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Civilian-Military Relations in the Context of National Security Policymaking

Marshall Bremont

Earlier this year, members of the Strategic Studies Group, which is headquartered here at the Naval War College, had the good fortune to hear firsthand of Brigadier General James M. Mead's experiences commanding forces in Lebanon. We were struck by his vivid description of the constant interchange that he, as commander of Marine forces ashore, had with Ambassador Philip Habib as they frantically scrambled to define and protect our nation's interests during that crisis. The message conveyed by General Mead was that the kind of amorphous and nebulous situation he encountered in Lebanon required the employment of Marines in ways which he had not been trained to do and for which no specific doctrine existed. Nevertheless, it was a situation that Marines will be dealing with again and again in the years ahead. It therefore behooves us—both civilians and military—to think through what will be facing us in such situations so that we do not find ourselves coping constantly with the totally unexpected.

The General's remarks struck home with me because his bottom line was completely consonant with the project completed in Newport by the members of last year's Strategic Studies Group, which was tasked by then Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral James B. Watkins, to examine the utilization of naval forces in peacetime and to develop a proactive means of employing these forces to avert crises. Admiral Watkins felt that all too often naval forces were merely being used as a "force of convenience," rather than as an integral part of a broad, overarching strategy.

Although a difficult and sensitive topic for a group of Navy and Marine officers to examine, it was ideal for educating them to the ins and outs of policymaking at the national level. In delving into the problem, they soon

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This article was excerpted by the editors from a speech delivered by Ambassador Bremont to U.S. Marine Corps staff, faculty, and students of the Naval War College at a "Mess Night" which took place on 30 March 1987.

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learned that there was no significant contingency planning by civilians, no standard procedures to ensure that stated policy was actually being carried out by the relevant agencies, and no systematic, designated means of coordinating policy implementation by the various Government departments. After extensive discussions with members of the National Security Council staff and officials of the State and Defense Departments and of the Central Intelligence Agency, the group came to the conclusion that significant differences existed between civilians and the military with regard to planning and crisis management.

Civilian policymakers, who had given the subject some thought, tended to criticize the military for offering them unrealistic and unusable courses of action in times of crisis. Military officers, on the other hand, criticized civilian decisionmakers for not giving them clear directives and for not revealing their hidden agenda. "If they didn't want me to incur any casualties," one such officer asked, "then why didn't they say so?"

The SSG concluded that a dysfunction existed between civilian and military thinking. For obvious reasons, the military devotes almost all of its planning time to warfighting, which essentially means maximum military effectiveness in putting ordnance on targets. When facing a peacetime situation which may require military action, the military tends to try to fit their wartime plans into peacetime contingencies. But for a variety of reasons this does not work. Civilians confronting peacetime crisis situations usually want low-risk, relatively quick response options that can be publicized as successes on the evening news. Public perception is actually more important to them than military effectiveness. Furthermore, civilian policymakers would much prefer to receive a series of options rather than operate on the basis of the single option generally offered to them by the military, who are naturally reluctant to come up with alternatives that have not been adequately thought through and staffed.

An even more fundamental difference between civilian and military crisis management is the absence of contingency planning by civilians. The military deals with concrete matters. To move a battalion or an aircraft carrier takes meticulous advance planning. There is not a military headquarters anywhere in the world that does not engage in planning and does not consider its plans section to be an important component.

The Secretary of State, on the other hand, deals only with the crisis of the day. The Secretary is without forces at his disposal. His tools are words, and words can be composed rapidly and transmitted instantaneously. He and his staff see no reason to anticipate their responses to upcoming events in any significant detail. Their responses, they feel, will flow naturally as they address the situations that develop—situations that are impossible to predict minutely. They lose sight of the fact that effective peacetime military response requires advance consultation by the military with civilian

components of the National Command Authority in order to ensure that the parameters of the problem to be addressed, and its goals and objectives, are fully understood and factored into the requisite military plans.

For these and other reasons, one of the major conclusions drawn by last year's Strategic Studies Group was that peacetime and wartime targeting and planning are fundamentally different and must be approached in wholly distinct ways. The SSG also concluded that naval options cannot be implemented with maximum effectiveness by themselves. They should be coupled with, and preceded by, coordinated pre-crisis contingency planning that takes into account the political, public affairs, economic, and diplomatic factors. The way to accomplish such comprehensive planning, the group felt, was to work out interagency regional peacetime strategies for the six primary hot spots in the world—those areas where use of U.S. military force is most likely to occur over the next several years.

The key to formulating such strategies lies in the in-depth examination of the various "unacceptable acts" that could occur in each of those regions and in the construction of matrices that outline the political, diplomatic, economic, public affairs, and military actions the United States could undertake to preclude such "unacceptable acts" from occurring; or, if indeed they do occur, to think through appropriate responses to such "unacceptable acts."

It concluded that "unacceptable acts" in any given region were finite and in some cases could be narrowed down to as few as four or five; that once they had thought through their preemptive, proactive, and reactive responses to those four or five "unacceptable acts," they had actually thought through the entire range of response options available to the U.S. Government for dealing with almost any political crisis in that region.

The benefits of coordinated, pre-crisis contingency planning may seem obvious, but the fact is that such planning has not been done by the U.S. Government for the past twenty-five years—not since the Presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower. In that Administration, such planning was a concept which was considered central to the administration of national security policy. The National Security Council in those years had a Planning Board to engage in policy planning and an Operations Coordinating Board (OCB) to ensure, on an interagency basis, that agreed policies were implemented and, to the extent possible, potential political crises identified and averted. This bureaucratic structure was keyed to regular Thursday meetings of the National Security Council, presided over personally by President Eisenhower, which generally lasted several hours. Eisenhower, who was head of planning for the U.S. Army when General George C. Marshall selected him to command our forces in Europe, was committed to the idea of military planning and brought such concepts into the White House when he became President, as did his former Chief of Staff Walter Bedell Smith, who became Deputy Secretary of State and the Head of the Operations Coordinating Board.

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On 6 December 1960, in a meeting with President-elect John F. Kennedy, Eisenhower stressed the importance of the NSC "together with its two supporting agencies—the Planning Board and the Operations Coordinating Board. . . . I did urge him," Eisenhower wrote in his diary, "to avoid any reorganization until he himself could become well-acquainted with the problem. (Incidentally, I made this same suggestion with respect to the White House staff, the National Security Council, and the Pentagon.)"

This is a unique example in our history of one President passing on his wisdom, gleaned after eight years in the White House, to a newly elected President of the other party. It was good advice, but Kennedy did not heed it. He abolished the subordinate OCB structure a few months after he took office. To cut out bureaucratic fat is a good idea, but not if the muscle and the gristle are cut out with it.

The Tower Commission pointed out that the sequence of events in Irangate was an aberration from the way the NSC ordinarily operates and recommended that the NSC continue to do its business using current procedures. In our post-World War II environment, the President cannot operate without a staff to coordinate foreign policy and national security affairs. No department or agency can substitute for that staff because each department and agency has its own parochial interests and its own axes to grind, which do not necessarily coincide with our national interest or with the President's political interest.

The President's staff, however, cannot function as an operational agency or have an agenda of its own separate from those of the great departments which administer our national security policy. The difference between staff work and operations is better understood in the military than in any other segment of our society, as is the need for the clear delineation of responsibility and for adherence to a chain of command. It has therefore been shocking to a great many Americans to see as the culprits in the latest series of White House shenanigans two distinguished military officers on active duty. With this in mind, it is perhaps worthwhile to consider where those officers went wrong. It should be clear that there are certain rules, procedures, and canons in the making of high government policy which, if violated, can lead to catastrophe. These can be encapsulated in the following ten rules, all of which were transgressed recently by officials of the National Security Council staff.

The first rule is stringently to think through the downside. It is not too much to ask White House operatives to make a balanced risk-to-gain assessment before undertaking any action. President Nixon was going to be reelected by a landslide in 1972. Everybody on his staff knew this. Why rob Democratic Party headquarters under those circumstances? What possible gains could have compensated for the losses suffered?

The second rule is never let the maintenance of necessary secrecy impede access to those who have a genuine need to know. To proceed with a deal to exchange antitank missiles for several unfortunate hostages against the advice of the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense was folly. To take subsequent action to achieve this end without keeping George Shultz and Caspar Weinberger fully informed was madness—both operationally and politically. Secrecy has its place, but it should never be used as a means to keep unpleasant advice from the President.

The third rule, a variation of the second, is to beware the half-baked expert. Would any admiral commanding the Second Fleet make crucial decisions about submarine deployments without consulting COMSUBLANT? If not, then how can senior officials on the National Security Council staff advise sending Bibles from presidents to ayatollahs without first consulting a genuine expert on Iran and Iranian culture?

The fourth rule is to take every possible step to disassociate the President from actions which have risky or negative consequences. The most bewildering single act of this whole sorry affair was the trip to Teheran. What were the risks and what were the gains of using a former National Security adviser on such a mission? Why not have the negotiations done by a trusted agent or even a third country national so that if the negotiations failed there would be no direct link to the White House?

The fifth rule is never to associate two unassociated policy initiatives. While highly creative, the use of money generated by Iranian arms sales to support the Contras was of dubious legality and could only hurt the Contras in the long run. An iron law of Washington is that everything eventually becomes public. To bank that secrecy will protect you is the mark of an amateur.

The sixth rule is always consult your lawyer and your press secretary before undertaking important policy initiatives. Public and press reaction to what you are doing is fundamentally important in our democracy, as is staying within the boundaries of the rule of law. If what you are planning is deemed too sensitive to reveal to these two key officials, then forget those plans. They are certain to damage the President eventually.

The seventh rule is to think three steps ahead of yourself about the gains you expect to achieve. Even if the U.S.-Iranian arms negotiations had come to fruition and the hostages had been released, the United States still would have endured a net loss. The fundamental geopolitical fact of the matter is that it is not in the interest of the United States for Iran to be victorious in its current war with Iraq or for terrorists to believe that the way to manipulate the U.S. Government is by seizing a few American hostages. Exchanging TOW missiles for such hostages is therefore, on both counts, a very bad idea.

The eighth rule is never to use a military man for political purposes. This can only discredit the military and damage the military-civilian relationship

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upon which our democracy is based. The military work for the elected representatives of the people, whichever Party is in power. Military officers should *never* be asked to engage in actions that could be construed as politically partisan. Speaking at fund-raisers and opening Swiss bank accounts is not acceptable behavior if you're wearing a green suit. If you have to engage in such actions, then at the very least retire from active service before doing so.

The ninth rule is to avoid zealots and zealotry. When asked for the prime characteristic of a practitioner of diplomacy, the great French statesman Talleyrand unhesitatingly replied, "Surtout, pas trop de zèle—Above all, not too much zeal." This is as true today as it was in the 18th century. There are better places for true believers than on the White House staff.

The tenth rule is to think strategically and beware the false analogy. One of the participants in the ill-fated journey to Teheran suggested in an Op-Ed article for the *Washington Post* last autumn that the opening to Iran paralleled Kissinger's opening to China. What he neglected to point out was that the two most important foreign policy aims of the Nixon administration were to get out of Vietnam with our honor intact and to establish a détente relationship with the Soviet Union. On both these counts the U.S. opening to China not only made sense, but was a powerful impetus in achieving those aims. Had the negotiations with Chou En-Lai failed, they nevertheless would have been understood by all sensible observers of international affairs as being clearly in the basic interests of the United States and the West. Such cannot be said—to put it mildly—about the so-called opening to Iran.

Exactly eighty-two years ago, the greatest scientific paper of the last several centuries was published, in which Albert Einstein proved that time and space not only look different, but *are* different, for the man traveling in a spaceship close to the speed of light, as well as for the man observing him from a distant vantage point. From my experience, time and space are correspondingly different for those of us outside observing the White House and for the man working in the White House and trying to make sense of the outside world.

But it is nevertheless not asking too much of those who hold the awesome responsibility for decisions that may lead brave members of our military forces to shed their blood to think through, as many moves ahead as possible, all ramifications of any such decisions. Careless and slapdash decisionmaking is inexcusable. The end game is what counts both in chess and in diplomacy.

Note

1. An "unacceptable act" was defined as any action which *required* a response from the U.S. Government which might involve the employment of the U.S. military.