

The Role of the Military in U.S. History: Past, Present, and Future

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The rise of professional militaries in the West is credited with accelerating the process of creating the modern nation-state. In addition to defending the state from external threats, professional armed forces performed internal security, public safety, and administrative functions that helped to establish the legitimacy of its sovereignty.

The United States stood as an exception to that trend. While a professional army was assembled to help win independence from England, it did not help to create the U.S. This was accomplished by the people. In the new republic, national sovereignty was reserved for the people. The government's armed forces, like all of the other instruments of national power, were to be servants of the people, not a means with which to govern them. This concept is foundational to the roles, missions, and actions of the U.S. armed forces past, present, and future. Nevertheless, as the nation evolved, so did the scope and activities of the American military.

Birth of the Republic

Defining appropriate civil–military relations was foundational to the establishment of the United States. The principles for organizing military force were largely drawn from British history, culture, legal concepts, and tradition.

The experience of Britain in the state-formation period of the 17th and 18th centuries was unique. In almost every other instance, militaries emerged as important instruments of domestic control as well as weapons of war. This evolution was not unique to Europe. It was also common in Latin America as well as parts of Africa and Asia. In places where great empires did not have dominion, rulers had

limited capacity to marshal military forces either for military campaigns or for internal security. Rulers could either call for levies from lords or assemble militias on the one hand or contract for mercenaries on the other. Neither solution was particularly satisfying to sovereign powers because not completely controlling armed forces compromised both their power and their legitimacy.

The Italian scholar Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) struggled with the dilemma of the pursuit of power in his political and military writings. He decried mercenaries as rapacious and unreliable.¹ He argued for an army of citizen-soldiers² who would virtuously serve the state, an idea that at the time was well-meant but impractical. What most states did instead was mass resources that allowed for temporary standing armies—either of conscripts or of rented forces from foreign powers like the German Landsknechte.

As the constitutional character of the British state evolved, however, history led Albion on a different path. During the English Civil War (1642–1651), the crown used both the professional army and hired foreign troops to prosecute the war against the forces mustered by a revolt led by leaders in Parliament. After an interregnum (1649–1660), the crown was restored, but James II abdicated in 1688 over another confrontation with Parliament. The Bill of Rights issued when William and Mary were offered the crown enshrined that foreign troops should not be stationed on British soil, the military should be raised only by Parliament, and only a limited standing army should be stationed in Britain and never mobilized against the British people.³ This enshrined in law the concept of “no

standing armies” as well as the rationale for checks and balances so that the government could never use the armed forces as an instrument of tyranny against the people.

It was the British “no standing armies” tradition and the republican concept of the citizen-soldier envisioned by Machiavelli that together served as the intellectual foundation for the American armed forces. The practical lessons from decades of armed warfare between nation-states in Europe, the Americas, and Asia were also considered in deciding how to organize the American armed forces. While the Americans wanted civilian control of the military, they also wanted armed forces that could fight and win. This meant that land and sea forces needed to be under unified military commands that could muster professional troops and matériel for extended campaigns and employ them as effectively as possible.

Thus, during the American Revolution in 1775, the Continental Congress commissioned George Washington as commander in chief of the Continental Army.⁴ Meanwhile, the Congress assumed responsibility for raising and supporting a professional army and naval forces instead of just relying on the colonial volunteer militias to fight for independence.

At the end of the war, the Continental Army watched from their cantonment at Newburgh in upstate New York, waiting for the final peace treaty between the United States of America and the United Kingdom and the evacuation of British forces. There was great consternation in the ranks that the Congress had not delivered on many of the promises made to enlistees. Some argued that the military should refuse to disband until their grievances were addressed or even march on the Continental Congress. Washington quelled the mutiny,⁵ his principal argument being that their loyalty to the nation and to the appointed civilian leaders in the Continental Congress transcended their personal interests.

The practical lessons of the American Revolution did as much as the intellectual scholarship of writers like Machiavelli, John Locke, and others to shape the drafting of the U.S. Constitution that was finally ratified in 1788.⁶ The foundational document had a great deal to say about the roles, missions, and oversight of the armed forces. In fact, there is more articulation of stated and enumerated powers

related to defense in the Constitution than there is about any other function of government.⁷

The Constitution enshrined civilian control of the military by making the President the commander in chief of the armed forces.⁸ This was more than a symbolic appointment. Below the level of the President, to this day, no single officer has command authority over all U.S. military forces.

In addition to ensuring unity of command and effort in wartime, the Constitution gave Congress the authority and responsibility for raising and maintaining national military forces,⁹ thereby limiting the power of the executive to use or maintain armed forces independently, without reference to Congress. Congress authorized creation of today’s Army (under the Secretary of War) in 1789;¹⁰ Navy (under the Secretary of the Navy) in 1794;¹¹ and Marine Corps (serving within the Department of the Navy and under the Secretary) in 1798.¹²

The Constitution also authorized individual states to raise and maintain militias.¹³ This authority was granted partly because the Congress assumed that there would be a small standing Army and Navy in peacetime with most internal security tasks addressed by the states themselves. Laws later evolved for state forces to work in concert with or under the national government. During the War of 1812, for instance, Andrew Jackson had a commission as a major general in the regular United States Army and command of the Seventh Military District. He organized the defense of New Orleans with a combination of militias, volunteers, and a handful of professional forces.

Thus, since the earliest days of the republic, Americans proactively sought to implement all of the concepts they thought essential for the armed forces of a republican state with civilian control, limited professional militaries in peacetime, and armed forces focused on defending against external threats rather than being employed for internal security. The armed forces were primarily for foreign threats and constabulary duties in frontier territories and on U.S. borders. President Thomas Jefferson, for example, deployed naval and Marine forces to safeguard U.S. interests against the states of North Africa. The United States fought two separate wars with Tripoli (1801–1805) and Algiers (1815–1816) and maintained a Mediterranean Squadron in theater that has continued in different iterations down to the present day.

That said, however, the Constitution did not prohibit the use of armed forces in a domestic theater under extraordinary circumstances.¹⁴ George Washington as the first President demonstrated that authority in 1794 when he called out troops under federal authority to quell the Whiskey Rebellion, a series of violent protests against the first excise tax imposed by the new government. At the time, before troops could be raised, the Militia Act of 1792 required a Supreme Court associate justice or “the district judge” to certify that law enforcement was beyond the control of local authorities.¹⁵ After that determination, Washington issued a proclamation announcing that the militia would be called out under his command. The troops dispersed the insurrectionists.

In responding to the Whiskey Rebellion, the President declared that he was acting with “deepest regret” and that the military was being employed to restore civil order, not as a political instrument.¹⁶ As President, Jefferson likewise looked to policies demonstrating that military forces were national instruments not to be used to further political interests. For instance, when the U.S. government built its first complement of frigates for the Navy, it ordered that contracts be distributed to several ports in different states to demonstrate that the Administration was not picking favorites. Jefferson established the first federal military academy at West Point in 1802 and distributed appointments among all the states to create opportunities for both political parties to contribute to the Army’s officer corps, ensuring that no single political faction dominated the ranks of regular Army officers.¹⁷

The structural decisions made to organize national defense ensured an effective military without consolidating political control of the armed forces. In this respect, the U.S. overcame the principal critique over the capacity of republics to defend themselves, highlighted in Alex de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*.¹⁸ De Tocqueville had many nice things to say about the new nation and the concept of democracy, but he wondered whether a representative republic could fight wars and deal with protracted security challenges without collapsing over internal squabbling and political factions in a government where authority was divided and organized to provide checks and balances against the independent use of force by the executive.

From the West to the Western Hemisphere and the World

Experience proved that the U.S. could use armed forces decisively to protect itself. In this respect, as the republic grew, strategy and interests did as much as the political constructs laid out in the Constitution to shape the roles and missions of the armed forces.

Again, Washington’s action proved formative in developing and employing the armed forces. From the birth of the republic, there was a ferocious debate between political factions over how to defend the new nation. At the time, the global geopolitics that largely affected the fledgling state was the rivalry between France and Great Britain over spheres of influence. This competition extended to the Western Hemisphere where both countries had colonial holdings as well as economic and security interests at stake.

In the U.S., one faction argued for aligning with the British. The other argued for siding with France. Washington argued for what at the time was an even more controversial decision. The U.S., he declared in his farewell address to Congress, should have “no entangling alliance,”¹⁹ eschewing treaty alliances with either Paris or London. Washington did not intend to author an immutable principle of American foreign policy; Article II the Constitution specifically grants government the authority to execute treaties.²⁰ Rather, Washington was making a declaration of grand strategy: an overall expression of ends, ways, and means to secure U.S. interests over the long term.

The U.S. was a fledgling power, Washington reasoned, and the best way to secure American interests was to ensure that they were not intertwined with and overwhelmed by those of either great power (Britain and France), thereby avoiding the risk of the U.S. becoming a vassal state or being drawn into the endless wars between the rival empires. In part, this decision allowed the U.S. to maintain modest armed forces without stressing the finances of the young republic and creating a powerful government institution that might later be used to undermine democratic rule.

Washington’s choice became the orthodoxy of American grand strategy until President James Monroe advanced the Monroe Doctrine in his annual message to Congress in 1823.²¹ Monroe argued that European powers were obligated to respect the

Western Hemisphere as the United States' sphere of interest. This new strategic formulation was grounded in America's expanding power and interests, particularly with regard to westward expansion and ensuring freedom of the seas for American shipping. Commensurately, the U.S. military added modest expeditionary capability and increased capacity to conduct constabulary operations in new territories. The most muscular employment of U.S. forces in the hemisphere was the Mexican–American War (1846–1848).

Emphasis on hemispheric defense remained the focus of the U.S. armed forces, although there were exceptions. The U.S., for example, still maintained the European Squadron in the Mediterranean; deployed an East India Squadron in 1835 (which became the Asiatic Squadron in 1868); and established the Great White Fleet, a group of Navy battleships that circumnavigated the globe from 1907 to 1909. The U.S. military also maintained a ground-force presence in China throughout the first decade of the 20th century in addition to forces in the Philippines.

Hemispheric defense, however, remained the U.S. military's dominant focus. The armed forces, for instance, were called upon for a punitive expedition in Mexico (1916–1917). The American occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934 was justified in part as an attempt to secure avenues of approach to the United States through the Caribbean. Even the U.S. intervention in World War I was justified as based on hemispheric defense, predicated on the need for preemptive action to counter the likelihood of invasion by the German Empire and Mexico.

In fact, until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, which triggered U.S. entry into World War II, hemispheric defense remained the guiding strategy behind the missions, structure, and manning of the American armed forces.

By the end of World War II, the U.S. had emerged incontestably as a global power with global interests and responsibilities. Strategy was largely structured around fighting the Cold War with the Soviet Union included establishing an independent Air Force branch; building strategic forces (nuclear-armed missiles, bombers, and submarines); permanently stationing major forces overseas; maintaining a global military command structure; and investing in expansive treaty alliances, principally NATO.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the crafting of a consensus global grand

strategy became difficult, but the U.S. still recognized that it needed armed forces with global reach and the capacity to conduct extended campaigns.

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks renewed concerns about the defense of the home front and engendered a persistent need for security not seen except in wartime since the early days of the republic, although the military traditionally had provided support to civil authorities—for example, in response to the great San Francisco earthquake of 1906. In another example, in 1929, the city of Tacoma, Washington, experienced a massive power outage.²² The Department of the Navy ordered the USS *Lexington* to respond, and the ship's four giant generators helped to provide electricity for the next several weeks. Only after 9/11, however, did the mission of homeland defense become integral to long-term U.S. strategy.

Strategy vs. Reality

While strategic needs have generally defined the scope, size, and missions of the military over the course of U.S. history, there is a saying: “Strategy can change faster than foster structure.” In other words, sudden changes in the geostrategic environment can occur that reveal inadequacy in force planning or introduce dramatic and unanticipated new demands.

The American Civil War (1861–1865) is perhaps the starkest example. For the first half-century of the republic, the armed forces mostly conducted constabulary duties and punitive expeditions on the frontier. It was never envisioned that the military would be required to conduct major campaigns or even operations in a domestic context. When the secession of the southern states plunged the country into conflict, the armed forces had to adapt rapidly, including by employing national conscription to fill the ranks.

The Civil War also saw the first widespread deployment of persons of color in the U.S. Army. By the end of the Civil War, roughly 179,000 black men (10 percent of the force) served in the Union Army. Another 19,000 served in the U.S. Navy.²³ After the war, blacks continued to serve in segregated units. The most famous were the “Buffalo Soldiers,” cavalry units that served on the American frontier. Buffalo soldiers also fought in the Spanish–American War and served in the Philippines.²⁴

Another significant departure from tradition was the use of soldiers as federal marshals during

Reconstruction. During the presidential election of 1876, President Ulysses S. Grant dispatched troops to polling stations in South Carolina, Louisiana, and Florida, where electoral votes remained in dispute. Reflecting the ongoing national debate between security and government power within the United States and the appropriate use of the armed forces, this measure precipitated calls for the passage of the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878,²⁵ which prohibited federal troops from enforcing state or federal laws without congressional approval.

Reconstruction was not the first and would not be the last time that the armed forces became mired in political and social controversies. Despite Posse Comitatus, during the 19th century, military forces were often called upon to restore public order. For example, between 1875 and 1918, state militias or federal troops were called out to respond to labor unrest over one thousand times.

Unfortunately, although the armed forces were intended for hemispheric defense, the chaotic attempts to launch an invasion force from Tampa, Florida, proved that the U.S. Army was not up to the task of executing an expeditionary campaign in Cuba during the Spanish–American War in 1898. Further, the War Department struggled to integrate active-duty forces, state militias, and volunteer units. In response, the U.S. Congress passed the Militia Act of 1903²⁶ establishing the modern National Guard from state militias and codifying the circumstances under which state National Guard units could be federalized. Congress also created both Army and Navy Reserve forces, thereby establishing in the modern era three formal components of the armed services:

- The active force (full-time federal troops);
- The National Guard (state forces that could be mobilized under federal service); and
- Reserves (federal troops that were inactive until mobilized for federal service).

As the armed forces struggled with the transformation from an ancillary security force to the principal instrument of American national power, it also had to undergo a significant intellectual transformation. During the Civil War, for instance, the armed forces had an unprecedented requirement to

conduct major campaigns including joint operations (involving multiple services). A modicum of military education was gained in the Army and Navy military academies as well as the military service schools.

Military theory and doctrine drew heavily from European experience, especially the Napoleonic wars, and influential writers such as Antoine Henri Jomini.²⁷ Later, the American armed forces were deeply influenced by works such as Alfred Thayer Mahan’s *The Influence of Seapower Upon History*²⁸ and Carl von Clausewitz’s *On War*²⁹ that emphasized conventional military operations. American military theory and doctrine were also influenced greatly by combat experience, including experience during the Civil War and World War I, where U.S. forces drew heavily from the British and French military establishments’ understanding of planning, staff work, and other operational skills.

In preparation for and during World War II, the U.S. armed forces developed skills that far exceeded what was needed for hemispheric defense and would serve as the basis for modern thinking about warfare. For example, before the outbreak of World War II, the Naval War College conducted sophisticated war games for global war.³⁰ Military staffs developed the Rainbow Plans,³¹ which dealt with various global contingencies. The Army Air Corps developed concepts for strategic bombing. By the time the U.S. armed forces emerged from World War II, they had the world’s most sophisticated system for the development of professional military education, doctrine, and strategic planning.

In preparing for participation in World War I and World War II, the U.S. also had to scramble to reorganize for new missions that exceeded hemispheric defense. During both wars, for instance, the United States instituted wartime drafts to expand military capabilities. However, the drafts ended when hostilities concluded.

In addition, the services had to develop new capabilities. During World War I, the Army established aviation forces under the Signal Corps. After the war, in 1926, the Army formally established an Army Air Corps.³² The Navy developed submarine and naval aviation forces. In the interwar years, the Marine Corps developed expeditionary amphibious warfare capabilities (which were also adopted by the U.S. Army during World War II).

During the interwar and wartime years, there also were numerous incidents in which the armed

forces and their leaders became mired in political controversy despite the constitutional strictures that sought to insulate the conduct and oversight of the military from partisan political activity. One of the most noteworthy was the controversial decision to use the Army to eject the Bonus Marchers (World War I veterans who marched on the capital in Washington, D.C., demanding cash redemption of their service bonus certificates).³³

Even during wartime, the U.S. military often became embroiled in the challenges of social change. Many of the major U.S. military training bases were in the South in states that had instituted “Jim Crow” laws legalizing unequal treatment of African Americans. The presence of mobilized black soldiers resulted in many incidents. Race riots also occurred overseas in Europe and the Pacific. Despite the tensions of segregation, many African Americans volunteered to serve in the military during World War II.

Women also mobilized in significant numbers to serve in the armed forces, though they were organized in reserve corps under the Army, Navy, Marines, and U.S. Coast Guard. Their service was limited by the fact that they were not allowed to perform combat-related duties.

A Dramatic Transformation

Before World War II, there was vigorous debate over the future of U.S. strategy and how best to protect American interests. This debate was catalyzed by a national organization, the America First Committee, whose leadership included famed aviator Charles A. Lindbergh, the movement’s most recognizable spokesperson. Right up until the U.S. entered World War II, the majority of Americans supported the group’s basic aim: to avoid becoming involved in overseas wars and instead strengthen the nation’s capacity for hemispheric defense.

Days after Pearl Harbor, Lindbergh wrote in his diary: “I can see nothing to do under these circumstances except to fight. If I had been in Congress, I certainly would have voted for a declaration of war.”³⁴ Many of the America First Committee’s leaders volunteered to serve in the armed forces.³⁵ Lindbergh managed to find ways to contribute to the war effort, even flying combat missions in the South Pacific.

After the Second World War, America’s place in the world and the requirement for large, standing military forces were open questions. The postwar

world marked a dramatic transformation in the U.S. military that was shaped largely by changing geostrategic conditions and the evolving nature of American power and influence. The concept of hemispheric defense now seemed wholly inadequate. A number of initiatives were undertaken to ensure that U.S. forces had global reach and influence. As the confrontation with the Soviet Union escalated into a Cold War, the armed forces became the primary instrument for the American strategy of containment against the Soviet threat.

The National Security Act of 1947 formalized the roles of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, which had evolved informally over the course of World War II.³⁶ The law created a National Security Council to improve coordination of the armed forces with the other instruments of national power. An independent Air Force was also established. In addition, authority over the armed forces was consolidated. This eventually led to the Department of Defense, which oversaw the secretaries of the Army, Navy, and Air Force.

The Selective Service Act of 1948 served as the basis for the modern Selective Service System.³⁷ As global tensions with the Soviet Union rose, a draft was maintained during peace and war (unprecedented in U.S. history) until 1973.

America’s standing armed forces also expanded dramatically. During the course of the nation’s history from its founding to World War II, the U.S. averaged 1 percent to 2 percent of national GDP during peacetime, expanded dramatically during wars, but then was quickly reduced to a one-digit or two-digit norm after the conflict. Throughout the Cold War, however, the U.S. averaged between 7 percent and 8 percent of GDP.³⁸ Defense spending was also the lion’s share of the federal budget and government research and development (R&D) funding, mostly related to national security, that dwarfed the private sector.

New Age, New Challenges

The notion that maintaining a small peacetime standing force would be sufficient to ensure that the military would not be exploited as an instrument to undermine democratic rule was clearly no longer relevant in a modern age when large standing armed forces were the norm, not the exception. The notion remained attractive—even desirable—but global realities trumped America’s historical preferences.

The American military establishment grew to such an extent during the first decade of the Cold War that in his farewell address in 1961, President Dwight Eisenhower warned that “[i]n the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex” and “must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes.”³⁹ Nevertheless, the U.S. political structure proved remarkably resilient in sustaining civilian control of the military, a testament not only to the oversight of Congress and the sense of the American people, but also to the professionalism of the military itself and its commitment to constitutional principles.

Political and social tensions affecting the military were endemic throughout the Cold War. In 1949, a number of active and retired senior naval officers became embroiled in a plot to undermine the Administration’s naval policies, an incident that was labeled “the Revolt of the Admirals.”⁴⁰ During the Korean War, President Harry Truman ordered the full racial integration of the U.S. military.⁴¹ Truman also sparked a significant confrontation when he fired the senior U.S. commander in the theater, General Douglas MacArthur, for insubordination. In the 1950s, President Eisenhower called out U.S. troops to enforce orders to integrate schools in the South.

The 1960s and 1970s proved even more contentious as the nation was rocked simultaneously by the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements. Military forces were frequently called out to quell disturbances. The most shocking incident occurred in 1970 when National Guard soldiers fired on demonstrators at the Kent State University campus, killing four students.⁴²

Military culture struggled to adapt to the tumultuous challenges of Cold War politics and social change and unrest. Two of the most influential books of the time were Samuel Huntington’s *The Soldier and the State* (1957)⁴³ and Morris Janowitz’s *The Professional Soldier* (1960),⁴⁴ both of which sought to define the military’s place in modern American society and reconcile the struggles in contemporary civilian–military relations. But while both were deeply influential and widely read in the military, their prescription to define a professional space insulated from political turmoil, the rapidly changing modern world, and the rapid shifts in demands of and attitudes toward the military largely proved fruitless and inadequate.

For much of American history, absent major wars, the American military was comprised of people and institutions that had scant interaction with most Americans. The military drew limited public resources. Sailors were far away at sea, and soldiers were stationed on dusty bases in Texas or far-off garrisons in China, removed from everyday life.

From World War II (when more than 10 percent of American men were in uniform) on, the armed forces and veterans were a ubiquitous part of American life. Moreover, social change intertwined America and its armed forces. In 1978, the women’s reserve corps were disbanded, and women were integrated into the regular services (though still excluded from combat roles). Women were also accepted at the nation’s military academies. Change also brought new challenges. In the coming decades, for instance, all of the services would face major scandals involving the treatment of women in the military and be dogged by allegations of sexual abuse and violence in the armed forces.

Guns vs. Butter and More

Another significant change in the military’s place in American life was the armed forces’ impact on fiscal policy. From the American Revolution through the first half of the 20th century, when military forces were modest, defense spending might engender occasional heated controversies and debates but was not a significant factor in the American political economy. That completely changed after World War II. Although the military after the war remained—and remains to this day—a global force that required significant funding, the size of the military and its related funding were continually whipsawed, buffeted by politics, the state of the U.S. economy, and global affairs. For example:

- With the conclusion of the Second World War, President Harry Truman (1945–1952) consciously sought to reduce the armed forces, only to reverse course with the outbreak of the Korean War.
- President Dwight Eisenhower (1953–1961) also instituted significant reductions in conventional forces, which he offset in part by increased funding for nuclear arms, a policy that was continued by President John Kennedy (1961–1963).⁴⁵

- President Lyndon Johnson (1963–1969) dramatically increased defense spending to accommodate the war in Vietnam, but he also increased domestic spending, which resulted in a significant negative impact on the economy.

Presidents continued to look for military reductions until President Ronald Reagan (1981–1989) dramatically increased the size of the military, justifying it as necessary to outmatch the Soviet military. Following the end of the Cold War, the military experienced a cascading series of force reductions that continued until the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the outbreak of war in Afghanistan and Iraq. President Barack Obama (2009–2017) again sought force and spending reductions, only to see that trend reversed by President Donald Trump (2016–2017), who sought to increase readiness; focus on countering China, Russia, and Iran; and establish a new military service—the United States Space Force.

Much of the push and pull in the size, scope, and funding of military forces was the result of more than fiscal pressures, changing geopolitics, and views of how to employ modern militaries. In the wake of the Vietnam War, for instance, the U.S. military came in for scathing criticism. One influential critique, historian Russell Weigley’s *The American Way of War* (1973),⁴⁶ argued that American military tradition was overly focused and dependent on the use of brute force in war. Another well-known critique, Harry G. Summers’ *On Strategy* (1982),⁴⁷ concluded that the problem was how modern militaries are employed.

The Goldwater–Nichols Act of 1986,⁴⁸ the first sweeping legislative reform since the National Security Act of 1947, was authored to address the inefficiencies and inadequacies of the military in modern warfare. Among the initiatives in the law were measures to improve the conduct of joint operations by improving the ability of the individual services not just to work together, but to develop synergies more intentionally by leveraging each other in an integrated way.

Technology also introduced dramatic changes. The proliferation of silicon microchips engendered a new generation of computer technologies that had an immediate impact on the military. GPS, for instance, enabled the widespread deployment of precision-guided weapons. Technological evolution

also affected (and continues to affect) how the military conceptualizes operations. In addition to being joint, forces must also be multidimensional, integrating operations on land, at sea and below the surface, in the air, in space, and in cyberspace.

The U.S. military has also been asked to conduct a wide variety of operations, from conventional warfare to occupation duties, border security, and homeland defense, and to assume an expanding role in space operations. On top of this, while the U.S. armed forces have always been tasked with global missions since World War II, the rise of China, a resurgent Russian threat, and persistent aggression from Iran in the Middle East have led to a lively debate over how to apportion forces and efforts—an especially difficult challenge given the reduction in forces following the end of the Cold War.

In addition, manpower issues have increasingly come to shape the nature of the force. Before the end of the Cold War, reserve components (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Coast Guard) and National Guard (Army and Air Force) were used predominantly only in wartime. Since the end of the Cold War, the armed forces routinely call on all components of the “total force.”

Further, the U.S. military has not employed Selective Service since the 1970s. Instead, the military relies on recruiting and retaining an all-volunteer force. The challenges of sustaining such a force are changing with the demographics of the country, particularly since there is decreasing propensity to serve in the military and fewer American youth are qualified for military service.⁴⁹ Though all military positions have been open to both men and women, the challenge continues to grow.

Another contemporary challenge is the size of the veteran population, which is on a scale not seen since Vietnam. Veterans who have a range of physical and mental health challenges, as well as valuable skills to bring to civilian communities, also have political influence. Historically, large veteran populations after the Civil War, World Wars I and II, and Vietnam have had an economic, political, and social impact on the country in addition to affecting how we provide services and support for future servicemembers. The 9/11 generation most likely will as well.

While the armed forces were buffeted in the post–Cold War world by shifts in focus, demands, funding, and the advent of technologies that affect

military operations, they were also affected by dramatic social change. President Bill Clinton (1993–2001) generated controversy when he attempted to change policies to allow homosexuals to serve openly in the armed forces. Opposition was substantial and led to a compromise policy known as “don’t ask, don’t tell.” Under President Obama, gays and lesbians were permitted to serve openly in the military, and restrictions prohibiting “gay marriage” were removed.⁵⁰

These shifts have introduced a dramatic cascade of social policy changes that now includes controversy over transsexuals serving in the U.S. military. Further, initiatives like Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and Environmental and Social Governance (ESG) programs have embroiled the armed services in controversial debates over social policies and cultural norms. Proponents of such changes argue that increased diversity within the force will somehow make it stronger, more effective, and more resilient while also aligning it with the demographic profile of American society, but there is no clear evidence that supports these claims. To the contrary, such politically progressive policies appear to hurt recruiting and retention efforts and have spurred strong opposition within the military and among the retired and veteran communities.

Looking to the Future

The history of America’s military demonstrates the resilience of democratic structures. Yet it is also clear that the constitutional order governing the military’s relationship with the federal government and the American people is not immune from political pressure and destructive influence. The healthy state of civil–military relations can never be taken for granted; nor should the need to check influences and impulses that seek to make military forces a tool of political factions.

U.S. history shows that the roles, missions, structure, and capabilities of America’s military forces are regularly subject to change. As the needs of providing for the common defense continue to evolve, so must the armed forces. Consequently, the why, how, and extent of change should be a subject of serious, sober debate. America will remain a global power and will continue to need a military that is up to the task of protecting the homeland and the country’s interests on a global scale. The struggles the nation has faced since the end of World War II and the forces that impact them—geopolitics, the economy, technology, and social change—are not going away. The choices that have to be made in the future will be no easier than the choices that had to be made in the past. Nor will the magnitude of the consequences of getting it right or wrong be any less.

Endnotes

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