, even after Cuba. On the 1st of May, McGeorge Bundy advised the president that that morning the chiefs had been unanimously in favor of a military operation to secure the Laotian panhandle; he noted, however, that just two days before they had been evenly split, with the Navy and Air Force in favor and the Army and Marine Corps opposed.[18]

This was not the finest hour of the uniformed Pentagon leadership. Its advice was irresolute and at times unclear, qualities compounded by the administration's moves from crisis to crisis. This period, together with what the administration concluded was aggressive and faulty advice in the second Cuban crisis, produced in the Kennedy administration and its holdovers in the Johnson era a deep-seated distrust of the nation's senior military advisors.[19]

Although the decision processes in themselves had been ugly in the cases of Korea and Laos, the decisions themselves can be appraised separately—ugly processes can have attractive outcomes. Yet one ought not to rely on luck when deciding whether to commit the nation to war.

The Bad. Although evidence is limited, due to the destruction in the early 1970s of virtually all documentary evidence of JCS meetings during the Vietnam period, the 1964–65 Vietnam decisions appear to constitute a less egregious case of low-quality decision making. The military had sufficient time and access to thrash out a position and to make its case to the president, the national command authority, and Congress. Meetings between civilian and military leaders were regular and frequently frank. Senior military leaders believed the chairman accurately represented their views and opinions to the president and that he listened. Consequently, the individual chiefs consciously chose not to exercise their legal right to see the president.[20]

Senior military leaders failed to capitalize on this early and continual involvement. The roots of their failure lay in their inability to articulate an agreed-upon, viable alternative to the limited war advocated by civilian policy makers. In particular, they were unable to pierce the argument that a larger commitment of force would inevitably be met with a larger opposing force and produce a geographically wider battlefield, that such a battlefield could not be sealed, and that the chances of a conflict with China would be much higher.[21]

In the face of this fundamental and irresolvable difference of opinion over the likely response of the enemy and the acceptance of risk of a major Asian conflagration, senior military leaders failed to make their case explicitly by presenting clearly the costs and risks of all courses of action. "There was no recommendation that I can recall for the total force," according to the Chief of Staff of the Army, General Harold K. Johnson. Instead, there were two "comments," one by Johnson and the other by General Wallace Greene, Commandant of the Marine Corps, that between 500,000 and 750,000 troops and five to seven years might be required.[22] We know that when such respected advisors as George Ball and Clark Clifford later used such figures, the general response was that they were "crazier than hell." Had senior military leaders staffed and presented their case more clearly, the response may have been different.

But the military produced no strategic estimate evaluating the costs, risks, and benefits of various courses of action and tying a preferred course to broader national security strategy. The closest thing to a strategic estimate was a study by the director of the Joint Staff, General Andrew J. Goodpaster, entitled "Intensification of the Military Operations in Vietnam: Concept and Appraisal." Commissioned by verbal order from the chairman on 2 July 1965 and completed by an ad-hoc group on 14 July, its purpose was to "assess the assurance the United States can have of winning in [South Vietnam] if we do 'everything we can.'" Its conclusion was a marginally qualified affirmative. Up to seventy-nine battalions might be required to quell the insurgency, but as few as fifty-one might suffice.[23]

Unfortunately, the report confined itself to what Clausewitz would have called "purely military analysis." It made accurate assessments and predictions about the deficiencies of the army of South Vietnam, as well as about Chinese and Soviet support, regional and United Nations political developments, and the evolution of force ratios for all involved parties. It also correctly recognized that political will was required to win. However, the study did not analyze the effect of national will on the war effort, nor did it consider the time necessary to win the war even under its own assumptions, or the impact on U.S. force levels with and without a reserve call-up. Underlying the analysis was the view—wholeheartedly supported by the service chiefs at this time—that the enemy would fight large-unit battles. Finally, the report exaggerated the effectiveness of airpower, even as it recognized its general limitations.[24]

If the nature and form of military advice was lacking in the Vietnam decisions, the content of that advice was the final failure. In short, the advisors misunderstood essential aspects of the nature of the conflict. Civilians and military officers alike overestimated the efficacy of airpower, were convinced that the conflict was moving into a Maoist "third phase" in which the enemy would fight large-scale conventional battles, and neglected the importance of domestic support for the insurgency. They believed the enemy would not match the U.S. buildup and that external infiltration and support were the primary problems.[25]

> *How is one to make war in a way that follows its essential logic and yet is "fully consonant with political objectives"?*

These beliefs and a general sense of, if not optimism, then can-do-ism, characterize the preponderance of military advice in the spring and summer of 1965. It is found in the weekly summaries of the Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, which made their way to the White House; in General Johnson's March 1965 report following his trip to Vietnam; in the April 1965 Honolulu Conference; and most of all during the July plenary meetings, at which senior military leaders had an open floor with the president.[26] This may explain why a concept of operations was not even agreed upon for the deployed forces until after the critical decisions.

The inability to articulate an alternative strategy, the absence of a strategic estimate, and the failure to comprehend or convey essential aspects of the war must be kept in mind when we read, for example, *Dereliction of Duty, On Strategy, The Key to Failure,* and such vignettes as "The Day It Became the Longest War."[27] For some of these authors, it was largely a matter of guts and guile—personal and moral failures on the part of the chiefs to stand up to the bullies and manipulators in the White House and present the proper, winning strategy. This accusation may be satisfying in a certain way, but vilification for lack of courage presupposes that a solution was known to exist but was not bravely put forward. The chiefs pressed sporadically for more force but did not have a clear solution at the "theater-strategic" level, where political and military realities meet.[28]

In *On Strategy II: A Critical Analysis of the Gulf War,* Summers quotes General Johnson as saying that he would go to his grave with the knowledge of the "lapse in moral courage" of having failed to tell his president what was necessary to win the war.[29] Yet in oral histories shortly after his retirement, Johnson referred instead to two mindsets that afflicted both civilians and military. One was the unexamined assumption that a display of American power would cause the enemy to run; the other was that none of his "acquaintances wanted to trigger a conflict with the Russians. No one wanted the Chinese to come moving out of South China." The threat may have been "overstated, but nevertheless in many people's minds it was real, because unconditional surrender in World War II had prolonged that war in the minds of many people."[30]

The military had a set of divided and debatable preferences rather than a communicable or convincing plan. Yet had the senior military leaders presented even their competing, possibly flawed preferences in terms that laid out their costs and risks, the outcome may have been different. For regardless of their shortcomings and motivations, neither Lyndon Johnson nor any of his advisors wished to destroy the Great Society, ruin the prospects for the Democratic Party, or tear the very fabric of American society. Confronted with the likely costs of various courses of action, they may have made different decisions. Requirements for continual written estimates may help to overcome civilian stubbornness or divisions within the military by confronting both with the stark facts of worst-case scenarios.

The Good. In 1954, the Eisenhower administration pondered sending air, naval, and ground forces to save the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu. Since at least 1950, official policy had held that a noncommunist Vietnam was a vital U.S. interest. At stake were a significant population and territory, prospective strategic resources and minerals, and the image of the West as able to resist all forms of communist expansion. The United States also had made a clear public commitment, in that it had supported France in its war against the communists since the end of World War II. Thus the French could be optimistic when they came to the United States in the winter of 1954–55 to request military intervention.[31]

The administration ultimately chose not to become involved in either an air or a ground war. Over several months of deliberations, decision makers came to believe that any use of air power would be inconclusive and would so engage U.S. prestige that ground troops would inevitably follow. A ground commitment would require several hundred thousand troops for years. It was decided that the interest, however "vital," was not worth the cost.

The role of the military's information and advice in this decision is still debated. In his memoirs, General Matthew B. Ridgway, Army Chief of Staff at the time, stated (contra General Johnson) that he could go to his maker knowing he had saved a great number of lives that would have been sacrificed through muddy thinking. Eisenhower later stated that he did not recall Ridgway's main briefing; nonetheless, the Army's behavior in this case is a useful model. Ridgway sent a large team of specialists, representing every branch of the Army, on an extended visit to Indochina. The result was a comprehensive report stating that success in Indochina would require well over three hundred thousand U.S. troops, high rates of casualties for five to seven years, and an expansionist fiscal policy that would reverse the constraints Eisenhower had placed on the budget and in particular on the military.[32] Ridgway registered his amazement that policy makers were seriously considering a major war without taking due account of the costs and risks. By placing such estimates in writing and forcing their presentation to the National Security Council (NSC) and the president, Ridgway had a major impact on the key political decisions—or would have, had the president been inclined toward intervention.

General Ridgway's behavior was only an extension of his views up to that time. On several occasions he had prodded the NSC to face the fact that if Indochina was a vital interest and the council truly believed in the domino theory, the resources necessary to securing this interest had to be procured. Unfortunately, neither his actions nor his critical attitude toward facing squarely the costs of living up to major commitments were institutionalized. Indeed, defense reforms in 1958, and even more notably the Kennedy administration's selection of a new senior military leadership, served to rein in such independence of thought and action. The Goldwater-Nichols Act does not help and may in fact even hinder it.[33]

To what extent can and should the 1954 Ridgway model be institutionalized? The question points to the double-edged nature of healthy civil-military relations with respect to intervention decisions. On the one hand, Ridgway pushed the logic of military action as far as possible and clearly stated the costs and risks. He stayed "within his box," fulfilling what he saw as the requirements of a military-strategic assessment. He studiously avoided stepping over the line and advocating policy in any direction—and openly scolded his peers, including the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, when they recommended specific strategic-level policies. On the other hand, Ridgway did not avoid the political aspects of his strategic assessment, tackling head-on the difficult questions of how long the war would take (and by implication the need for domestic political support), the number of troops, expected casualties, operational rules and conditions, and wider fiscal requirements. It is precisely this combination of hard military analysis with an understanding of political relevancies that senior military leaders should emulate today.

Where Are We Now?

Recent experiences are no less indicative than these historical case studies of the need to improve the rules and norms concerning how and when the senior military leadership provides advice on the use of force. According to a widely read account, General Colin Powell as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff failed to offer options to President George Bush just after Saddam Hussein's August 1990 invasion of Kuwait, or in October, when the president wanted a more offensively oriented strategy.[34] Neither, it appears, did General Powell develop options for coercive diplomacy in Bosnia, claiming that no clear political objectives had been developed.[35] American military leaders (including retired admiral Jonathan Howe, acting as the UN emissary in charge) appeared also to misunderstand the fundamentals of clan structure and clan warfare in Somalia, contributing to the mission creep that ultimately led to the fruitless hunt for Mohammed Aideed. The war for Kosovo revealed not only an utter lack of planning for a ground option but also a Vietnam-like unwillingness to face the realities of ideationally motivated warfare.

None of these failures should be blamed exclusively on the military leaders themselves, of course. At least during the Bush administration, the political elites shared the military's basic premises on Bosnia and did not wish to become involved more deeply. Later, during President Bill Clinton's two terms (as in the Vietnam years), the Pentagon followed the White House's lead. Ideally, civilians would know what questions to ask and would understand the uses and limits of military force.

It is precisely these unhealthy symbiotic or subservient—as opposed to subordinate—relationships that legislation superseding the Goldwater-Nichols Act should preclude. I offer four suggestions to further debate.

First, the senior military leadership should be required by law to generate a *strategic estimate* that describes the likely costs and risks of several *strategic options*. These options should not be limited to those already under consideration by the White House. Thus, for example, if the White House does not wish to consider a ground war but the military considers one a strong likelihood, the costs, risks and requirements of that ground war should be analyzed and presented formally. The costs and risks would include matériel, casualties, and funding. Estimates of each option's duration should always be added to these factors, as well as appraisal of the domestic support it might enjoy. Together these building blocks point to the need for a "joint strategic capabilities plan" for use-of-force decisions—standardized procedures designed to guarantee consideration at the highest levels of the most important issues.

Second, an independent body of advisors should be established at the executive level (comparable to the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board) for decisions on the use of force. Some such boards work well in Washington, though the overwhelming majority do not. We lack studies on the factors bearing upon the effectiveness of such independent bodies. However, the value of such an independent advisory body, composed of retired military officers and diplomats, academics, and policy analysts, would probably be widely acknowledged after it participated in its first successful use-of-force decision.[36]

Third, some of the central tenets of Goldwater-Nichols need to be revised. Especially in the post–Cold War world, the notion of a single individual as the principal military advisor to the president is outdated. The merits of this arrangement have not been demonstrated—it was not responsible for victory in the Gulf War, for the initial accomplishments in Somalia, or for the limited achievements of Kosovo. The drawbacks are great, however, and obvious. It prevents a multiplicity of military views from reaching the president. More importantly, it prevents the development of those views, which must be diluted if they are ever to see the light of debate. The power of the chairman over the vice chairman and the Joint Staff needs to be decreased if a strategic estimate is to be effective.

Fourth, the selection and education processes for senior military leaders, including the service chiefs and the chairman, need to be reexamined. The present politicization of the selection process should be decreased. Professional military education must also be focused on areas relevant to tomorrow's struggles: regional security studies, the spread of technologies of mass destruction, the nature of international criminal and terrorist organizations, ethnic conflict, nuclear and conventional deterrence, the advisory and decision-making processes and the ethics involved in them, and the evolution of international norms and law. Mastery of any of these requires a serious commitment to higher education, including the necessary time and incentives; how this is to be squared with existing incentives for promotion is the greatest challenge.[37]

These and related changes will not be fully effective unless comparable analysis and progress are made in the civilian realm. We have relied so heavily on the principle of civilian control that we have neglected to consider the need for civilian leaders and bureaucrats knowledgeable about military power. That, however, is the subject of another argument.

The goal of the nation's military leadership in use-of-force decisions should be to provide, in an effective way, useful advice to political decision makers whatever their strengths and limitations. "Effectiveness" refers to the ability to inject counsel concerning military implications into the thinking of political decision makers. This requires the communication of military perspectives on the costs, risks, and benefits of various options. "Usefulness" refers to the extent to which information and advice promote decisions that further the national interest as political decision makers define it—or ought to define it, could they see more comprehensively. This requires of senior officers a deeper understanding of the political, geographical, and technological bases of military issues than has previously been evident except in a handful of individuals. Finally, they must bring this advice together at the nexus of the operational and strategic levels. If they choose instead to adhere to "purely military" advice or to color their advice with the perspective of politicians—in any branch of government—senior military leaders will provide neither effective nor useful counsel.

The emerging strategic environment requires a rethinking of the civil-military relationship at the upper levels. The present obsession with control needs to be replaced with an emphasis on advice, counsel, and information, so that military and political institutions can better collaborate in assuring the nation's security.

Notes

1. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1989), p. 606.

2. Ibid., pp. 607–8.

3. Ibid., p. 608.

4. Ibid., pp. 609–10.

5. For a good summary of the traditional view of the problem, see Peter D. Feaver, "The Civil-Military Problématique: Huntington, Janowitz, and the Question of Civilian Control," *Armed Forces and Society*, Winter 1996, p. 149.

6. John D. Steinbruner, *The Cybernetic Theory of Decision* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1974), p. 16.

7. John Elster, "Introduction," in *Rational Choice*, ed. John Elster (Oxford, U.K.: Basil, Blackwell, 1986), pp. 34–59; Steinbruner, pp. 32–5, 65; Alexander L. George, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1980), p. 10; Graham T. Allison, "Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crisis," *American Political Science Review* (September 1969), pp. 689–96; and Janice Gross Stein and Raymond Tanter, *Rational Decision Making: Israel's Security Choices* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 11–6.

8. Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1997), p. 178. See p. 188 for a candid expression of how far apart were the chiefs and the president.

9. See Michael R. Gordon and General Bernard E. Trainor, *The Generals' War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995).

10. See James F. Schnabel and Robert J. Watson, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, vol. 3, *1950–1951, The Korean War, Part One* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Office of Joint History, 1998), pp. 1–24. See also, John Lewis Gaddis, *The Long Peace* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), ch. 4, "Drawing Lines: The Defensive Perimeter Strategy in East Asia, 1947–1951." For the CIA assessment that withdrawal would result in invasion by the North and collapse of the South, see "Consequences of U.S. Troop Withdrawal from Korea in Spring, 1949," OFE 3-49, 28 February 1949, in *CIA Cold War Records:*

The CIA under Harry Truman, ed. Michael Warner (Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Agency, Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1994), pp. 265–74.

11. James F. Schnabel, *Policy and Direction: The First Year- -The United States Army in the Korean War* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Staff of the Army, Chief of Military History, 1972), pp. 83–9. The original message is in Schnabel and Watson, pp. 48–9. See Clay Blair, *The Forgotten War: America in Korea, 1950–1953* (New York: Anchor Books, 1989), pp. 82–3. See also Glenn Paige, *The Korean Decision* (New York: Free Press, 1968), pp. 120–8, 190–205.

12. Schnabel and Watson, p. 34; Joseph Goulden, *Korea: The Untold Story of the War* (New York: Times Books, 1982), p. 67.

13. For the "colt" quotation, Dean Acheson, draft letter to "Paul," 12 July 1950, Acheson Memos, box 65, Harry S. Truman Library. For analyses of this phase, see Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 148–84, 193–216; Irving Janis, *Groupthink*, 2d ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982), pp. 48–71; and George, pp. 69, 75, 125, 128.

14. For Admiral Sherman's hesitance to question the decision, see Schnabel and Watson, p. 50. On the more general problem see Dean Acheson, *The Korean War* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), pp. 68–72.

15. See, for example, Clark Clifford memorandum to the president, 29 September 1967, on Memorandum of Conference on 19 January 1961, *The Pentagon Papers*, Senator Gravel Edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), vol. 2, pp. 635–7. Memoranda and notes on the transition meetings relating to Laos are found in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963*, vol. 14, *Laos Crisis* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1994), pp. 1–27, see esp. nn. 3 and 5, pp. 24 and 25, respectively. Clifford indicates that Eisenhower thought the United States should intervene alone if necessary. For a discussion of the controversy surrounding the issue, see Fred Greenstein and Richard Immerman, "What Did Eisenhower Tell Kennedy about Indochina? The Politics of Misperception," *Journal of American History*, vol. 29, no. 2, 1992, pp. 568–88.

16. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 338.

17. Ibid., p. 326.

18. McGeorge Bundy note, 5/1/61, POF, CF Laos 1961, box 121, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, Mass.

19. See, for example, McGeorge Bundy, "Some Preliminary Administrative Lessons of the Cuban Expedition" (draft, 24 April 1961), in James G. Blight and Peter Kornbluh, eds., *The Bay of Pigs Reexamined* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1998), par. 4, p. 266.

20. See, for example, Oral Histories of General Earle G. Wheeler, 21 August 1969, Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Penna., pp. 24–5, and 7 May 1970, also pp. 24–5; General William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Da Capo, 1989), pp. 131, 159–60; and Oral History of General Harold K. Johnson, Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Penna., 1 August 1974, pp. 17–8. Citing Hanson Baldwin, Harry Summers blames the paucity of meetings between the Chief of Staff of the Army and the president on the latter. See Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1982) p. 48, n. 16.

21. This section relies on declassified documents from the Papers of the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff (National Archives) and Office of the Historian of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Pentagon), Washington, D.C.

22. Oral History of General Harold K. Johnson, 1 August 1974, p. 8.

23. Report of Ad Hoc Study Group, 14 July 1965, NSF Country/Vietnam, box 20, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Austin, Texas.

24. I am indebted to Colonel Tom Maffey on this point.

25. See Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1986).

26. On 20 April 1965, McNamara, with John T. McNaughton (deputy secretary of defense for international security affairs) and McGeorge Bundy (special assistant to the president for national security affairs) met in Honolulu with General Westmoreland, Maxwell Taylor (U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam), General Earle Wheeler, U.S. Army (chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff), and Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp, Jr. (Commander in Chief, Pacific Command) to consider the military options. U.S. State Dept., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, vol. 2, *Vietnam, January–June 1965*, esp. docs. 262, 264, and 265, retrieved January 2000 from the World Wide Web: http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/.

27. H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997); Summers, *Vietnam War*; Norman B. Hannah, *The Key to Failure: Laos and the Vietnam War* (Lanham, Md.: Madison Books, 1987); and Charles G. Cooper [Lt. Gen., USMC, Ret.], "The Day It Became the Longest War," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, May 1996, pp. 77–80.

28. On the importance of the "theater-strategic" level of analysis, see William J. Gregor, "Toward a Revolution in Civil-Military Affairs: Understanding the United States Military in the Post–Cold War World," Project on U.S. Post–Cold War Civil-Military Relations, Working Paper no. 6, August 1996 (Harvard University, John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies).

29. Harry Summers, *On Strategy II: A Critical Analysis of the Gulf War* (New York: Dell, 1992), p. 54.

30. Oral History of General Harold K. Johnson, 21 May 1973, p. 37. On the lingering skepticism toward policies of unconditional surrender, see Brien Hallett, "Unconditional Surrender and the U.S. Military," unpublished manuscript, Matsunaga Institute for Peace, University of Hawaii.

31. Among secondary sources see *The Pentagon Papers*, Senator Gravel edition, vol. 1; Melanie Billings-Yun, *Decision against War: Eisenhower and Dien Bien Phu, 1954* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1988); George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1986); George Herring and Richard Immerman, "Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu: 'The Day We Didn't Go to War' Revisited," *Journal of American History*, September 1984; and Michael Schaller, "Securing the Great Crescent: Occupied Japan and the Origins of Containment in Southeast Asia," *Journal of American History*, September 1982.

32. Documents at the Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Penna.

33. See Christopher M. Bourne, "Unintended Consequences of the Goldwater-Nichols Act," *Joint Force Quarterly*, Spring 1998, pp. 99–109.

34. Gordon and Trainor.

35. Colin L. Powell, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), pp. 576–7.

36. See the author's "Expanding the Base of Expertise: A PFIAB for Use-of-Force Decisions," *Strategic Studies Institute Newsletter*, U.S. Army War College, December 1999.

37. Each service views its educational resources differently, and indications are that Congress will take another look at the disparities as the next defense-reform debate shapes up. See Paul R. Schratz, "The Hundred-Year Growing Pain," *Naval War College Review*, September–October 1984, reprinted Winter 1998, pp. 137–52.

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