United States Military Academy

Stewarding the Profession

SYMPOSIUM REPORT

WEST POINT PRESS

31 August 2022
Written by Major Adam Barsuhn

Table of Contents

Executive Summary ——— 01

Opening Remarks ——— 02

Overview of Panels ——— 03

Panel Summaries ——— 04

The Way Ahead ——— 10

Symposium Resources ——— 12

Acknowledgments ——— 13

Executive Summary

On 31 August 2022, the United States Military Academy at West Point hosted a leader Symposium entitled "Stewarding the Profession." The Symposium's goal was to spark a candid, yet collaborative conversation about the current challenges in American civil-military relations, as a part of the Academy's annual intellectual theme of "Called to Serve: Military Leadership in a Democratic Republic." The Symposium continued a discussion begun during the Academy's 2022-23 Academic Year Convocation, in which General (Retired) Martin Dempsey discussed his own experiences navigating civil-military relations and the challenges he faced as the eighteenth Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Together, civilian scholars, retired military leaders, former senior U.S. government policymakers, and high-ranking leaders from the academic, military, and physical programs at West Point engaged in discourse about these civil-military challenges, identifying specific issues and discussing how the military and West Point might best address them. To encourage transparency and frankness, the participants' comments were non-attributional. The Symposium was divided into three panels, each moderated by a West Point faculty member, with several distinguished guests assigned to each panel. The Symposium concluded with a consolidated, final discussion session.

The first panel of the Symposium began by discussing the fundamentals of American civil-military relations and explored topics like the tensions resulting from the competing authorities of the Executive and Congressional branches.

The second panel focused on the distinction between military officers being nonpartisan versus apolitical, along with the role of dissent in the policymaking process. During this topic, attendees also explored various models of civil-military relations and debated which knowledge, skills, and behaviors were most critical to educating current and future officers to help ensure successful civil-military relations.

The third panel of the day focused on public trust in the military. It discussed the elements that contribute to the public's trust of those in uniform, along with how that trust can be eroded. It also considered the implication of high or low trust in the military, along with ways to judge if the military was bridging potential gaps with society.

In the last session of the Symposium, those in attendance discussed potential ways forward for West Point (and the military in general) in light of the day's conversation.

Opening Remarks

Brigadier General Shane Reeves, 15th Dean of the Academic Board at West Point, provided the opening remarks for the Symposium. Brigadier General Reeves articulated the origins and necessity of the Symposium, noting the appropriateness of the event being held in the Haig Room in West Point's library. The room is named after Alexander Haig, former White House Chief of Staff and Secretary of State, who (in)famously overstepped his authority by declaring himself acting President after President Ronald Reagan was shot on March 30, 1981, despite there being three other government officials ahead of him in the order of constitutional succession. General Reeves argued that Haig's example highlights the challenges and complexities of civil-military relations, and he expressed the hope that the frankness in bringing up General Haig's missteps would inspire the intellectually honest discussion required to ensure healthy civil-military relations in the future.

General Reeves also noted the appropriateness of the Symposium's location given its proximity to the city of Newburgh, New York (visible in the distance from the Haig Room). Newburgh was the location of a seminal moment in American civil-military relations: the Newburgh Conspiracy. The Conspiracy entailed disgruntled members of the military threatening to take action again Congress. Ultimately, George Washington's leadership ensured that civilian control of the military remained absolute, which remains true to this day.

General Reeves next articulated why he decided on the theme of "Called to Serve: Military Leadership in a Democratic Republic" as the intellectual theme for West Point's 2022-23 academic year. He mentioned challenges facing the United States, including the increasingly partisan domestic political environment, and growing unrest and uncertainty in several governments abroad. General Reeves highlighted the recurring demand signal from leaders and experts to have West Point help find solutions to these challenges.

Addressing the West Point faculty in the room, General Reeves urged them to consider their role in developing future officers and how they are equipping them to navigate the complex, difficult questions he'd just highlighted. He also thanked the distinguished guests for participating in the Symposium, while asking them to help their respective organizations better understand the issues facing West Point. He also reminded all participants that they are ambassadors for West Point, united by a collective passion for the institution and the place it holds in American society and the military. Finally, BG Reeves charged the audience to remember that the Symposium was not merely an academic exercise, but rather an opportunity to directly address issues affecting the Army and the nation's ability to fight and win on a complex battlefield.

Overview of Panels

Panel 1: The Fundamentals of American Civil-Military Relations

Hon. Ryan McCarthy
Gen (Ret.) Chuck Jacoby
Dr. Marybeth Ulrich
COL Winston Williams

Panel 2: Non-Partisan vs. Apolitical

Hon. Chris Gibson
GEN (Ret.) Pete Chiarelli
LTG (Ret.) Eric Wesley
Dr. Risa Brooks
COL Heidi Demarest

Panel 3: Public Trust in the Military

GEN (Ret.) Vince Brooks
GEN (Ret.) Joseph Votel
Prof. Matt Waxman
COL Gail Yoshitani

Panel 4: The West Point Way Ahead

Dr. Kori Schake

Panel Summaries

The first panel focused on the fundamentals of civil-military relations, in particular, the relationship between the military and the state. It included such questions as: what are the authorities of the branches of government over the military, and how do these authorities intersect and generate tension; how should the military respond to such tensions, and as the military navigates the tensions, how does it avoid partisan activity; how does understanding, navigating, and adjusting behavior based on political realities differ from partisan activity. Finally, it grappled with perhaps the most important question of the Symposium: if there is a model that should guide the military's response to these tensions, how should it be taught to young leaders, that is, the future officers such as the 4,400 cadets at West Point.

The experts on the first panel quickly pointed to several sources of the tension between the military and civilian leaders. All panelists agreed the United States did not face the classic "civil-military problematique" of balancing a military that is strong enough to defend the state, while not willing or able to overthrow the state itself. As more than one panelist argued, the United States military is firmly under civilian control.

The more pressing and relevant tensions come from different areas. First, reiterating a point made by Samuel Huntington, civilian control itself generates tension. The overlapping and conflicting claims on the military from Executive and Congressional authorities is a feature of our Constitution. The very nature of having two principals with different incentives, constituents, and authorities means the military will find itself in the midst of political tensions. However, as one panelist noted, these are the type of tensions that are a healthy part of our democratic system. A key point in developing officers that can successfully navigate civil-military relations is having them understand these authorities and the natural tension they generate.

Many panelists also noted that while the military is more comfortable and familiar with the Executive Branch, given the President's clear role in the chain of command as the Commander in Chief, the military can be far less comfortable when working with Congress. One obvious source of this tension is that the Executive, unlike Congress, does not have partisan divides, as it only ever consists of one political party at a time. Testifying in front of Congress is a necessary part of oversight, but a challenge naturally emerges when an military official is asked to give an opinion on strategy and policy. Should they provide their best military advice and analysis, even if it goes against a stated policy of the current Administration? How does the need to be truthful and transparent while testifying, knowing that Congress

Panel Summaries (cont'd)

is a proxy for the greater American public, coexist with the need to avoid undermining, or boxing in, the Executive? As one panelist noted, these are the difficult questions of "living at the nexus of checks and balances."

Many panelists noted that navigating these natural, enduring tensions requires a flexibility and understanding does not always come naturally to military leaders, especially ones raised in a Huntingtonian model of objective control that argues for a clear dividing line between politics and military expertise. Instead, officers must understand the unequal, continuous dialogue, a model first outlined by Eliot Cohen in his book "Supreme Command." This conversation happens most often in the shared space where politics and military expertise overlap, and the skills required to collaborate in that space are essential for military leaders. These type of skills may seem abstract or academic, but as one panelist noted, navigating the murky waters of policymaking requires the same basic interpersonal skills officers have always needed: empathy, humility, relationship building, and communication. In short, teaching and modeling emotional intelligence is essential.

Additionally, exposing junior officers to Congress would also be helpful, as too many officers navigate the budget process or appointment process for the first time at the senior level. Realizing the importance of congressional staffers, many of whom are more junior than the officers with whom they interact, is an important skill that can be learned early on in a career. A panelist also suggested better integrating civil-military relations into professional military education at all levels. While West Point cadets take courses in American Politics and Officership that cover the foundations of civil-military relations, ROTC cadets, due to their varied university experience, may not have the same curriculum or exposure. Encountering the theory and practice of civil-military relations again, or for the first time ever, at senior service colleges is not preparing all levels of officers for these tensions.

The second panel shifted focus to the topic of partisan versus apolitical activity. Building on the first panel, it asked, what civil-military tensions then, are not natural and may be untenable? As one panelist noted, there is a danger in assuming all civil-military tensions are recurring: it can ignore historical anomalies or new, unique challenges. Some of these problems originate when authorities are taken to partisan extremes. One such example, offered by a panelist, is confirmation hearings. While perfectly within Congress's oversight authority to conduct thorough and exacting confirmation hearings for general officers and DoD civilian appointees, the increasing trend has been to use them to block all nominations for broader political reasons. This tension is destructive, as it hurts overall military readiness when clearly qualified, bipartisan candidates are stuck with "acting" titles or not confirmed at all. How

Panel Summaries (cont'd)

does the military navigate this tension, or similar ones such as continuing resolutions that degrade readiness through budgetary gridlock, such as sequestration? Further challenges include the military potentially being drawn into deciding an election or possibly efforts to ideologically sort the military to turn it into a partisan force. Both tensions were identified as plausible, given the current political climate, but are viewed as both unnatural and destructive.

Panelists returned to the need for a new model to guide officers in these tensions. As already mentioned, as seminal as Samuel Huntington's works are, the flaws of his objective/subjective control model have been noted by both practitioners and academics. Panelists agreed that it reinforced a divide between politics and military expertise that is useful in its clarity and focus on professionalism. However, it creates a gap by not accurately reflecting the actual practice of policymaking at the highest levels. Additionally, it can blind military officers to the realities of the conflict continuum, where competition is constant and exists left of actual combat. The military's role in deterring and countering its adversaries in the competition space is inherently political, a blind spot for Huntington's model.

Eliot Cohen's unequal dialogue was suggested as an alternative model, as one that acknowledges the shared space already discussed. One benefit of this model is its focus on having officers who are appropriately political, while also requiring civilian leaders who have enough military expertise to engage their military subordinates and advisors. As one panelist noted, however, civilian leaders with military backgrounds or expertise are on the decline since the advent of the All-Volunteer Force. Cohen's model requires both sides to listen and understand each other, but the lack of experience and exposure on both sides makes even the most empathetic efforts challenging. A panelist also suggested a Madisonian model, built on Peter Feaver's principal-agent work, that emphasizes the role the agent (the military) has in providing the principal (the civilian leadership) with the best advice to make their decision.

Whatever model is chosen, how can the military tell that it is doing well in navigating these tensions? Panelists identified several metrics to assess the health of civil military relations. First, fundamental to any relationship is trust, which persists despite competing priorities and incentives. Next, a willingness by the military to embrace the aforementioned natural tensions and recognize that a falsely "happy" relationship is not necessarily a healthy relationship. Another indicator is the viability of the All-Volunteer Force itself: the American people can vote with their feet by not joining, which

Panel Summaries (cont'd)

may lead elected officials to question the military's inability to recruit and retain talent. The professionalism of the Force is another indicator. Robust self-policing, especially of low grade civil-military violations, such as derogatory comments about elected officials, that can become bigger ones, was brought up by another panelist as the sign of the professionalism of the force. A final indicator was a deep, ideological commitment to democracy in the military in which leaders understand what it means to serve a democracy, guided by the Constitution and the values it embodies.

The last discussion of the second panel focused on the role of dissent. As one panelist provocatively asked, what happens when the military gives its best advice and is ignored? When is informed and reasoned dissent acceptable? How far can and should that dissent be taken? As another panelist noted, the incentives in the military are for conformity and compliance, which can run counter to the introspection required for professions to successfully understand and solve their problems and failures (such as the end of the war in Afghanistan).

As one panelist noted, healthy and survivable dissent must happen in the context of a trusted relationship between individuals. The military has a professional obligation to dissent, given its expertise, but it cannot stray over the line into advocacy and insistence. As one panelist noted, officers must learn "survivable dissent" – the type that conveys the rationale and justification for dissent but does not destroy relationships or careers. Finally, as summed up by another panelist, there are no easy answers for this type of dissent, given the unique dimensions to whatever dilemma an officer may encounter. Instead, officers must be taught to understand and articulate their reasoning, values, and judgment for whatever response they choose.

The third panel focused on another important civil-military relationship: the interplay between society and the military. Panelists began by discussing what erodes the trust between the public and the military and how this trust can be built and regained once lost. As one panelist noted, mistrust between the military and the public largely occurs because of uncertainty, due to a lack of information, misperceptions, and ambiguity.

One panelist identified several sources of these inaccurate perceptions, beginning with the increasing insularity of the military. The decreasing amount of the American public that is both qualified and willing to serve is

Panel Summaries (cont'd)

decreasing, making the military increasingly a family business. While these factors have created a very professional force, it can create a caste that is separate from society. A lack of active engagement creates misperceptions that affect civil military relations, as the public believes things about the military that are not facts, while not believing facts about the military that are true.

Panelists also acknowledged that beyond mishandling public communication, well known scandals such as Abu Ghraib, the death of Pat Tillman, and Guantanamo Bay eroded the trust of the public, whether they were representative of broader issues or not. The military also exacerbated some situations by not responding quickly, accurately, and empathetically. As one panelist astutely noted, "[T]he military is measured by how we react or respond to a crisis." A panelist also pointed out that the military has largely outsourced its connection to the public to news organizations, instead of focusing on an organic connection that builds firsthand experience for the public with the military.

Another panelist placed the challenges facing the public and military's relationship into three contexts that all affect the health of the relationship. First, the broader geopolitical environment is increasingly uncertain. While there has been bipartisan consensus on U.S. foreign policy, what if the political consensus and public attitudes change against military commitments? Next, public attitudes against the rest of the civil service, such as the intelligence community and law enforcement, have shifted drastically. As the panelist noted, partisan attacks on institutions such as the FBI would have been unthinkable only a few years ago. While the military has not yet faced such attacks, it is unclear how brittle the public's trust in the military is.

Finally, the panelist noted that there are internal threats to American democracy. While it is positive that the military is looked upon favorably by some as a protector of democracy, it is highly likely that the U.S. presidential elections will continue to be close, contested elections. Correspondingly, it is conceivable that 30-40% of the population will turn against the military if the military intervenes (or fails to intervene) in a disputed election.

Panel Summaries (cont'd)

The panel then turned the question of the differences between the military and society. One panelist noted with concern a possible consequence of the separation between the two could be an arrogance on the military's side, as it may believe it is more disciplined, fit, or patriotic than the public it serves. Panelists debated whether it is positive for the military to think it is better than society, with one panelist noting that the military should be better in some ways, given its focus on being a winning fighting force and trusted institution. As one panelist said, the military is in the business of violence and expectations should be high, given the stakes at hand.

Panelists also debated the military's role in fixing the gap between it and society. While panelists agreed that there was much that the military could not fix (such as trust in the FBI), the military must take the first steps in building trust with the public. One panelist noted that the military must be proactive, as hyperpartisanship and winner-take-all politics means it is inevitable the military will continue to be drawn into the public's eye and ire. Another panelist noted that familiarity was everything in bridging the gap, as survey data had shown that simply knowing someone in the military or having a high school JROTC program changed public attitudes toward the military.

Finally, panelists discussed the role of the media in the public's perception of the military. As one panelist argued, the easiest institution to hate is the press, and that officers must actively work against this tendency by teaching future leaders to engage and understand the press. Another panelist noted that it is far more effective to criticize individual stories or sources as inaccurate than lazily criticizing the "media" as an institution. Further, it reinforces the ongoing, widespread criticism and distrust of institutions and authority, which ultimately reverberates against the institution of the military itself.

The Way Ahead

The final panel of the Symposium focused on developing a way ahead for the military, along with specific actions West Point can take in developing the next generation of officers. The first panelist began by asking if the military is doing enough to help with civil-military relations. It was the panelist's opinion that the military's current actions were insufficient and proposed two broad areas in which the military could do more.

The panelist first suggested that the military needs to reflect as much on its civil-military failures as on its successes. They elaborated that having a set of principles to follow is not for the easy times, but rather for the hard times. Both officers and cadets need to contemplate the hard choices they will have to make, and these are choices are not made easier by pretending they do not exist or are easy. Instead, officers and cadets should be forced to think about heavy choices with moral consequences, in which trade-offs between comparative goods are inevitable. Second, the panelist suggested that the military needs to be willing to talk about its worries regarding civil-military relations. If the military cannot have honest internal conversations about its concerns, rank and file members may not know the challenges or may be unprepared to face these tensions when they do arise.

The same panelist also reflected on the multitude of civil-military dilemmas that had been discussed during the Symposium. One of these challenges was a potential gap between how the military discusses civil-military relations and its actual choices, such as publicly committing to civilian control while taking actions that actually undermine control. Other dilemmas were the degradation and denigration of institutions, along with the tolerance for informed and reasonable dissent in an institution that requires a clear chain of command. Another challenge was how veterans engage with the public, especially a public that does not readily make a distinction between active and retired service members.

Other dilemmas brought up included anxieties about politicization in the ranks and the need for an "appropriately political" officer corps, especially in an era where skepticism and even hate of the military are reemerging on some parts of the political spectrum. A final dilemma is whether it was enough for senior officers to think about and discuss these issues, and if not, how best to engage and educate all levels of the military on civil-military issues.

The panelist also presented a few solutions moving forward. First, the military should focus on relationships, processes, and grit in its dealing with the branches of government. While tensions will exist, building

The Way Ahead (cont'd)

relationships on trust and understanding, and following appropriate processes, along with resilience in dealing with inevitable setbacks are all essential. Second, building and maintaining trust with civilian leaders and the general public is essential and requires a proactive approach in which the military takes the first steps. Third, candor is the best antidote to misperception and ambiguity. Being forthright about challenges, both internally and publicly, is essential. Finally, whenever possible, using specific examples of problems and issues instead of generalizing will help focus on individuals and instances instead of broad, ineffectual complaints.

The panelist concluded by arguing that the military gets the political leadership they deserve, and the political leadership gets the military it deserves. Both sides have a responsibility to educate and understand each other, while focusing on making arguments that persuade the other side, not that persuade themselves.

Finally, the panelist discussed how best to teach cadets about these issues and prepare them to be effective partners in the civil-military relationship. While the flaws of Samuel Huntington are well known, his "The Soldier and the State" is still a particularly useful starting point. The canon is often wrong, but "Soldier" provides an excellent vehicle for holding a dialectical discussion. Another important teaching point for cadets is that politicians and journalists owe nothing to the military. It is not their job to get stories right or to be sympathetic to the military. In the same vein, as more than one panelist noted, civilian leadership has the right to be wrong.

Other important points about cadet development focused on the emotional intelligence required for officers in any environment, whether operational or political. This type of intelligence will also help them understand when they can and when they should dissent without straying into disobedience. Finally, understanding the Constitution and the broader debates of the Founding Fathers over the role of the military in the United States is a critical foundation for any future officer to understand.

Symposium Resources

The following documents were provided to the Symposium guests prior to the event.

Public Confidence Trends

BIT.LY/PUBCONF

Select Readings Excerpt

BIT.LY/PRIMER_READINGS

Gen (Ret.) Dempsey Fireside Chat

BIT.LY/MD_FIRESIDE

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to all the participants in the Stewarding the Profession Leader Symposium for their expert insights and contributions to this important conversation.

About the Author

Major Adam Barsuhn is an active-duty U.S. Army military intelligence officer with multiple deployments to Afghanistan. He currently serves as the Executive Officer to the Dean of the Academic Board at the United States Military Academy at West Point. He is also as an instructor of international relations in the Department of Social Sciences at West Point. Adam holds an M.P.P from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government and a B.S. from USMA.

Thank you to the following individuals who provided notes, comments, proofreading, and editing for this report:

- Professor Rob Barnsby
- Colonel Jordon Swain
- Major Renee Sanjuan