



Strategic Insights: A New Era in Civ-Mil Relations: Rendering Advice to Those Who Do Not Want It

November 2, 2015 | Dr. Don M. Snider

Recently, one of the most respected voices of those who work and teach in the field of American civil-military (civ-mil) relations, Professor Peter Feaver, provocatively offered the following question:

When it comes to national security, should one advise President Barack Obama on the best course of action or just the best course of action that he is likely or able to accept and implement?¹

Thus, owing primarily to the Obama administration's difficult civ-mil relations and what some consider to be ineffective policy implementation, particularly in Syria, this question is now sprouting up in journalistic reporting, academic journals, and in classroom discussions here at the U.S. Army War College. The import of the question for military professionals lies in the fact that it could lead one outside the traditional norms of American civil-military relations. These norms have in general held that the responsibility of senior military leaders is simply to give their best professional military advice – no shading allowed, and most certainly no shading that might make policy implementation less than fully effective. In fact in the Army's new doctrine of the profession (ADRP 1 – *The Army Profession*),² the principles are clearly stated:

Military leaders offer their expertise and advice candidly to appropriate civilian leadership . . . Army professionals properly confine their advisory role to the policymaking process and do not engage publically in policy advocacy or dissent. Army professionals adhere to a strict ethic of political nonpartisanship in the execution of their duty.³

Note that Feaver alludes to how future military advice might be shaded, specifically in a direction that will make it have a better chance of acceptance and implementation. The idea is that military leaders, when forming their multiple options or courses of action (COAs), might broaden them to include options that are known to be favored by the civilian leader. Or, conversely, they can simply refrain from rendering advice that they pretty well know in advance will not be accepted, even if it better supports the mutually agreed strategic objectives.

A more refined explanation of this breakdown in civ-mil relations, particularly as it applies to use-of-force decisionmaking, is detailed in a journal article by Janine Davidson, a recent political appointee within the Obama administration:

This article suggests that the mutual frustration between civilian leaders and the military begins with cultural factors, which are actually embedded into the uniformed military's planning system. The military's doctrine and education reinforce a culture of 'military professionalism' that outlines a set of expectations about the civil-military decision-making process and that defines 'best military advice' in very specific ways. Moreover, the institutionalized military planning system is designed to produce detailed and realistic military plans for execution – and that will ensure 'victory' – and is thus ill suited to the rapid production of multiple options desired by presidents. The output of this system, framed on specific concepts and definitions about: 'ends,' 'ways,' and 'means,' and expectations about who provides what type of planning guidance, is out of synch with the expectations of presidents and their civilian advisors who have been formed by a different set of cultural and institutional drivers.⁴

This description by civilian leaders portrays these culturally-induced civ-mil tensions to be clearly dysfunctional. However, not all participants in the process agree. When asked just before his retirement, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Marty Dempsey, replied:

I think the system is actually designed to create that friction in decisionmaking . . . I would advise future leaders that friction and disagreement in decisionmaking is not a negative. Frankly, you should embrace the friction. What I found was, and I cannot put a percentage on it, but in general the person at the table with the most persuasive argument tends to prevail in those environments.⁵

And when asked subsequently what military leaders could do to change the situation, particularly in situations of conflict with nonstate actors, Dempsey replied:

Elected officials are hardwired to ask for options first and then reverse engineer to objectives. And the military is hard wired to do exactly the opposite . . . Now what do we do about that situation? Nothing frankly. But that is the environment we live and work in. I learned that pretty early on . . . When you become a senior military leader, you have multiple responsibilities, one of which is to give the best military advice possible . . . If you are going to understand how decisions are made in our government, you must build relationships, and if you are going to build relationships you have to demonstrate a certain gravitas . . . If you can't build a relationship of trust and credibility – credibility first and trust second because trust is earned – then you won't be successful in contributing to our national security strategy . . . I don't find the options to be that crisp in [conflict with nonstate actors], and therefore we have to be more thoughtful and open to negotiating them, remembering that we have a moral compass.⁶

These are significantly differing perspectives on the current difficulties in civ-mil decisionmaking. What, then, are military professionals to do, how are they to prepare themselves for service in this environment?

To me, two items seem obvious. First, we should rapidly be adapting the Joint Planning Systems. They were originally designed during the Cold War and implemented for conflict with the other great powers. Now the requirement is for the rapid and iterative planning needed for conflict with nonstate actors. Some adaptations have been made including a newer crisis planning system, but Davidson's critique remains valid.

Second, we should be educating at every level in the services' schools of professional education just what the culture of "military professionalism" should be – that culture that Davidson alluded to in the first quotation above. In his interview, the Chairman aptly outlined several of its major principles: Give the best military advice possible, build credibility across the civ-mil divide by developing gravitas in military expertise to earn the trust of those with whom you serve, be thoughtful and open in negotiating national security options, and be guided by a moral compass.⁷

To which, I would add another principle, the steward's responsibility to maintain the quality and independence of the profession's expert knowledge and practice. In other words, despite the current tensions, do not lose the soul of the military professions, the belief as expressed by Professor Eliot Freidson, that:

claims the right, even the obligation, of professionals to be independent of those who empower them legally and provide them with their living . . . the functional value of a body of specialized knowledge and skill is less central to the professional ideology

than its attachment to a transcendent value that gives it meaning and justifies its independence. By virtue of that independence, members of the profession claim the right to judge the demands of employers or patrons and the laws of a state, to criticize and to refuse to obey them. That refusal is based not on personal grounds of individual conscience or desire but on the professional grounds that the basic value or purpose of a discipline is being perverted.⁸

Obviously, Freidson was writing from the perspective of professions in the private sector. But there is still applicability to the military professions notwithstanding the provisions for civilian control embedded in our Constitution. In fact, Professor Feaver notes this when he answered his own rhetorical question: “But it is dangerous for military advisors to let the president’s debilities shape their best military judgment. That puts the military on the slippery slope of politicization that ends in sycophancy, with the president surrounded by yes-men.”⁹

“Military Professionalism?” By all means, and the kind that candidly and independently presents first their profession’s best military advice.

ENDNOTES

1. Peter Feaver, “Is It Worth Giving Obama Advice He Won’t Listen To?” *Foreign Policy*, September 4, 2015, available from foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/04/is-it-worth-giving-obama-advice-he-wont-listen-to/, accessed on October 6, 2015.
2. Headquarters, Department of the Army, ADRP1 – *The Army Profession*, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, June 2015.
3. ADRP 1, pp. 6-3.
4. Janine Davidson, “Civil-Military Friction and Presidential Decision Making: Explaining the Broken Dialogue,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No.1, March, 2013, pp. 129-145.
5. Joseph Collins and Richard Hooker, “From the Chairman: An Interview with Martin E. Dempsey,” *Joint Force Quarterly*, Vol. 78, 3rd Quarter, 2015, pp 2-13, quotation from pp. 5 and 9.
6. Collins and Hooker, pp. 7-9.
7. For a more detailed list of such principles see, Richard Kohn, “Building Trust: Civil-Military Behaviors for Effective National Security,” chapter 13 in Suzanne Nielsen and Don Snider, *American Civil-Military Relations: The Soldier and the State in a New Era*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009, pp. 264-289.
8. Eliot Freidson, *Professionalism: The Third Logic*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001, pp. 220-221.

9. Feaver, p. 2.

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