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The Hazards of Military Worship

By Tom Engelhardt
May 11, 2017

Here's a footnote to America's present wars that's worth pondering for a few moments. The U.S. Air Force is running out of ordinary bombs, smart bombs, and in some cases missiles. No kidding. The air war over Syria and Iraq that began in August 2014 and is now two-and-a-half years old has eaten through America's supply of bombs. The usual crew of weapons makers evidently can't produce such munitions fast enough to keep up, so the U.S. military is, for instance, cutting into its stockpiles of smart bombs in Asia to send some to the Middle East and Africa simply to keep pace with demand – and, according to recent reports, it may nonetheless be failing to do so. Consider this a longer term problem since, in the era of Donald Trump, the generals are increasingly running their own wars, which, if the daily drumbeat of news about them is accurate, are only ramping up further.

Everywhere you look, from Yemen to Iraq, Syria to Somalia, the American military is growing more assertive as civilian casualties rise and constraints of any sort, whether on special operations raids, drone strikes, or the use of the most powerful non-nuclear bomb in the U.S. arsenal, fall away. Only last week, for instance, came news that Trump's generals plan to put recommendations on his desk soon to turn the tide in America's longest war, the largely forgotten one in Afghanistan, which the U.S. military now refers to as a "stalemate." (Who cares that, on the ground, the Taliban has in recent months seemed increasingly ascendant and the U.S.-trained, U.S.-supplied, and U.S.-backed Afghan military increasingly battered?) Those

recommendations – so claims acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations Theresa Whalen – will help the U.S "move beyond the stalemate." This will evidently be done by sending 3,000 to 5,000 more U.S. troops there to train the Afghan military. Yes, you read that right. Almost 16 years after the invasion and "liberation" of Afghanistan in 2001, the solution to the never-ending war there is to send in a few thousand more U.S. military personnel to work with a force filled with "ghost soldiers," into which this country has already reportedly poured $71 billion and which has suffered both staggering casualties and startling desertion rates in recent years. Just off the top of your head, tell me how you think that's likely to go. And oh yes, once those troops are there, one thing that will certainly be needed: more bombs and missiles to support their activities.

All of this is part of what *TomDispatch* regular Army Major Danny Sjursen, author of *Ghost Riders of Baghdad: Soldiers, Civilians, and the Myth of the Surge*, refers to today as the U.S. military's "more" strategy. With the generals ascendant in the Trumpian universe and all those stars twinkling in Washington's firmament, "more" is distinctly in the saddle. Whether in Afghanistan or in Syria and Iraq, where that massive air campaign against the Islamic State is now well into its third year, it has lent a significant hand to the rubblization of major cities across both of those countries. (In Syria, the Russian and Syrian air forces have offered a similarly helping hand in the process, as has ISIS with its suicide vehicles and booby-trapped buildings.) As a result, while the Islamic State is not yet defeated, the region is now in genuine chaos, overrun by millions of uprooted refugees from countries increasingly in ruins and in disarray. In other words, what started as a "war" against al-Qaeda, a modest-sized group of fanatics largely located in Afghanistan (with scattered cells of followers elsewhere), has now become a catastrophe stretching from Afghanistan to the former state of Libya in North Africa and beyond. As ever, the American solution to this crisis, as Sjursen points out, is: more! *Tom*

Everyone Loves the Troops and Their Generals, But History Indicates That Military Advice Isn't All It's Cracked Up to Be
By Danny Sjursen

More, more, more.

I was guilty of it myself. Commanding a small cavalry troop of about 85 soldiers in southwest Kandahar Province back in 2011, I certainly wanted and requested more: more troopers, more Special Forces advisers, more Afghan police, more air support, more supplies, more money, more… everything. Like so many others in Afghanistan back then, I wanted whatever resources would protect the guys in my unit and fend off the insurgent threat. No one, of course, asked me if the U.S. military should even be there, nor did I presume to raise the question. I was, after all, just a captain dug into a tough fight in a dangerous district.

It's funny, though, people sometimes ask me now, "What's really going on in Afghanistan?" They ask the same question about Iraq, where I led a unit back in 2006-2007. I mean, the implication is: If you served over there, unlike those (liberal!) pundits and politicians who regularly mouth off on the subject, who would know better? But I've learned over the years that what they don't want to hear is my real answer to such questions, so I rarely bother to tell them

that historians, analysts, and thoughtful critics, even ones who haven't been within thousands of miles of our war zones, probably understand the "big picture" better than most soldiers.

That's the dirty little secret of America's wars: despite the omniscient claims of some veterans, most soldiers see their version of war as if gazing through a straw at 30,000 feet. Combat and dedication to your unit and mission naturally steer you toward such tunnel vision. And here's the sad thing that no one wants to admit: that mantra applies as strongly to generals as to sergeants (and if you don't believe that, just check out our wars of the last 15 years). So it's worrisome when president after president defers to and all too often hides behind the supposed wisdom of active and retired three- and four-star flag officers.

Don't get me wrong, some of these guys can be impressive. No one is perfect, but former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Martin Dempsey was a gem with genuine scholarly and combat bona fides. But consider him and a few others the exceptions that prove the rule. Which is why civilian control of the military, and of the policymaking process that goes with military action, is not just a constitutional imperative but desirable for thoroughly practical reasons. Which, in turn, is why the makeup of the current administration – with an unprecedented number of generals in key positions – raises some serious questions.

And yet the problem is so much bigger than that. Somehow – and this should be truly unnerving – Americans have gotten to a place where, it seems, they trust *only* soldiers. In June 2016, for instance, a Gallup poll found that 73% of Americans had "quite a lot" of confidence in the military, versus 36% for the presidency and 6% for Congress. Such disparities ought to inspire distress about the direction of our public institutions, but rarely do.

Where the nation puts its money both reflects this reality and aggravates it. Consider that in this fiscal year military spending exceeded $600 billion, or 12 times the State Department's budget. Worse still, the new president's proposed budget would cut State by more than one-third – despite former Secretary of Defense Bob Gates's quip that there are already more members of military bands than Foreign Service officers.

The Myth of (Infallible) Military Judgment

By now, it's part of American lore that, facing a thorny problem or potential conflict abroad, a president should throw some stars at it. If only generals were indeed pixie dust. Historically speaking, though, since World War II, calling on the generals has often resulted in abject failure. There's plenty of evidence of that in the last 15 years of, at best, inconclusive war in the Greater Middle East, but first, let's take a brief tour of military advice from the previous century's crises.

MacArthur in Korea

In October 1950, just months after the Korean War began, President Harry Truman met General Douglas MacArthur, commander of the coalition forces in Korea, on Wake Island. There, MacArthur assured the president of two things: that the Chinese would not intervene in the war and that the fighting would be over by Christmas. A month later, hundreds of thousands of Chinese "volunteers" streamed across the Yalu River into northern Korea, sending MacArthur's

troops into headlong retreat. Wrong once, the general promptly called for a massive U.S. troop escalation and the bombing of China, perhaps even nuclear attacks on that country. Truman recoiled, fired the general, and opened negotiations, all while avoiding nuclear war. And what happened to the twice-wrong MacArthur? In April 1951, with the war still underway – an armistice wouldn't finally come until July 1953 – he received a record-breaking 19-mile-long ticker-tape parade through New York City in which 3,249 tons of paper rained down on him.

Ike vs. the Generals

President Dwight Eisenhower so loved the Army that he asked his successor to return him to his five-star rank. That way he'd be addressed as "General" rather than "Mr. President" in retirement. Yet no president was more dismissive of the notion that military men, rather than civilians, know what's best. When a senator contended that the Air Force was better positioned than politicians to assess its own needs, Ike snapped back, "Bunk!" (He knew the Pentagon regularly overstated its case.) As for sage military advice, Eisenhower dismissed General Mark Clark's plans for an all-out assault in Korea as "madness" and sacked all his service chiefs after they "revolted" over a truncated defense budget he proposed. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Admiral Arthur Radford, even hinted that it might be "high time" to reexamine the taboo against using nuclear weapons in that war. Despite significant saber-rattling, Ike ultimately chose restraint.

In fact, he was notoriously skeptical of his generals' advice and left office famously warning Americans about a growing "military-industrial complex." The result of his presidency: the commanding general and hero of World War II held down defense spending, never used nukes, ended the bloody stalemate of a war in Korea, and – most importantly – avoided World War III.

Kennedy and the Joint Chiefs Deal With Cuba

The U.S. high command, like much of the American public, was obsessed with newly Communist Cuba. In April 1961, after the Bay of Pigs, a disastrous CIA-sponsored invasion by Cuban émigrés, the generals proposed a new plan, Operation Northwoods. Approved by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, it called for false-flag terrorist attacks on émigrés in Miami or on U.S. ships off the coast to drum up public support for a war against Cuba. President John F. Kennedy refused.

Soon after came the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, which brought humanity as close to extinction as it's ever come. When U.S. intelligence learned that the Soviet Union had stationed nuclear missiles on that island, just 90 miles from Florida, the government entered full-scale panic mode. During deliberations on how to proceed, the Joint Chiefs – to a man – recommended air strikes against Cuba and a possible follow-on invasion. Later, in a memo, they declared that they were prepared to use "nuclear weapons for limited war operations in the Cuban area."

Instead, Kennedy chose a blockade and negotiations. The Russians responded by pulling their missiles out of Cuba and humankind lived to fight another day. After one of those meetings, Kennedy remarked to an aide, "These brass hats [generals and admirals] have one great advantage. If we… do what they want us to do, none of us will be alive later to tell them that they were wrong." Deeply disturbed by the advice of the Chiefs during the Cuban Missile Crisis,

Kennedy later confided to some White House guests that "the first thing I'm going to tell my successor is to watch the generals, and to avoid feeling that just because they were military men, their opinions on military matters were worth a damn."

The Generals Grapple With Southeast Asia

In April 1961, the Joint Chiefs recommended that President Kennedy intervene to stop a "North Vietnamese-sponsored" Communist offensive in Laos through the use of air strikes and the introduction of U.S. ground forces in that country. When Kennedy asked the military chiefs what to do if the North Vietnamese Communists bombed Laotian airports as the U.S. flew in troops, one replied: "You [drop] a bomb on Hanoi, and you start using atomic weapons!" In fact, Army General Lyman Lemnitzer assured the president that "if we are given the right to use nuclear weapons, we can guarantee victory." Kennedy ruled against his generals on both counts.

Nevertheless, Kennedy and then President Lyndon Johnson foolishly agreed to escalate U.S. involvement in Vietnam. In that war, admittedly, civilian policymakers were often the chief villains. However, the generals were anything but blameless. In 1967, as U.S. casualties increased and many Americans began to question the country's involvement in the conflict, the senior commander, General William Westmoreland, assured Congress that there was, in a phrase that became infamous, "light at the end of the tunnel." When Vietcong guerillas attacked nearly every American base in South Vietnam in the January 1968 Tet Offensive, he had only one answer, a solution once again all-too-familiar to twenty-first-century Americans: more. He requested 206,000 additional U.S. troops on top of the half-million-plus already in Vietnam. President Johnson balked and began negotiations with North Vietnam. It took – tragically – seven more bloody years, but eventually U.S. troops were extracted from what a near consensus of credible historians now conclude was an "unwinnable" war.

These examples obviously don't imply that no general ever gave solid advice or that civilians weren't perfectly capable of concocting their own hare-brained war-making schemes. Rather, the point is to deflate – just a bit – the present all-too-popular notion of American military infallibility, or at least superiority.

Above Scrutiny?

It's dangerous to deify any public institution, let alone the country's bureau of violence. That's not, in itself, a knock at the military to which I've dedicated my adult life, but a basic recognition of the gravity of all martial exertions. No government agency is so holy that it shouldn't be scrutinized, not in a real democracy. Yet American society is headed in that very direction, along with its new president. On Inauguration Day, finding himself in a crowded room with all the generals he had appointed to key positions in his administration around him, he declared emphatically, "I see my generals, generals that are going to keep us *so* safe."

We usually imagine the threat of military control over decision-making as an aspect of opaque autocracies, but it can also stem from the excessive exultation of a "warrior" class in a democracy. Consider the chilling comments of White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer after a

controversial raid in Yemen in January left Ryan Owens, a Navy SEAL, several al-Qaeda fighters, and a number of civilians, as well as several children, dead.

Spicer took umbrage after a number of people, including the notoriously hawkish, wildly pro-military, former POW Senator John McCain, questioned the operation's value. The press secretary's statement, however, went beyond standard partisan defensiveness and into genuinely treacherous territory when he asserted that "anyone who would suggest [the raid] is not a success does disservice to the life of Chief Ryan Owens." That represents a new standard for public debate on military operations. Think of the implications: if a single serviceman dies, then all critical scrutiny of such actions is off the table, being by its very nature disrespectful and unpatriotic. Taken to its logical conclusion, such an approach would leave no room for public protest or even the vestiges of an antiwar movement in response to future American war making.

Lest anyone imagine that Spicer simply misspoke, President Trump promptly upped the ante. He tweeted: "Sen. McCain should not be talking about the success or failure of a mission to the media. Only emboldens the enemy… our hero died on a winning mission." Take a moment to let that sink in: to question the effectiveness of a raid in a country with which the U.S. is not at war, which resulted in multiple military and civilian deaths – even when the critic is the Republican chairman of the Senate Armed Services committee – should now be considered "emboldening" the enemy. Somebody pinch me.

Generally, however, that raid led mainly to endless praise for both Chief Petty Officer Owens and the U.S. military. In fact, no matter the situation, the carnage involved, or the decision-making behind it, the rhetoric of praise for America's "warriors" has become a commonplace of our national life.

In fact, we military professionals ought to be confident enough to weather genuine scrutiny of both our decision-making and our acts. The danger is this: while we're caught up in the countless "thanks-for-your-service" platitudes, upgraded airline seating, ever larger flags flying o'er sporting events, and other forms of hollow soldier-worship and militarized "patriotism," the nation may be losing something precious: the right to dissent.

Bogus "Options"

In nearly every recent instance when military commanders were asked for a strategy review, the response was the same. What was needed, swore the generals repeatedly, were more troops, more airstrikes, more bases, more money, and more time. A rare exception to this litany of more came from former Joint Chiefs Chairman Dempsey who laid out not just the options, but also the potential costs of a Syrian intervention.

Presidents deserve and require such real options. Too often, however, especially in this country's 15-year "war on terror" across the Greater Middle East and parts of Africa, senior military leaders have failed to present plausible, achievable choices to the commander-in-chief. Nearly all of them have proved to be "more" guys.

Consider, for instance, Afghanistan in 2009. Things had been going poorly indeed in what was already an eight-year-old war. And so *our nation turned its lonely eyes to him* – General Stanley McChrystal, a special operator fresh off a tour tracking down and killing al-Qaeda in Iraq's leadership, including Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

Asked to conduct a "strategic review" and present Barack Obama with military options in Afghanistan, McChrystal instead offered the new president a Goldilocks dilemma. He submitted what were, in essence, three versions of the same option: surge big, surge little, or surge just right. Those "options" failed the Army's own doctrinal course of action test – solutions must be suitable, feasible, acceptable, and distinguishable. Since all three of McChrystal's choices involved counterinsurgency and troop escalation, they were hardly distinguishable.

Instead, they did what they were meant to do and boxed the young president into an escalatory corner, a "more" decision being not just the commander's favored but only course of action. Obama grumbled and then sent McChrystal his reinforcements. It sounded like Iraq 2006-2007 all over again. Only this time – the president and Americans more generally were assured – the ensuing surge would be even better, involving a supposedly comprehensive, interagency approach to the Afghan War.

Before he used his new troops to launch his first major offensive into largely Taliban-controlled, opium-poppy-rich Helmand Province in southern Afghanistan, McChyrstal proudly announced that he not only had a military force ready to go, but "a government in a box, ready to roll in," too. Seven years later, with more American soldiers once again being sent back into Helmand Province and the Taliban ascendant in significant parts of it, can there be any question how badly McChrystal's strategy failed? Today, in fact, more of Afghanistan is under Taliban control than at any time since 2001. As retired army colonel and Professor Gregory Daddis observed, "Looking back, the logic flaws become clear." After all, Daddis continued, "how could counterinsurgents provide… security… if the population… too often saw U.S. soldiers as 'anti-bodies' invading their body politic?"

Perhaps at this point it won't surprise you to learn that two civilians on the Obama team – Vice President Joseph Biden and U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan (as well as ex-lieutenant general) Karl Eikenberry – doubted from the start the U.S. military's ability to impose an external solution on Afghans via such a surge. They were ignored. After all, who knows better than the guys overseeing the actual fighting?

Which raises the question: How will the Trump administration's generals, now in crucial government positions, counsel the president regarding Syria, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Yemen, and North Korea? Predictions are always a dicey matter, but recent history suggests that we can expect military escalation, which already seems to be underway in at least three of those countries. *More*, after all, remains the option of choice for America's generals almost 70 years after MacArthur went head to head with his president over Korea.

What then is to be expected when it comes to the conflict with ISIS in Iraq, the complex, multi-faceted Syrian civil war, and America's longest war of all in Afghanistan? All signs point to more of the same. Open up a newspaper or check out a relevant website and you'll find, for

example, that U.S. Afghan commander General John Nicholson wants a new mini-surge of American troops dispatched into that country, while the U.S. commander in the fight against ISIS, General Stephen Townsend, may require yet more ground troops to "win" in Iraq and Syria.

After much positive and often fawning news coverage in the wake of his recent Tomahawk missile strike in Syria, it's hard to imagine that the president won't grant the generals' wishes. In fact, he has already reportedly turned over decision-making on U.S. troop levels in Syria and Iraq to them. And yet it should be obvious enough that more of the same, without even the semblance of credible alternatives or dissenting voices, is an innovation-stifling loser of an option. Fifteen years later, it doesn't take a genius to know that something about U.S. strategy hasn't been and isn't working.

The Choice

So, isn't it well past time for the generals and civilian leaders to ask the obvious question: Does the U.S. even have the ability to improve such societies via military power? These days, unfortunately, such thinking rings heretical to martial ears. Yet not to raise such questions is to ensure that Americans will experience a kind of endless *déjà vu* in their wars.

What this country needs right now are civilian leaders who think strategically, exude confidence, and aren't afraid to challenge military advice. Appropriate respect for senior servicemen shouldn't mean either impulsive adulation or timid apprehension. Civilian policymakers haven't always been right, but since World War II, the generals have the weaker (and far more hair-raising) record.

Republics are imperiled when a military caste diverges from civil society. Despite the glowing (if shallow) praise heaped on America's all-volunteer force, it is increasingly distant from the population in whose name it theoretically fights.

For those of us still in uniform, thoughtlessly soldiering on may sound both stalwart and romantic, but it rarely amounts to a sagacious strategy. Don't take my word for it, consider the climactic scene in *Once an Eagle*, a legendary novel within the American officer corps and long a staple on every general's recommended professional reading list. This highly touted, if ill-understood, book ends as its protagonist, an aged, decorated general, slowly dies from wounds inflicted by a Vietnamese "terrorist" bomber. Gasping his final breath, the old soldier dispenses his last pearl of wisdom to a junior officer: "Remember, Joey, if it comes to a choice between being a good soldier and a good human being – *try* to be a good human being…"

In war, as in much else, there's often wisdom in abstention. And when it comes to war, sometimes less is more.