

FORUM

Response to Jordan Henricks's Reflection on "From Citizen Soldier to Secular Saint"

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I really appreciate how Chaplain Jordan Henricks uses his reflection on "From Citizen-Soldier to Secular Saint" to call our attention to the crucial role that chaplains can, do, and may play in upholding civ-mil norms. There's also something hopeful, lovely, and deep in his account of how personal identity interacts with civ-mil norms of non-partisanship.

If I were to push back, I'd do it on these grounds: there is such a thing as the military. And it's not solely comprised of individual soldiers, chaplains, and professional military education (PME). There are superstructures in place, whether through doctrine and policy or in the form of bureaucratic, institutional, and organizational arrangements. Well-meaning chaplains, and thoughtfully designed PME courses, may well facilitate precisely the kind of affective, holistic work that he describes. And the Army certainly supports that work through some of its superstructures.

Thinking of the military holistically is necessary because it allows us to see the fundamental importance of the military as an entity subscribing to the benefits of healthy civ-mil dynamics. Certain figures in government obviously carry the weight of civ-mil relationships more than others, but that reality also should not obscure the role of the entity as an entity believing in and upholding the good inherent in civ-mil relations. Such a holistic view is necessary to account for the state of civ-mil relations and discourse in the U.S. today.

Individual soldiers may be fully formed and aware in exactly the ways Henricks describes. PME may support and deepen that formation. Chaplains may well have a role in some of this.

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And yet none of this may be enough to fortify civ-mil relations in the ways they need to be fortified. And none of this may be enough to get us to ask whether what we need is fortified civ-mil relations or a new, even radically novel, conception of civ-mil relations.

For my own part, I am willing to entertain the idea that the state of civ-mil relations demand two things. Today's tensions seem to cry out for a return to basics and first principles, including the primacy of civilian control of the military and the importance of non-partisan abiding commitments to democratic norms. They also pull on the military as an institution and individuals within it to discern whether the crisis in civ-mil relations is such that their very nature needs to be reconceived. Such an overhaul is best done with first principles in view but must also be unsparing and thoroughgoing in its willingness to rethink and revamp civ-mil relations.

Overhauling civ-mil relations may well be a rocky process, but right now is pretty rocky. For my own part, though, I wonder if there isn't also something deeply hopeful and optimistic in such work because it affords an opportunity to shape a democratic future that we in the U.S. all deserve.

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

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