

Trump's Generals: A Natural Experiment in Civil-Military Relations

JAMES JOYNER

Abstract

President Donald Trump's filling of numerous top policy positions with active and retired officers he called "my generals" generated fears of militarization of foreign policy, loss of civilian control of the military, and politicization of the military—yet also hope that they might restrain his worst impulses. Because the generals were all gone by the halfway mark of his administration, we have a natural experiment that allows us to compare a Trump presidency with and without retired generals serving as "adults in the room." None of the dire predictions turned out to be quite true. While Trump repeatedly flirted with civil-military crises, they were not significantly amplified or deterred by the presence of retired generals in key roles. Further, the pattern continued in the second half of the administration when "true" civilians filled these billets. Whether longer-term damage was done, however, remains unresolved.

The presidency of Donald Trump served as a natural experiment, testing many of the long-debated precepts of the civil-military relations (CMR) literature. His postelection interviewing of more than a half dozen recently retired four-star officers for senior posts in his administration unleashed a torrent of columns pointing to the dangers of further militarization of US foreign policy and damage to the military as a nonpartisan institution. At the same time, many argued that these men were uniquely qualified to rein in Trump's worst proclivities. With Trump's tenure over, we can begin to evaluate these claims. Additionally, the period of "Trump's generals" ended almost precisely halfway through his administration, with the resignations of James Mattis as secretary of defense (SecDef) and John Kelly as White House chief of staff (WHCOS)—effective 1 and 2 January 2019, respectively.

Therefore, we can compare a Trump presidency with and without retired generals serving as “adults in the room.”

This article compares predictions of a CMR crisis at the outset of the administration with the results. Specifically, it compares the following: concerns for militarization of foreign policy, loss of civilian control, politicization of the military, and hopes for restraining Trump’s worst instincts. We see that, while Trump repeatedly flirted with them, civil-military problems were not significantly amplified or deterred by the presence of retired generals in key roles. Further, a similar pattern continued in the second half of the administration when “true” civilians filled these billets. Whether longer-term damage was done, however, remains unresolved.

Predicting a Civil-Military Relations Crisis

The CMR debate started almost immediately after Trump’s 2016 election, when it became clear that an unusually large number of senior officers were candidates to join the administration. While the views on Mattis were mixed, the reaction against the prospect of so many retired senior officers set off alarm bells. By late November, Lt Gen Michael Flynn, USA, retired, was already announced as the national security advisor (NSA) designate.¹ Mattis was favored for defense secretary, though Gen Jack Keane, USA, retired, was reportedly being strongly considered. General Kelly, USMC, retired, was the frontrunner for secretary of homeland security; Gen David Petraeus, USA, retired, was being considered for both secretary of state and director of national intelligence (DNI); and active duty admiral Mike Rogers was also under consideration for DNI. US Army retired general Stanley McChrystal’s name was also being floated, despite his announcing over the summer that he “would decline consideration for any role” in a Trump administration.² The possibility of so many senior military leaders serving in key political roles caused civil-military scholars to suggest potential problems.

Concerns of Militarization of Foreign Policy

Many CMR scholars feared that placing retired officers in key national security roles would further shift the policy-making balance of power to the Pentagon, either because they shared the same worldview as serving officers or because they lacked a sufficient breadth of experience to appreciate nonmilitary instruments.

Gen Anthony Zinni, USMC, retired, was concerned that “we could end up being long on military strategy, much needed after the last two Admin-

istrations, but short of foreign policy expertise.” I argued, “Recently separated officers are likely to reinforce the advice given the president by the Joint Chiefs rather than offer a political perspective.”³ Phillip Carter and Loren DeJonge Schulman warned, “This risk is particularly acute now, after 15 years of war, when the military has achieved such policy and budget primacy, and military tools are often looked to as options of first, rather than last, resort.”⁴ Thomas Pickering echoed this sentiment, adding, “If they have all the money and resources and tools, that does reduce the influence and capacity of the civilian-dominated agency.”⁵

Carol Giacomo took a slightly different tack and argued that “the concern is not so much that military leaders might drag the country into more wars. It is that the Pentagon, with its nearly \$600 billion budget, already exercises vast sway in national security policymaking and dwarfs the State Department in resources.”⁶

But, as with the other CMR concerns, many were skeptical. Richard Fontaine pushed back at the notion that retired officers were especially likely to urge the use of force, observing, “In my experience, veterans have been less likely than the civilians to advocate for military intervention abroad.” He suggested that it was the latter who “pushed hardest to launch the 2003 Iraq invasion.”⁷ Maj Gen Charles Dunlap, USAF, retired, went further, contending that because they know the costs, “retired generals don’t clamor for war; they are typically the voices urging that all other avenues be exhausted before turning to force.”⁸

Additionally, many disagreed that modern four-stars fail to understand the complexities of the larger policy picture. For example, Caroline Bechtel observed, “Combatant commanders oversee all assets in their respective areas of operation, coordinating all military, diplomatic, intelligence, and even development assets in their commands. Thus, they must have an intimate understanding of the command’s political context, often playing a regional political or diplomatic role themselves.”⁹

Concerns over Civilian Control

The most debated CMR issue was whether these retired generals would further shift the balance of power toward the military brass and away from civilian policy makers, exacerbating a growing public sense that military affairs are best left to the military. Even many who supported a waiver for Mattis believed it would be dangerous for the exception to become the norm. A related concern was whether a lifetime in uniform left retired officers unprepared for the challenges of navigating an inherently political process. Robert Burns noted, “Trump has turned to retired officers so pub-

licly and in such large numbers that it raises questions about the proper balance of military and civilian advice in a White House led by a commander in chief with no defense or foreign policy experience.”¹⁰

By far the most controversy over civilian control was engendered by the potential and then actual nomination of Mattis, only three years retired from the Marine Corps, as SecDef. When Congress created that position in 1947, it specified that its occupant must be “appointed from civilian life by the President” with the proviso that “a person who has within ten years been on active duty as a commissioned officer in a Regular component of the armed services shall not be eligible for appointment.”¹¹ In addition to concerns that the senior generals and admirals of World War II enjoyed more political prestige than virtually any civilian, Congress believed that this cooling-off period would “help ensure that no one military service dominated the newly established Defense Department; ensure that the new Secretary of Defense was truly the President’s (rather than a service’s) representative; and, again, preserve the principle of civilian control of the military at a time when the United States was departing from its century-and-a-half long tradition of a small standing military.”¹²

Just over three years later, owing to the twin crises of the “revolt of the admirals” against the second SecDef, Louis Johnson, and the debacle at the outset of America’s entry into the Korean War, President Harry Truman requested a waiver. Writing Congress, he urged, “I am a firm believer in the general principle that our national defense establishment should be headed by a civilian. However, in view of the present critical circumstances and General [George] Marshall’s unusual qualifications, I believe that the national interest will be served best by making an exception in this case.”¹³ While controversial, the request was honored but accompanied by a statement expressing “the sense of the Congress that after General Marshall leaves the office of Secretary of Defense, no additional appointments of military men to that office shall be approved.”¹⁴

That intention was honored for 67 years until Trump’s nomination of Mattis. Given the lack of a crisis comparable to 1950 and that Mattis was a battlefield commander rather than a staff officer who had served two years as secretary of state after retirement, the choice generated considerable controversy. Numerous Democrats on the Senate and House Armed Services Committees came out early against a waiver. Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) issued the obligatory caveat “General Mattis deserves deep gratitude and respect for his commendable military service” before declaring, “Our American democracy was built around the concept of civilian control of the military.” She urged her colleagues to resist granting a waiver

to “protect this core foundation on which our country was built, and which has served us well.”¹⁵ Her colleague Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) concurred, declaring, “Civilian control over the Department of Defense is a bedrock principle. The standard is a high one.” He added, “General Mattis has the burden of meeting it, which he has not yet done. I would vote to waive it only under the most unique and exigent circumstances.”¹⁶ Sen. Chris Murphy (D-CT) was “deeply fearful” that the precedent of civilian control of the military could wither by granting the waiver, and Rep. Adam Smith (D-WA 9th District), the top Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee, proclaimed, “Civil control of the military is not something to be casually cast aside.”¹⁷

In testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Kathleen Hicks noted that the prohibition applied to this particular office and no other is because it is “the one nonelected civilian position in the operational chain of command.”¹⁸ While supporting an exception for Mattis, she cautioned against routinely appointing retired generals to SecDef or other senior posts in the defense bureaucracy. Doing so would undermine the nation’s “interest in developing knowledge and expertise about the armed forces among those who have not served” because “motivating civilians to invest in careers in the defense sector requires having positions of meaning to which they can aspire.”¹⁹

Peter Feaver and Lawrence Korb shared Hicks’s position. Feaver argued that those who retire as a four-star officer “never become fully civilian” because they retain “some of the influence of serving military officers” and “represent the military profession in the eyes of the public in a way that much more junior veterans do not.”²⁰ Korb said that having Mattis, a man who had spent four decades in uniform, as SecDef would rob the Pentagon of needed perspective and that major social changes in the military, from ending segregation to allowing women in combat, had always been pushed by civilians.²¹

Still, some noted CMR scholars defended the selection. Despite his reservations, Feaver argued that it was reasonable to make an exception in Mattis’s case for many reasons but especially “because so many other logical candidates signed letters opposing [Trump] during the campaign, effectively taking themselves out of the running for consideration for a post like this.”²² Similarly, Hicks supported a waiver not only because of Mattis’s superb command of the issues and avowed support for the tenets of civilian control but because she assessed “the state of U.S. civil-military relations to be strong enough to withstand any risk such a once-in-two-generations exception, on its own, could pose.”²³

Some dismissed the need for the rule altogether. Mackubin Owens contended that “Mattis as secretary of defense is no more a threat to civilian control than Dwight Eisenhower as president.” He noted that during Mattis’s tenure as commander of CENTCOM, “none of the symptoms of unhealthy civil-military relations, such as those that characterized the tenure of Donald Rumsfeld as secretary of defense, manifested themselves.” For instance, “there were no leaks to the press over policy disagreements and no reports of ‘slow rolling’ or ‘foot dragging’ in Mattis’s implementation of the president’s policy,” despite tensions that would ultimately result in Mattis’s premature relief.²⁴

Kori Schake argued that Mattis would be “a superb Secretary of Defense” and pointed to survey research finding that “the public does not share experts’ concerns about retired military officers endorsing political candidates or speaking at political conventions, because the public has outsourced its expertise to the military itself.”²⁵ Similarly, Rosa Brooks contended that “in America today, the notion of civilian control of the military has become unmoored from its original purpose.” Instead, it has “become a rule of aesthetics, not ethics, and its invocation is a soothing ritual that makes us feel better, without accomplishing anything of value.”²⁶

Within the larger debate, there was also one over sheer professional competence. Some argued that a lifetime in uniform does little to prepare people for the inherently political tasks of running massive organizations, while others argued that retired generals are in fact uniquely suited for those tasks.

Joan Johnson-Freese wondered “whether [retired generals] are bringing the right job skills and cultural dispositions to their positions.” She added, “Nobody argues that retired ambassadors, because they have demonstrated career achievement should, on retirement, be hired by the military, given a few stars and perhaps act as a Service Chief or the Joint Chief of Staff [*sic*].”²⁷ Charlie Stevenson observed, “There is a concern that someone who has been a general all their adult [life] doesn’t really understand civilian life.” Specifically, “the secretary of defense has to deal with domestic businesses, has to recruit people from the civilian job sector. If he is just used to commanding[,] he might not be used to commanding civilian society.”²⁸

Erin Simpson expressed personal admiration for Mattis but opposed his nomination on the grounds that “warfighters rarely make good bureaucrats. The Pentagon is one of the world’s largest bureaucracies, and Mattis has shown little patience for management and administration.” Moreover, “Budgets, white papers, and service rivalries, not to mention the

interagency meetings and White House meddling—these tasks are not what you go to Jim Mattis for.”²⁹

Gen John Allen, USMC, retired, offered a mixed view of a potential Petraeus selection. Echoing Harry Truman’s assessment of a possible Dwight Eisenhower presidency, Allen observed, “The State Department bureaucracy is not really efficient—it doesn’t snap and pop the way bureaucracies do in the military.”³⁰ Further, “It doesn’t work in a hierarchical way. . . . He’s going to recognize that he’s never going to get a diplomat to tell him something in 10 words that can be said in 14 minutes.”³¹ Despite his worries about the difficulty of transitioning from the military hierarchy to a civilian agency, Allen was intrigued by the idea. “We’re in a damn dangerous world now,” he stated. “For Trump to reach out to some of the finest military minds we’ve ever had—who have led very large, globally-oriented organizations—I don’t think that’s a bad thing.”³²

There were plenty of other defenders of placing retired four-stars in these roles. Bing West argued, “Our country is fighting a long war. It’s common sense to seek the experience of those who have proven they know how to fight.”³³ Peter Roberts was even more enthusiastic, gushing, “Mattis, Petraeus, Keane, Kelly and McChrystal radically altered the way that the US dealt with challenges in Iraq and Afghanistan, turning failing campaigns into a semblance of victory.” He added, “It is this type of leader, capable of making decisions and implementing unpleasant policies in high-pressure environments, that marks out generals and admirals as extremely useful government partners.”³⁴

Dunlap, the author of a seminal 1992 article on the dangers of militarizing domestic politics, also expressed support. He viewed Mattis as “gifted with the kind of authentic charisma that few people of any generation enjoy . . . [,] engender[ing] a confidence in his leadership that I’ve never seen equaled.”³⁵ Further, Dunlap challenged the very premise of the critiques, contending that “it would have never occurred to the Founding Fathers to oppose a retired officer holding a political office of any sort. Quite the opposite, as most had such service themselves and those who did not regretted their failure to serve.” He endorsed the public perception that “retired generals, by and large, have a considerable set of leadership and organizational skills, not to mention a work ethic, which would be valued by any large organization, including the government.”³⁶

Concerns of Politicization of the Military

A related fear was that placing retired generals in these roles would encourage active duty officers to shade their military advice to policy mak-

ers, whether to curry favor to remain viable for postretirement appointments or because policy makers would more thoroughly vet the brass for political alignment.

While allowing that Mattis was her preferred option among the names being floated and was “not especially worried about how Mattis the man will handle the job,” Alice Hunt Friend was nonetheless “worried about how the military as an institution will respond and what comes after Mattis.” She was concerned not only about service parochialism that led to the cooling off period being included in the law but also about the military becoming “associated with one party over the other, robbing the profession of its historic political impartiality.” Relatedly, “active-duty officers may begin to view political appointments as natural addenda to their careers—rather than the rarity it is now—encouraging partisan ambitions prior to retirement.”³⁷ Hicks was in agreement. Just as routinely appointing senior retired officers would discourage civilians from pursuing careers in defense, “it would risk furthering incentives for active-duty officers to politicize their speech and/or actions and for civilians to seek to ascertain the political viewpoints of officers as part of the recruitment and hiring process for political positions.”³⁸

Still, others were skeptical. Brooks noted that “today’s US military has elaborate internal checks and balances and a deeply ingrained respect for democracy and the rule of law. It’s difficult to imagine any active-duty general or group of officers, no matter how popular, persuading the troops to ignore or overturn the results of an election or a properly passed law.” She added, “That’s even truer for retired military officers. Technically, they are civilians. They can still give orders if they want to, but even the lowliest private is free to tell a retired general to take a hike, subject only to the constraints of courtesy.”³⁹

Hope of Restraining Trump

Regardless of their views of the wisdom of having a recently retired general run the Pentagon or a plethora of former senior generals in high posts, many were optimistic that these individuals would be able to rein in an improbable president who had demonstrated during the campaign a lack of discipline and impatience with the norms of foreign policy making. Opinions ranged from relief that Trump would pick from this group rather than make more extreme choices to a belief that it was about time to turn policy making over to the most trusted leaders in the land.

Brooks declared that “a cabinet stocked with retired military officers is the least of my worries” compared to the alternatives, observing, “anyone

who thinks Rudy Giuliani would make a better secretary of state than David Petraeus needs to have their head examined.”⁴⁰ While I was among those concerned about putting a general in charge of the Pentagon, at the same time, “I breathed a sigh of relief when General James Mattis was announced as Donald Trump’s choice for defense secretary” given the likely alternatives, noting that Flynn was “already in place as national security adviser” and that “names like Rudy Giuliani, John Bolton and Newt Gingrich” were “being floated for key foreign policy posts.”⁴¹

Lt Gen David Barno, USA, retired, and Sen. John McCain were similarly inclined. Barno observed that “most of these officers are relatively non-partisan, publicly endorsed no candidate during the campaign, and have lifelong records of public service leading large, complex organizations.” He predicted that “they could bring a wealth of sober judgment and experience to a Trump foreign policy team in need of both.”⁴² A month into the administration, McCain, a frequent Trump critic, declared, “I could not imagine a better, more capable national security team than the one we have right now” when McMaster replaced Flynn.⁴³

However, Simpson was unpersuaded, observing, “His Mattis-inspired about-face on waterboarding notwithstanding, I’m not convinced the president-elect will be able to manage a coterie of competing advisors, much less listen to them.”⁴⁴

Assessing the CMR Concerns

The next sections attempt to assess the above predictions in light of what actually transpired in the four years of Trump. Doing so is difficult, partly because the concerns and hopes are intertwined. Most notably, the very notion of retired generals restraining the elected commander in chief may well undermine the norms of civilian control and risk damaging the military’s reputation for nonpartisan service. Still, while the separation is artificial, the predictions provide an organizing principle for the discussion.

Was US Foreign Policy Further Militarized?

A quick survey shows that Trump did have an unusual number of general officers, retired and otherwise, in key policy-making positions. The table below provides a snapshot of general and flag officers, retired or active, broken down by administration and post, in the period since the passage of the National Security Act of 1947, which began the modern era.

Table. General officers in key policy-making positions since 1947

President	Secretary of State	Secretary of Defense	NSC	WHCOS	DCI/DNI	DHS
Harry Truman	George Marshall (21 Jan 1947– 20 Jan 1949)	George Marshall (21 Sept 1950– 12 Sept 1951)			Sidney Souers (23 Jan 1946– 10 June 1946) Hoyt Vandenberg (10 June 1946– 1 May 1947) Roscoe Hillenkoetter (1 May 1947– 7 Oct 1950) Walter Smith (7 Oct 1950– 20 Jan 1953)	
Dwight Eisenhower					Walter Smith (20 Jan 1953– 9 Feb 1953)	
John Kennedy						
Lyndon Johnson					William Raborn (28 Apr 1965– 30 June 1966)	
Richard Nixon				Alexander Haig (4 May 1973– 9 Aug 1974)		
Gerald Ford			Brent Scowcroft (3 Nov 1975– 20 Jan 1977)	Alexander Haig (9 Aug 1974– 21 Sept 1974)		
Jimmy Carter					Stansfield Turner (9 Mar 1977– 20 Jan 1981)	
Ronald Reagan	Alexander Haig (22 Jan 1981– 5 July 1982)		John Poindexter (4 Dec 1985– 25 Nov 1986) Colin Powell (23 Nov 1987– 20 Jan 1989)			
George H. W. Bush			Brent Scowcroft (20 Jan 1989– 20 Jan 1993)			
Bill Clinton						
George W. Bush	Colin Powell (20 Jan 2001– 26 Jan 2005)				Mike McConnell (13 Feb 2007– 27 Jan 2009)	
Barack Obama			James Jones (20 Jan 2009– 8 Oct 2010)		Dennis Blair (29 Jan 2009– 28 May 2010) James Clapper (5 Aug 2010– 20 Jan 2017)	
Donald Trump		James Mattis (20 Jan 2017– 1 Jan 2019)	Michael Flynn (20 Jan 2017– 13 Feb 2017) H. R. McMaster (20 Feb 2017– 9 Apr 2018)	John Kelly (31 July 2017– 2 Jan 2019)		John Kelly (20 Jan 2017– 31 July 2017)

The table includes only the most prominent roles: secretary of state, secretary of defense, national security advisor, White House chief of staff, director of central intelligence (DCI)/DNI, and secretary of homeland security. It excludes those who served only in an acting capacity. These criteria ignore retired officers like Gen Barry McCaffrey, USA, who served as President Bill Clinton's "drug czar"; Gen Eric Shinseki, USA, who served as veterans affairs secretary under President Barack Obama; and Anthony Zinni, who served as a special envoy on the Qatar crisis for Trump. Doing so keeps the focus on those in the most powerful posts. It also allows a reasonable consistency in comparison since most have existed since either the very beginning (state secretary, defense secretary, chief of staff, DCI) or very early (national security advisor) in the period in question. The sole exception is the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), created in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. I have taken the liberty of consolidating the DCI and DNI positions, given that they perform the same ostensible function notwithstanding some key organizational differences.

Simply looking at the information in the table shows several things. First, senior officers have frequently served as DCI/DNI. For nearly three decades, ending with Stansfield Turner's tenure under the Carter administration, active duty three- and four-star officers were common in that billet. Moreover, three retired officers have served as DNI in its short history. Excluding the DCI/DNI slot, five administrations (Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Carter, and Clinton) had no general or flag officers (GOFO) in key posts, and three (Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Clinton) had none at all.⁴⁵ We went more than two decades with no GOFOs in a key billet between Marshall's tenure as SecDef and Haig's turn as White House chief of staff. Marshall (State and Defense), Haig (WHCOS and State), Powell (NSA and State), and Kelly (DHS and WHCOS) are the only GOFOs to fill multiple billets. Additionally, Scowcroft was NSA for two different presidents nonconsecutively.

So Trump was indeed unusual in beginning his term with three retired four-star generals in key national security posts; no other president had more than two. More unusually, none of them served as intelligence director. Did this lead to a militarization of policy?⁴⁶

It certainly seemed so at the outset. Seven months into Trump's tenure, a *Washington Post* report began, "High-ranking military officials have become an increasingly ubiquitous presence in American political life during Donald Trump's presidency, repeatedly winning arguments inside the West Wing, publicly contradicting the president and even balking at implementing one of his most controversial policies."⁴⁷ It assessed that "gen-

erals manage Trump's hour-by-hour interactions and whisper in his ear—and those whispers, as with the decision this week to expand U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, often become policy.”⁴⁸

Friend and Hicks argued that “if Trump gives merely episodic presidential attention to defense matters, the military receives little strategic direction from the commander in chief.” They added, “By largely delegating national security decisions to the Pentagon, while allowing the diplomacy, development, and trade elements of our toolkit to atrophy, the United States severely underplays its hand as a global power.”⁴⁹ Anne Applebaum observed,

A U.S. foreign policy run by military technocrats will have the same deep flaws as the governments run by economic technocrats that are sometimes installed in countries engulfed by economic crisis. A foreign policy, like an economic policy, can succeed only if it has political backing. Difficult decisions will be accepted by the public only if they have political legitimacy. Military decisions in particular should be part of a carefully thought-out strategy, one that has been cleared by Congress, debated in public and discussed not only in the Pentagon but also in the State Department and the other institutions, staffed by experts, that we have created for this purpose.⁵⁰

While there were some early indications—such as the dropping of the so-called Mother of All Bombs on ISIS targets in Afghanistan weeks into his administration—that Trump's deference to theater commanders would lead to no-holds-barred military action at the expense of diplomacy, it is difficult to construct an argument that foreign policy became more militarized during his tenure.⁵¹ Indeed, depending on one's definition, Trump is the first US president in quite some time not to send troops into a significant new conflict⁵² and withdrew forces from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Somalia at a faster rate than his uniformed military advisors and civilian cabinet alike had counseled.⁵³ Indeed, the Syria decision was ostensibly the final straw for Mattis, prompting his resignation.⁵⁴

At the same time, the State Department's influence and capacity declined under Trump, with its senior workforce intentionally gutted,⁵⁵ a hiring freeze, and the serious curtailment of hiring top-drawer entry-level talent through the Presidential Management Fellows program and similar avenues.⁵⁶ Furthermore, despite high hopes from some that he would curtail Trump's excesses, Rex Tillerson proved to be an abject disaster in his short tenure as secretary, alienating the president and his staff.⁵⁷

Still, even though Pompeo's tenure was arguably even worse in terms of policy outcomes, he was ultimately the most powerful foreign policy ap-

pointee in the administration.⁵⁸ After serving as Trump's first CIA director, he spent nearly three years at Foggy Bottom, steering an aggressive foreign policy at odds with the elite consensus pushed by his predecessor and Mattis. Meanwhile, Mattis, Kelly, and McMaster were advocates for a much more traditional foreign policy. So too was Tillerson, even if he undermined it drastically by his misguided attempts at streamlining his department. They were, as will be discussed later, simply incapable of reining in a president with decidedly different instincts.

The evidence for generals in key posts leading to a militarized foreign policy in the administration is thin. Arguably, though, the fact that Pompeo—a West Point graduate who left the military after his first tour—succeeded at getting his preferred policy options enacted while they were not is evidence for the claim that former generals lack the necessary political skills. Then again, it may simply be that his preferences were either more aligned with Trump's or were more malleable than were those of the generals.

Was Civilian Control Diminished?

The ongoing trend of power shifting from the civilians in the Office of the Secretary of Defense to the brass accelerated during the Trump administration. It is, however, difficult to pin this on the choice of Mattis to lead the Pentagon.

Reacting to several instances in the first six months of the administration where Trump seemed to leave the decisions on significant military matters to Mattis and commanders in the field, Friend and Hicks declared it “an abrogation of our tradition of civilian control over the military.” They argued that doing so endangered the “military's political neutrality and commitment to technical expertise free of partisan interests.”⁵⁹ Months later, Andrew J. Bacevich claimed that Trump had “largely ceded decision-making on the conduct of America's wars to the very generals he derided while running for office.”⁶⁰

Further, there were an unusual number of incidences where uniformed leaders actively resisted tweeted “orders” from or issued statements directly contravening the commander in chief. In the early months, these included resistance from Mattis and the Joint Chiefs over Trump's directive to ban transgender individuals from military service and pushback against his statements seemingly siding with white supremacists in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Here, having a recently retired Marine general clearly clouded the issue. It would be perfectly normal for a “regular” civilian SecDef to resist the president who appointed him on matters of policy pursuant to the best

military advice of the brass. But because Trump continued to call him “General Mattis” and continued to cultivate his “Mad Dog” persona, the distinction was blurred.

Carter noted that it “is significant and telling that the highest-ranking military officers—such as Gen Joseph Dunford, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the four chiefs of the armed services—did not file affidavits in support of the government in the transgender cases.”⁶¹ He defended these actions, contending that “military leaders have struck a posture that’s not disloyal but still allows the ship of state to correct its course when steered in the wrong direction by an errant president.” He added, “Call it *respectful disobedience* or *selective engagement* or *lawful resistance* or some other euphemism—but it’s clear that military leaders have found a formula for saluting their commander in chief while keeping his worst excesses at bay.”⁶²

Here, having retired generals in prominent civilian roles arguably played a factor. As Carter put it, the uniformed leaders were “probably aided by a secretary of defense and White House chief of staff who have literally worn their shoes. Jim Mattis and John Kelly may not be able to moderate the president’s worst statements or most egregious tweets, but they almost certainly provide cover for senior military leaders behind closed doors, where they can explain to the president why the generals are behaving a certain way.”⁶³ Beyond that, while impossible to assess at this juncture, it’s more than reasonable to assume that Mattis’s relationship with Dunford, who had been his subordinate in the Marines, contributed to this impulse.⁶⁴

Lara Seligman reported in late 2018 that “frustrated by lack of influence and disheartened by U.S. President Donald Trump’s rhetoric, Department of Defense civilians are heading for the door, leaving key positions unfilled in a Pentagon increasingly run by active-duty or retired military officers.” Moreover, “interviews with a dozen current and former Department of Defense civilians reveal an increasingly hollow and demoralized workforce, with staffers feeling they no longer have a seat at the table.”⁶⁵ According to one anonymous former official, civilian oversight of the military “was already weakening in the last administration, and I think it basically fell off a cliff.”⁶⁶

Writing the day after Mattis resigned in protest over his inability to restrain Trump’s decision to withdraw US forces from Syria,⁶⁷ Schake praised the “quiet integrity” with which Mattis had done his job in the face of “gale-force political winds.” She stated, “The president of the United States has transgressed civil-military norms frequently—treating speeches to troops as campaign rallies, using military titles for civilian appointees to

give the appearance of military support for him personally and for his policies.”⁶⁸ In particular, she found it “shocking” when Trump signed his travel ban in the Hall of Heroes at the Pentagon early in the administration, which she saw as a “trap” he had sprung on Mattis and other senior leaders.⁶⁹ Tom Nichols likewise blamed Trump for the state of affairs, declaring that “the president has taken a dangerous path, excoriating retired military leaders who criticize him and lavishing praise and make-believe pay raises on the active-duty military voters who he believes support him.”⁷⁰

Jim Golby was less forgiving. He cut to the chase by observing, correctly in my view, “Jim Mattis may have become a civilian political appointee, but he never stopped being a marine.” Acknowledging that Trump often placed him in impossible situations, he gave the former secretary credit for having “avoided a true civil-military catastrophe” and going “two years without a major national security crisis.” In the end, though, he assessed that Mattis’s tenure “further: (1) blurred the lines of authority between civilian and military, as well as between active-duty and retired military; (2) enabled the rapid erosion of civil-military norms; and (3) widened gaps between the military and American society as well as between the military brass and elected political leaders.”⁷¹ While seemingly damning, none of these trends was reversed in the second half of the Trump administration when civilians were at the helm of the Pentagon.

Writing in September 2019, nine months after Mattis vacated the post but just two months into Mark Esper’s formal tenure as secretary, Schulman, Friend, and Mara Karlin welcomed the return of a Senate-confirmed civilian to the role after months of acting officials and lauded statements by Esper that he would seek to fill civilian posts that had been long vacant.⁷² Indeed, this was a clear failing under Mattis, although not one entirely of his making. His staffing was dominated by the likes of Craig Faller, an active duty rear admiral who was his senior military advisor, and Kevin Sweeney, a retired two-star admiral who was his chief of staff, both of whom had worked for him at CENTCOM.⁷³ But while this staffing issue was partly a function of leaders naturally wanting to surround themselves with trusted advisors, it was mostly a function of one of the problems that led Trump to select so many generals for his cabinet. Many Republican foreign policy professionals had disqualified themselves from serving by signing Never Trump letters or otherwise declaring the now-president unfit for office.⁷⁴ Additionally, Mattis was reportedly rebuffed when he tried to make Michèle Flournoy, who had served as under secretary of defense for policy under the Obama administration, his deputy secretary.⁷⁵

Regardless, Schulman, Friend, and Karlin asserted, “Civilian control is a process, not simply a person. And out of sight of most Americans, civilians are losing control over key processes that manage war plans, deployment decisions, and the programs that determine what kind of military the U.S. builds for the future.” Further, “over the last several years, formal engagements for civilian review of war plans have been cut back, with significantly less secretary-level oversight.”⁷⁶ They especially lamented the chairman having assumed the roles as the “global integrator” of war plans, which they argued “can impute to the military the kind of strategic, diplomatic, and political context that civilians traditionally provide.”⁷⁷ While they are by no means alone in this concern (indeed, I share it), this development didn’t happen on Mattis’s relatively brief watch and predates Trump’s tenure.⁷⁸ It was what was left from the failed Goldwater-Nichols 2.0 initiative that survived into the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act signed into law in the last days of the Obama administration.⁷⁹

Still, Dunford, who had pushed for this new role, was the first to exercise this power. Again, while it is impossible to know for sure, it is perfectly reasonable to wonder whether he would have received more pushback from a secretary who had come up as a Pentagon civilian and with whom he did not have a long-standing personal friendship. In any case, Dunford is now the template for the global integrator role, and it will be more difficult for new defense secretary Lloyd Austin to claw back the power if he is so inclined.

Regardless, the tensions over civilian control continued once Mattis departed. Indeed, they arguably intensified. In the wake of a series of standoffs in spring 2020, including the firing of tear gas to disperse peaceful protesters, Esper and Army general Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs—in his combat fatigues—marched by Trump’s side so that Trump could stage a photo opportunity at a church. Adding to this turmoil were a series of statements and policy letters from Esper, each of the Joint Chiefs, Mattis, and several retired four-stars critical of militarized responses to demonstrations and the handling of other crises. Karlin summed up the situation: “If this isn’t a civil-military relations crisis, I don’t know what is.”⁸⁰ But, as I argued at the time, these statements were consistent with their roles. Specifically, “to the extent any of these statements are seen as political, let alone partisan, it says a lot about our state of affairs and should cause us great shame as a nation. But they’re not only consistent with the values of the Constitution, federal law, and the Uniformed Code of Military Justice but it would be unconscionable for men who lead so many African-American service members to not get out in front of this issue.”⁸¹

In terms of the balance of power between the uniformed military and civilian policy makers shifting in favor of the former during the Trump administration, it was both a continuation of preexisting trends and a clash between the values of the military profession and the actions of a highly unusual president. While Mattis's relationship with Dunford and being steeped in those same values might reasonably have been expected to reinforce that tension, we see that it continued, even escalated, under Esper's tenure. The key variable, then, was Trump, not whether the SecDef was a "true" civilian.

It is too soon to fully assess other predictions in this ambit, but we have some early clues. The long-standing norm, enshrined in law since 1947, of the SecDef being a "true" civilian seems to have been discarded. Logically, Mattis's confirmation as SecDef made it easier for Austin to be nominated and confirmed, although the direct evidence is mixed. Mattis's waiver was approved 268–151 by the House and 81–17 by the Senate in 2017.⁸² Four years later, the House voted 326–78 and the Senate 69–27 for Austin's appointment.⁸³ Granting that two elections had altered the membership of both bodies, that is an increase of 58 votes in the House but a decrease of 12 in the Senate. There are a variety of possible explanations for that, including the fact that so many Democrats, particularly in the Senate, had been so adamantly opposed to the Mattis waiver and insisted that it be a one-time measure.⁸⁴ Still, the margins in both cases were overwhelming, lending credence to those who argued that the norm no longer reflected a consensus.

Whether the *de facto* eligibility of retired generals and admirals to serve as SecDef will lead to them being routinely appointed remains to be seen. But the circumstances that led to Mattis and Austin being chosen were unique. Trump seemed to have something of a fetish for generals, particularly those with outsized reputations for machismo, and had been renounced by much of his party's national security establishment. He had relatively few options. Biden had been widely expected to make Flournoy the first woman SecDef. For whatever reason, he did not. But he was under enormous pressure to appoint a Black person to the post, and as Bishop Garrison ably demonstrated, that radically narrowed the available talent pool because so few Blacks serve as senators, governors, or Fortune 500 CEOs.⁸⁵ Additionally, Biden had worked with Austin before and was especially impressed by him.⁸⁶

Still, while Hicks, by virtue of her appointment as Austin's deputy, has likely supplanted Flournoy as the most likely candidate to be the first woman SecDef, it would certainly shock no one if retired admiral

Michelle Howard, who served on Biden's transition team and has subsequently been appointed by Austin to a prestigious commission, added that post to her list of firsts. It is hard to imagine that she would face serious opposition in Congress.

Similarly, it is too early to know whether having two retired generals in short order appointed to the top Pentagon post will deter civilians from service there. Certainly, though, Biden has had no difficulty attracting top talent to the department.

Was the Military Further Politicized?

Within days of taking office, Trump committed several transgressions against the norms of CMR, often with Mattis or Kelly standing idly by. Critic Andrew Exum explained, "Whether it is the Memorial Wall at the C.I.A., or the Hall of Heroes at the Pentagon, he is using institutions that have previously been walled off from politics to generate political support for some of his more contentious policies."⁸⁷ Trump opened his remarks to military personnel at MacDill Air Force Base by implying that most there had voted for him.⁸⁸ Richard H. Kohn argued that Trump went too far: "Leading off with the election, attacking the press and talking about endorsements is a clear attempt to politicize the military and invite their partisanship. In rhetoric and style, his words mimicked a campaign rally."⁸⁹

Jason Dempsey and Amy Shafer suggested that the cabinet generals amplified these transgressions. In their view, "Kelly and Mattis hold[ing] political roles so recently after stepping out of uniform place[d] the military in a particularly influential position within the Trump administration, and, accordingly, [put] its reputation and role in American politics and society at great risk."⁹⁰ They also indicated that Trump's "comments may tie the military's reputation very closely to that of his administration—with potentially negative consequences for continued bipartisan support for the armed forces."⁹¹

Despite much uproar and pushback from Mattis and Kelly, the pattern continued. In July 2017, Trump urged Sailors attending the commissioning of the USS *Gerald R. Ford* to wade into domestic politics, stating, "I don't mind getting a little hand, so call that congressman and call that senator and make sure you get it" [referring to passing his defense budget]. He added, "And by the way, you can also call those senators to make sure you get health care." Carter rightly termed this "a serious breach of presidential norms," noting that "this could have been interpreted as an order from the commander in chief to the service members in attendance to support the Republican Party agenda."⁹²

As both an active duty officer and one who had not previously held military posts of the prominence that Mattis and Kelly had, McMaster was in a particularly weak position. His prestige as a combat leader was frequently leveraged by the president for partisan political aims. Daniel Kurtz-Phalen was blistering in his critique of the situation, stating that “McMaster was sent to undercut stories about Trump’s disclosure of Israeli intelligence to the Russian foreign minister—only to be contradicted the next day by Trump himself.” Further, “in exchange for destroying his reputation, McMaster is not earning Trump’s gratitude for being so supine, according to recent reports, but Trump’s ire for not being supine enough.”⁹³

But, as with Mattis, not everyone put the blame on Trump’s shoulders. Jeet Heer stated, “If McMaster is willing to trade his good name for a chance to whisper in Trump’s ear, he’s no different than Jared Kushner, Steve Bannon, Paul Ryan, or any of the other courtiers bending the knee before Trump.” Twisting the knife further, he continued, “As always, Trump is a clarifying figure: in this case, disabusing us of the myth of the American military as non-ideological Svengalis. McMaster, by this light, isn’t sullyng his reputation or that of the military. Rather, he’s showing his true colors.”⁹⁴

Thomas Ricks agreed, asserting, “I don’t see McMaster improving Trump. Rather, what I have seen so far is Trump degrading McMaster.”⁹⁵ Additionally, McMaster co-authored an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* with Gary Cohn, director of Trump’s National Economic Council, critiquing the policies of the Obama administration. It declared, “This administration will restore confidence in American leadership as we serve the American people.”⁹⁶ Consequently, Kimberly Dozier and Noah Shachtman reported, “A growing cadre of former military officers who served with . . . McMaster are quietly calling for him to retire from service, worried the embattled Trump administration is tarnishing the U.S. military’s reputation by deploying their own personal three-star general as a political shield.”⁹⁷

Beyond that, while many of these incidents had Trump in a leading role, some of the retired generals harmed their reputations as nonpartisan servants on their own. In his tenure at Homeland Security, Kelly was a strong champion of the travel ban, border wall, and other controversial policies.⁹⁸ As White House chief of staff, he told reporters that veterans feel “a little bit sorry” for civilians who hadn’t “experienced the wonderful joy you get in your heart” from national service.⁹⁹ Of course, Kelly was making those statements years earlier while still in uniform. In a December 2010 speech, he told a crowd of former Marines and local business people, “If anyone thinks you can somehow thank them for their service

and not support the cause for which they fight—our country—these people are lying to themselves. . . . More important, they are slighting our warriors and mocking their commitment to this nation.”¹⁰⁰

Trump had a unique talent for putting officials who are supposed to be apart from partisan politics in awkward positions implying their endorsement of his policies. This was by no means limited to active or retired military personnel. Combining Justice Amy Coney Barrett’s swearing-in ceremony and a campaign rally was an especially egregious example.¹⁰¹ Thus, I tend to blame him more than Mattis, Kelly, and McMaster for these incidents. But their very presence lent the prestige of their service to Trump’s cause. Still, these incidents did not stop under Esper. Indeed, as previously discussed, the level of crisis escalated.

Once again, the longer-term predictions are difficult to assess. But there is little evidence that senior military officers have become any more prone to shade their advice to please their political masters or position themselves for postretirement appointments. Indeed, as previously noted, the opposite seemed to occur, as the chairman and the service chiefs pushed back time after time against not only Trump’s attempts to politicize them but also policies they deemed damaging to good order and discipline.

The exceedingly modest possibility of being chosen to be SecDef one day is unlikely to modify behavior given how much serendipity is involved. The prospect of a Trump presidency would have seemed absurd when Mattis took over CENTCOM in 2010. And his outsized persona, which attracted Trump to him, would almost surely have alienated him from just about any other president. Similarly, a Biden presidency was a long shot in 2013 when Austin succeeded Mattis.

Was Trump Restrained?

Simpson was quite prescient when she expressed doubt that Trump “will be able to manage a coterie of competing advisors, much less listen to them.”¹⁰² In the end, neither Mattis nor any of the other generals had much success in reining in Trump’s excesses. Then again, neither did any of the civilians, including his own family.

At the outset, though, the theory had promise. Less than three months into Trump’s term, Kimberly Dozier popularized the term “Axis of Adults” to describe “a new band in town that’s guiding national security by quietly tutoring the most powerful man in America.” She applied it especially to Mattis, Kelly (then still at DHS), and McMaster but also included Mike Pompeo (then still at CIA) and, importantly, then-secretary of state Rex Tillerson, who had no military experience.¹⁰³ She attributed the coinage

to former Obama staffer Colin Kahl, who used it in a Twitter thread a month earlier.¹⁰⁴ Around the same time Eric Fehrnstrom declared, “Thank God for the generals,” observing that “in an administration riven by staff bickering and internal disputes, President Trump’s senior military appointees are taking a leading role and acting as a restraining influence.”¹⁰⁵

Senator Blumenthal declared Mattis, Kelly, and McMaster “standouts of dependability in the face of rash and impulsive conduct,” adding that “there certainly has been a feeling among many of my colleagues that they are a steadying hand on the rudder and provide a sense of consistency and rationality in an otherwise zigzagging White House.”¹⁰⁶ His colleague Sen. Brian Schatz (D-Hawaii) agreed, stating that “I for one am glad they’re there—because they’re thoughtful . . . because they’re lawful and because they’re rational.” Yet he recognized the tradeoffs. Schatz asserted, “I feel like the concern about the need to maintain civilian oversight of the military is a totally legitimate one, but that concern should be addressed at a later time. In the meantime, we should be reassured that there are competent professionals there who want to make smart choices.”¹⁰⁷ Along these lines, Kurtz-Phelan argued in May 2017, “If we make it through 2020 without a civilization-threatening international calamity, a decent share of the credit will go to the men Donald Trump likes to call ‘my generals.’”¹⁰⁸

Even small returns to the norm, such as McMaster removing Trump domestic policy advisor Steve Bannon from the official NSC roster, were a sign the “adults” were winning. An anonymous senior administration official declared, “H. R. has been a steadying force.” Another stated, “There is now an efficient process to debate ideas, put them before the president and come to fairly swift decisions—a contrast to the chaos NSC staffers described in the early weeks under now-resigned National Security Advisor Mike Flynn.”¹⁰⁹

In August 2017, Jonathan Capehart wrote a column declaring that “in a wild twist that only Trump could pull off, the generals surrounding the president are the ones protecting our democracy—from him.” He cited in particular Mattis’s refusal to treat Trump’s Twitter announcement banning transgender troops from the military as an order. That this came a day after JCS chairman Gen Joseph Dunford’s declaration that all senior leaders would continue to “treat all of our personnel with respect” did not seem to bother Trump in the least.¹¹⁰

Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay note that the early restraining influences went beyond countering the president’s excesses on Twitter to Trump being talked out of unconventional foreign policy choices. In par-

ticular, “when Syria launched chemical weapons attacks against rebels in April 2017, the Trump White House followed a textbook process in determining whether and how to retaliate,” and “Trump’s decision four months later to send additional U.S. troops to Afghanistan reinforced the belief that his advisers held the reins. They further observe that “Trump seemingly admitted as much when he announced the troop increase, saying, ‘My original instinct was to pull out—and, historically, I like following my gut.’ He had changed his mind because of meetings with ‘my Cabinet and generals.’”¹¹¹

But, quite naturally, having his instincts constantly challenged frustrated Trump. According to Daalder and Lindsay, “The Afghan troop increase came only after Trump railed at his generals for wanting to do more in Afghanistan, leaving Mattis visibly upset after one meeting.” In fact, Mattis, “worried by Trump’s poor grasp of global politics, . . . held a now-famous briefing for the president in July 2017 on why America played an outsized role in the world. With charts and maps, the briefers patiently explained how alliances and trade deals actually benefited the United States. Trump’s response was short and to the point: ‘This is exactly what I don’t want.’”¹¹²

The ability to restrain was quite short-lived. Tillerson was fired via Twitter in March 2018 after 13 months of bitter struggles with Trump.¹¹³ McMaster was forced into retirement later that month, “a victim of his hawkish stances on Afghanistan and Syria and for saying publicly that the evidence of Russian interference in the 2016 election was ‘incontrovertible.’”¹¹⁴ Mattis and Kelly both made it to December before resigning in frustration.

In a phone interview just after he submitted his resignation, “Kelly defended his rocky tenure, arguing that it is best measured by what the president did not do when Kelly was at his side.” In particular, he claimed that he had held back “pullout of all U.S. troops from Syria and half the 14,000 troops from Afghanistan,” both of which Trump announced immediately after Kelly’s departure. Further, his supporters credited him with “persuading Trump not to pull U.S. forces out of South Korea, or withdraw from NATO, as he had threatened.”¹¹⁵

The fact that McMaster was fired and Mattis and Kelly resigned in protest points to the limits of their ability to restrain Trump. Their military prestige likely gave them more sway than Tillerson had early on, but it only went so far; indeed, Trump would pillory them all once they departed.

Further, to the extent he was persuadable on foreign policy matters, Pompeo and Esper were just as effective as the retired generals. After the


abrupt withdrawal from Syria backfired, Trump allowed a significant reversal of the policy.¹¹⁶ Similarly, they successfully slowed his attempts to pull troops out of Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, and elsewhere.¹¹⁷ And, of course, America remains in NATO and South Korea. The constants were an ability to form a personal relationship with Trump and persuade him that their advice was in his best political interests, neither of which the generals were able to do.

Conclusions

While Trump's tenure provided a natural experiment, constantly testing the norms of CMR, it was arguably *sui generis*. Notwithstanding the Austin appointment, Biden appears at this early juncture to be a return to a "normal" presidency and consequently will likely have fewer blatant challenges of the relationship.

In the short term, at least, the assessment of Hicks, Brooks, and others that the norms of US civil-military relations were strongly embedded in military culture proved correct. Despite enormous pressures from their commander in chief to become involved in partisan politics, they ultimately held fast to their oath to the Constitution. Despite coming too close for comfort to the first failure in American history to peacefully transition power after an election, we never had to test whether the American military would follow an illegal order from the president to keep him in office or declare him a "domestic enemy" and force him out of office.¹¹⁸ However, the suggestion it would ever come to that is absurd because our institutions are mature, with multiple safeguards built in.¹¹⁹ Despite enormous political pressure, state and local election officials, the judiciary, and Congress thwarted attempts to overturn the election results, rendering military interference unnecessary.

Yet there remains reason for concern for the future. That questions like "Should a lack of military experience disqualify someone from senior leadership roles at the Department of Defense?" and "Should the secretary of defense be required to have served in the military?" are being seriously entertained at this juncture demonstrates how far the debate has swung.¹²⁰ This is not a function of Trump's presidency but of the fact that, as Schake put it, the "public has outsourced its expertise to the military itself."¹²¹ Further, the easy congressional votes on the Mattis and Austin waivers and the fact that so few military leaders understand why one is required to begin with are informative. These circumstances strongly suggest that almost half a century of an all-volunteer force and a large standing military

for eight decades have eroded our understanding of why these original concerns about civilian control existed in the first place.¹²² 

James Joyner

Dr. Joyner is a professor of security studies and department head at Marine Corps University. He previously was managing editor of the Atlantic Council, a Washington, DC, think tank, and of the Naval Postgraduate School's *Strategic Insights*. He served as a field artillery officer in the US Army and is a veteran of Operation Desert Storm.

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