

FORUM

Reflection on "From Citizen Soldier to Secular Saint": Regulation or Reverence? The Challenges of Civilian Oversight in an Era of Military Secular Saints

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Trent Lythgoe examines the state of civil-military relations by reflecting on Bryant, Swaney, and Urban, "From Citizen Soldier to Secular Saint" in dialogue with Jordan Henricks and Katherine Voyles.

Susan Bryant, Brett Swaney, and Heidi Urban raise several important issues in their article, but the most urgent one is the potential challenge to effective civilian oversight of the military that their findings highlight.

Civilian oversight forms the cornerstone of healthy American civil-military relations. Oversight is how political leaders exert civilian control over the military. Civilian control keeps the military accountable to the American people through their elected representatives. It also ensures that the military uses its coercive power solely to defend the nation—never to threaten, disrupt, or inappropriately influence domestic politics.¹ The United States has been fortunate never to have experienced a serious attempted military *coup d'état*, but Americans must stay vigilant and continually reinforce the principle of civilian control.

Civilian oversight also upholds democratic principles.² It ensures that the ultimate expression of a nation's political power—coercion through lethal force—is not misused. Civilian oversight makes certain that military power is only used when sanctioned by the American people through their elected representatives.

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¹ Peter D. Feaver, "The Civil-Military Problematic: Huntington, Janowitz, and the Question of Civilian Control," *Armed Forces and Society* 23.2 (1996): 149-78. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X9602300203>

² Richard H. Kohn, "How Democracies Control the Military," *Journal of Democracy* 8.4 (1997): 140-153. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.1997.0060>

Civilian oversight is a strategic necessity.³ Effective oversight aligns military strategy with national security policy, ensuring the military serves the nation's interests. As Clausewitz's well-worn dictum holds, military operations serve political ends. Civilian oversight keeps military strategy aligned with political objectives lest the military pursue military victory for its own sake.

Despite the clear need for civilian oversight, Bryant et al. reveal a troubling dynamic where the military's status as "secular saints" impedes the oversight meant to keep military power in check. Political leaders already struggle to oversee a military that Americans overwhelmingly trust.⁴ At the same time, Americans largely distrust political institutions.⁵ As a result, elected officials may see challenging the military as politically dangerous.

Oversight becomes even harder when military servicemembers embrace their secular sainthood by resisting oversight from politicians they may see as unfit to provide it. Bryant et al. find that nearly 20 percent of those surveyed resist civilian criticism of the military, and nearly 25 percent believe military culture is superior to society. It is difficult to imagine these service members recognizing the importance of oversight, let alone willingly accepting it.

The isolation of the U.S. military—enabled by the all-volunteer force (AVF)—compounds the civilian oversight problem by disconnecting the military from the public. Conscription, in the past, bridged some of the society–military gap by expanding the cross-section of the public who served or knew someone who did.⁶ However, the 1973 shift to the AVF changed this relationship. While the AVF has produced a professional and capable military, it has also isolated it from the society it serves. In the AVF era, the military has increasingly recruited from military-friendly regions and families with military service traditions. As a result, fewer and fewer Americans are familiar with the military or directly affected by military actions.⁷

This isolation is evident in how the U.S. fights wars. The AVF allows political leaders to wage wars abroad, such as the Global War on Terror, with a small volunteer force without putting the entire nation on a war footing. America's AVF wars contrast starkly with wars past. In the early years of World War II, for example, Franklin Roosevelt urged Americans to sacrifice for the military

3 Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Free Press, 2002).

4 "From Businesses and Banks to Colleges and Churches: Americans' Views of U.S. Institutions," Pew Research Center, February 1, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/02/01/the-u-s-military/>.

5 "Public Trust in Government: 1958-2024," Pew Research Center, June 24, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/06/24/public-trust-in-government-1958-2024/>.

6 Phillip Carter, Katherine L. Kuzminski, Amy Schafer and Andrew Swick, "AVF 4.0: The Future of the All-Volunteer Force," Center for New American Security, March 18, 2017, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/avf-4-0-the-future-of-the-all-volunteer-force>.

7 Nathalie Grogan, "The All-Volunteer Force: Civil-Military Relations Hit Home—an Abroad," Center for New American Security, September 17, 2020, cnas.org/publications/commentary/the-all-volunteer-force-civil-military-relations-hit-home-and-abroad.

and the economy, invoking a sense of shared national duty.⁸ In contrast, after the 9/11 attacks, George W. Bush urged Americans to go to Disney World and to carry on as if nothing had changed.⁹

The public's detachment from military service and the nation's wars compounds the oversight problem. Most Americans don't understand or care about what the military does—they simply trust the nation's security to secular saints.¹⁰ Because military affairs and foreign policy rarely influence how people vote, political leaders have little incentive to challenge the military.

The public's canonization of military servicemembers to secular sainthood complicates civilian oversight, shields the institution from scrutiny, and threatens to elevate it above the democratic processes that are supposed to govern it.

Henricks's response to Lythgoe's reflection can be read [here](#).

Voyles's response to Lythgoe's reflection can be read [here](#).

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⁸ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Fireside Chats," The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/app-categories/spoken-addresses-and-remarks/presidential/fireside-chats>.

⁹ "A Nation Challenged; Excerpts from Bush Speech on Travel," *The New York Times*, September 28, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/28/us/a-nation-challenged-excerpts-from-bush-speech-on-travel.html>.

¹⁰ Jim Mattis and Kori N. Schake, *Warriors and Citizens: American Views of Our Military* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution, 2016). See also "Inflation, Health Costs, Partisan Cooperation Among the Nation's Top Problems," Pew Research Center, June 21, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/06/21/inflation-health-costs-partisan-cooperation-among-the-nations-top-problems/>.