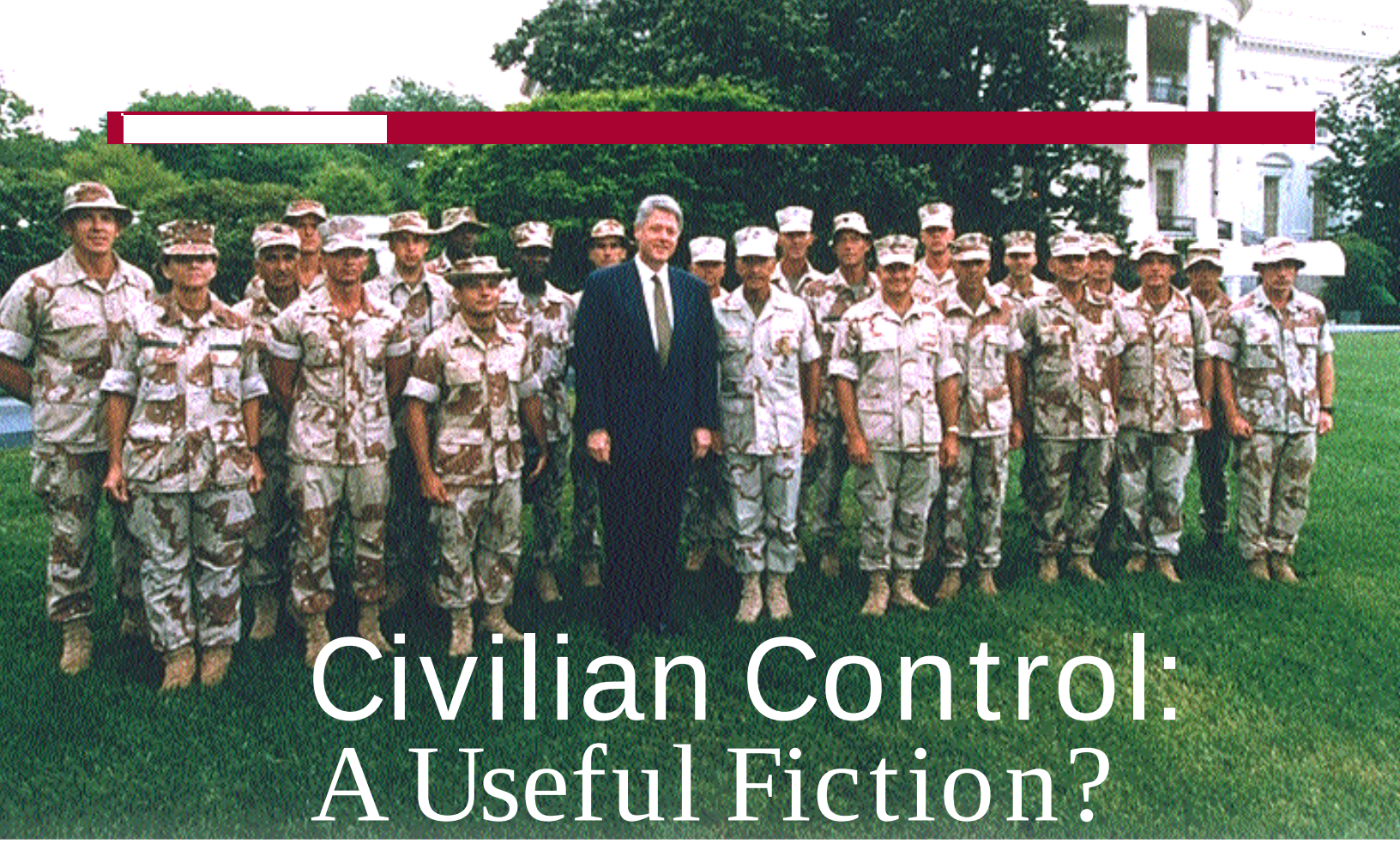

Civilian Control: A Useful Fiction?

Down home with the Commander in Chief.

The White House

By A. J. BACEVICH

A recent gathering of Washington-types was convened to discuss Richard Kohn's provocative essay entitled "Out of Control: The Crisis in Civil-Military Relations." Since the beginning of the Clinton presidency, articles critical of the current state of civil-military relations have appeared with some regularity. Of them, only Kohn's—published in the Spring 1994 issue of *The National Interest*—struck a nerve. His thesis is blunt and uncompromising: today's military is "more alienated from its civilian leadership than at any time in American history and more vocal about it." As befits a distinguished historian, Kohn marshals an impressive array of evidence to support that thesis. He cites a clutch of incidents—all previously reported in the media but quickly discarded when they used up their quota of newsworthiness—that taken together suggest an officer corps that views the current crop of civilian leaders with thinly veiled contempt. Yet Kohn does not regard the problem as merely military antagonism toward the President and his administration. Rather, he argues that a combination of political, strategic, and structural factors have contributed to an erosion of civilian control over time, a trend whose effects are only now becoming apparent.

The discussion of Kohn's article drew a roomful of both serving and former government officials, journalists, retired officers, and policy-oriented academics who examined his thesis that civilian control in the Clinton era had become increasingly tenuous. The question they considered was simple: has anything really changed? The ease with which the Washington veterans reached a consensus and disposed of Kohn's argument was dramatic: whatever the particulars of Clinton's difficulties with the military, in their view, *nothing* of substance had changed. In their experience, the Pentagon had *always* engaged in political maneuvering as evidenced, for example, in efforts to derail

Colonel A. J. Bacevich, USA (Ret.), is Executive Director of the Foreign Policy Institute, School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University and commanded the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment in the Gulf War.

The U.S. military is now more alienated from its civilian leadership than at any time in American history, and more vocal about it. . . . [T]he roots of the crisis go back to the beginning of the Cold War, when the creation of a large, "peacetime" standing military establishment overloaded the traditional process by which civilian control was exercised. . . . Civilian control is not a *fact*, but a *process*, that varies over time and is very much "situational," that is, dependent on the issues and the personalities, civilian and military, involved at any given point.

—Richard H. Kohn, "Out of Control: The Crisis in Civil-Military Relations," *The National Interest*

the President's initiative on gays in the military. Shorn of its peculiar cultural sensitivities, that controversy revealed the military indulging in the sort of interest group politics that it routinely (and in the eyes of this group all but inevitably) plays. When it comes to matters that the services consider vital to their well-being—budgets, weapons systems, defense policies—no President in recent memory has *controlled* the military in the strictest sense of that term. To imagine that all aspects of basic national security policies promulgated by presidential edict are actually decided in the Oval Office is simply naive. Much of the real action occurs behind the scenes through negotiation, intrigue, deal-making, and the occasional artful dodge—a complex game that the Pentagon plays with single-mindedness and considerable skill. As those accomplished in the ways of Washington must know, this is how the system works. Kohn's slightly overwrought hand-wringing notwithstanding, it always has.

This view that *nothing has changed* is important—and misleading. Drawing on firsthand experience extending back to the Cold War, these sophisticates effectively demolished the common journalistic take on Clinton's rocky relationship with the military: that the problem is one of simple animus on the part of senior officers who cut their teeth in the Vietnam-era. Putting personalities aside this view has utility, but to then conclude that all is well with American civil-military relations is dead wrong.

Roosevelt and Marshall

For the top brass to find itself at odds with a sitting President is hardly a new phenomenon. Yet to recall how senior officers in an earlier era handled disagreement with the man in the White House is to point out how much things *have* in fact changed. Nor is it necessary to reach too far back into history: consider the relationship between President Franklin Roosevelt and Chief of Staff of the Army General George Marshall. Perhaps more than ever people today appreciate Roosevelt as a masterful commander in chief. Marshall, by the same token, remains the preeminent icon of American military professionalism. He seems somewhat austere by present-day standards—imagine a soldier who considers it unseemly to cash in on his renown and who therefore declines lucrative offers to publish his memoirs or sit on corporate boards. Yet when it came to matters of strategy during World War II, Marshall and Roosevelt clashed repeatedly. Indeed, Marshall was not alone among the President's advisors in considering FDR's forays into grand strategy as impulsive and whimsical if not, on occasion, altogether daft.

At no time was disagreement between the two sharper than in the difficult months between the fall of France in early summer 1940 and America's entry into the war in December 1941—a period, it seems fair to say, when challenges besetting the Nation outweighed even the danger of permitting acknowledged homosexuals to serve in uniform. The outlines of the dispute are well

known and can hardly have been more fundamental. With aggression running rampant across Asia and Europe, the United States was engaged in a crash effort to bolster defense, preparing for the moment when the predators turned their attention to the Western Hemisphere. As Marshall saw it, rearming America was an absolute priority. Yet with that process barely underway, Roosevelt concluded that the Nation must simultaneously aid Britain in its lonely struggle against Germany. By any measure, the British cause was forlorn. Meeting the demands of Winston Churchill and his chiefs of staff, moreover, would only squander the modest gains made until then in rearming America. Materiel diverted to Britain would almost surely be wasted, the U.S. build-up would be thrown off schedule, and national security would not be enhanced but jeopardized further.

Marshall was not alone in seeing aid to Britain as a dubious proposition. Even apart from considerations of grand strategy many Americans found reasons for opposing efforts to rescue the British Empire. Those elements—including members of Congress, influential journalists, leaders of ethnic groups, and lobbyists—formed a ready source of support for military professionals who were persuaded that even a slight delay in rearming the Nation was intolerable. Yet Marshall chose not to exploit the opportunity offered by such potential allies. Instead, he directed his objections forthrightly to the President. When Roosevelt rejected Marshall's representations, insisting that the United States *would* aid Britain, the Army Chief of Staff loyally accepted the President's decision. Marshall would not, to use his own expression, "fight the problem." On the contrary, he would henceforth do his utmost to make FDR's policy work. Thus, for example, when Congress in early 1941 took up lend-lease, legislation designed to share the largess of American industry with Great Britain, Marshall's emphatic testimony on its behalf was crucial—perhaps decisive—in securing its passage.

History shows that in this the instincts of Roosevelt, the strategic tyro, were superior to the considered judgment of Marshall, the seasoned professional. More important for our purposes, however, is what Marshall's behavior evidences with regard to the substance of civilian control. Despite the political explosiveness inherent in the question of aid to Britain, Marshall did not attempt to advance his cause by engaging in leaks to favored journalists. He did not undermine FDR by making end runs to the President's many congressional critics. He did not avail himself of the pages of *Foreign Affairs* or other journals to drop oblique hints regarding which policies the Army would or would not support. Nor, once it was clear that Roosevelt was not to be budged, did Marshall sow a paper-trail of dissent to deflect criticism from himself if things turned sour.

Instead, by deferring to the President Marshall invested our policy with a coherence needed for success. In doing so he helped turn a long shot into a winner. In Marshall's eyes, there was no other recourse. As he remarked years later, "I honestly thought that it was ruinous [to the country] for me to come out in opposition to my Commander in Chief." Neither by coy maneuvering nor by foot-dragging would Marshall presume to challenge the legitimacy of the President's authority.

The Post-Cold War World

Contrary views of present-day political elites notwithstanding, Marshall's reaction shows just how much the norms of civil-military practice *have* changed over the decades. Practices seen today as within the acceptable bounds of military conduct—such as active duty officers publishing defiant op-ed pieces or service chiefs overshadowing their service secretaries—are in fact recent innovations. In Marshall's day, they were unheard of and would have been considered improper and unprofessional. Indeed, today's politicized and politically adroit military is yet one more legacy of the Cold War. In ways that many Americans fail to appreciate, the imperative of keeping the Nation on a perpetual, semi-mobilized footing transformed the traditional civil-military equation. As a result, the Pentagon's influence mushroomed, mostly at civilian expense.

The inherent dangers of confrontation with the Soviet Union provided powerful incentives to leave the implications of this transformation in civil-military relations unexamined: neither of the superpowers could afford to convey to the other an impression

that its soldiery was under anything except the tightest rein. Thus, as long as a Cold War-induced compact on national security policy remained intact, the potential consequences, adverse or otherwise, of any changes in civil-military relations remained hidden: on the questions of most fundamental importance, military leaders and senior civilian officials saw eye-to-eye. By and large, therefore, the subject could be consigned to the status of academic curiosity.

Yet no sooner did the Cold War end than that strategic compact began to unravel. A mere four years after the fall of the Berlin Wall—arguably the most important geopolitical event of this century—the chief characteristics of U.S. national policy have become drift and inconsistency. A great debate is underway to redefine America's role in the world, a debate inextricably linked to parallel controversies over the existing content and future evolution of our culture. Today's military feels no compunction about thrusting itself foursquare into that process at points of its own choosing. In doing so, its perspective is anything but disinterested. Like other participants in the debate, the services evaluate the present and envision the future through the distorting lens of their own institutional biases and expectations.

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But unlike other participants the Pentagon has a massive budget, large pockets of which are hidden from public scrutiny. It allocates a substantial chunk of research and development dollars. By virtue of vast defense spending it has intimate relations with corporate America. This Cold War legacy invests the military with a capacity to tilt the debate in ways that advance its interests but do not necessarily serve the common good. Unless subjected to rigorous oversight, this capacity is open to abuse. In a society increasingly confused about its basic values and showing signs of moral decay, these tendencies could even at some point in the future pose a threat to the established order.

Nearly forty years ago Samuel Huntington noted that: "In Western society civilian control has suffered the fate of consensus. . . . No one, civil or military, is ever against civilian control. Consequently, it has achieved acceptability at the price of becoming meaningless."

In an era that bids fair to be rich in perplexity and frustration, Americans can ill afford the luxury of consensus that is devoid of meaning. There is no crisis in civil-military relations today, but we must insure that we do not invite one through either inattention or inadvertence. Doing so requires acting promptly to reinvigorate civilian control over the military, helping it to recover from the anemic state into which it has slipped in the course of the last fifty years. Although returning to the era of George Marshall may be impossible, a fresh and stringent delineation of allowable military prerogatives is in order.

Once the parameters have been established, civilian officials must fulfill their obligation to assert authority energetically, forcefully, and consistently. This will not only safeguard democracy but may even—as it did in Marshall's day—produce sound policy. If nothing else, it will preclude the possibility of Americans ever awakening to discover that civilian control has become a fiction. Soldiers and civilians alike share an abiding interest in insuring that that day never dawns. JFQ