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**BARGAINING WITH THE MILITARY:
HOW PRESIDENTS MANAGE THE POLITICAL COSTS OF CIVILIAN CONTROL**

Abstract

In an era of increased politicization of the military, there are powerful disincentives for commanders-in-chief to challenge the preferences of the senior military leadership. While presidents may have the constitutional “right to be wrong,” they require considerable political capital to test that proposition. This article explores how George W. Bush and Barack Obama sought to balance their desire to have the military pursue certain policy preferences with the need to manage the underappreciated political costs of civilian control during the Iraq War. It identifies four strategies – *deferring*, *horse-trading*, *side-stepping* and *stacking the deck* – that each president employed to avoid incurring a domestic political penalty for being seen to go against the preferences of the uniformed military. Going beyond the initial invasion phase of the war, the article illustrates these dynamics drawing on dozens of interviews with former administration officials and top military leaders, including three coalition commanders and several members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Introduction

In theory, the U.S. military is supposed to act as an “armed servant.” Under the constitutional principle of civilian control, the president has the right to order the military to carry out virtually any lawful policy he or she chooses. While senior officials may disagree with the wisdom of a chosen course and privately counsel against it based on their professional expertise, they must ultimately obey the civilian principal’s wishes. As Admiral Michael G. Mullen, a former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, puts it, “you have the debate, the president makes the decision, and we march on.”¹

In practice, however, there can be considerable political costs associated with the exercise of civilian control. The uniformed military can evade civilian authority and increase the amount of political capital required to pursue the president’s preferred policies, either by issuing direct or indirect appeals which mobilize public opposition to them, or simply through bureaucratic obstructionism. While a president can punish behavior that amounts to “shirking,” overruling or dismissing recalcitrant generals also carries potentially grave political risks. And even when the military behaves in perfect accordance with its traditional obligation to remain apolitical, public attitudes towards the military are such that the mere revelation of any significant disagreement between a president and their military advisers

¹ Author Interview with Michael G. Mullen, Washington, D.C., March 29, 2018.

may be sufficient to trigger a politically damaging backlash. In a hyper-polarized environment in which leaks are commonplace, elected officials reasonably worry about the political implications of a divergence of preferences with the military becoming public knowledge.

How, then, do presidents obviate the political costs of exerting civilian control? Unpacking this puzzle is a particularly important task in an era of increased politicization of the military. In recent years, elected officials have repeatedly sought to leverage the credibility of senior officers to justify policy decisions and bolster their popularity on the campaign trail. The trend of appointing recently retired generals to positions usually reserved for civilians has also continued apace, while senior military officials have become embroiled in domestic controversies with alarming frequency. These patterns matter in part because the association of the military with partisan causes increases the potential political costs associated with going against their wishes on any given policy issue. Yet, as civil-military relations scholars have observed, these developments also strike at the heart of the norms underpinning civilian control and military effectiveness more generally.² It follows that having a clearer appreciation of the strategies employed by civilian leaders in managing the political costs of civilian control is essential to fully understanding the character of contemporary civil-military relations.

In seeking to address this question, existing scholarship only gets us so far. Dominant normative theories of civil-military relations focus on ideal-type scenarios which do not reflect the messy and inherently political character of elite decision-making. Principal-agent models more accurately capture this dynamic, yet remain relatively quiet on the steps a civilian leader might take *ex ante* to pre-empt the emergence of a divergence of preferences within a decision-making context. Recent research on deference to the military, meanwhile, offers a valuable but incomplete picture of the range of strategies available to presidents, necessarily limited to cases in which the leader is content to abdicate his or her “right to be wrong” altogether.

² See, for instance, Risa Brooks, Jim Golby and Heidi Urben, “Crisis of Command: America’s Broken Civil-Military Relationship Imperils National Security,” *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 3 (May/June 2021): 64-75, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-04-09/national-security-crisis-command>; Michael A. Robinson, *Dangerous Instrument: Political Polarization and US Civil-Military Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

This article offers a case study of civil-military dynamics during the Iraq War to inductively derive a broader menu of decision-making strategies that civilian leaders employ to avoid incurring a domestic political penalty associated with being seen to go against the preferences of the uniformed military. Centering on key episodes of civil-military friction, in the “surge” of 2007 and the debate over the pace and finality of the troop drawdown that followed, the paper shows how both the Bush and Obama administrations variously *deferred* to military officials on the broad strategic direction of the war; engaged in *horse-trading* over troop deployments; *side-stepped* those leaders who disagreed with civilian preferences in favor of alternative sources of advice; and *stacked the deck* to ensure the military provided recommendations they wanted to hear. Which of these behaviors manifested in any given episode is shown to depend on contingent factors, including the intensity of and distance between civilian and military preferences, the president’s sensitivity to the political costs of civilian control, and the skill and resources available to him in seeking to assuage the military’s opposition. The principal theoretical contribution of this article, then, lies in the identification of a series of similar decision-making behaviors exhibited by very different presidents as a means of managing the understudied political constraints on the exercise of civilian control. In doing so, however, the paper also contributes to the emerging literature on elite politics and foreign policy, illuminating a special case of bargaining between presidents and their advisers.³

As a relatively recent conflict of intrinsic historical significance, the war in Iraq gives ample scope for making an empirical contribution, too. While the initial decision to invade continues to attract the lion’s share of attention, the origins and wisdom of the policies pursued in the war’s later stages remain both comparatively understudied and fiercely contested. This paper therefore contributes to recent efforts to shift the focus towards the critical decision to “surge” in 2007 as well as its aftermath under President Obama. It does so by drawing on recently declassified documents and dozens of interviews with former administration officials and top-ranking military leaders, including three coalition commanders of Multi-National Force-Iraq (MNF-I).

The article proceeds as follows. First, it offers a brief survey of relevant theoretical literature to situate the argument. Second, it unpacks the foundational components of the political cost associated with civilian control, as well as the mechanisms through which these

³ Elizabeth N. Saunders, “Elites in the Making and Breaking of Foreign Policy,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 25 (2022): 219-240, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-041719-103330>.

costs may be imposed on the president. The third section, comprising the core of the paper, identifies four decision-making strategies which emerge from a close examination of the war in Iraq. Based on this analysis, the fourth section offers an exploratory discussion concerning the selection and effectiveness of each strategy. The article concludes with a summary of its main findings and suggestions for future research.

Civil-Military Relations Theory and the Politics of Civilian Control

In seeking to understand exactly how presidents balance the desire to have the military pursue his or her policy preferences with the need to do so at minimum political cost, traditional normative theories of civil-military relations are of limited use. On one hand, the “professional supremacist” school, following Samuel Huntington’s influential work, advocates for a form of “objective control,” in which the military adheres to a strict norm of non-intervention in politics in return for autonomy over matters which fall within their distinct area of professional expertise.⁴ Even though it continues to be the “normal theory” against which all others are measured, with considerable influence in military circles, its ideal-type vision of an apolitical military does not match the present reality.⁵ In truth, it would be of mixed utility even if it did, given its simplistic assumptions about the policymaking process and what it means to be political in that context.⁶

The “civilian supremacist” school, epitomized by Eliot Cohen’s characterization of civil-military relations as an “unequal dialogue,” reflects the dynamic nature of strategic decision-making far better. Yet it focuses on a set of historical cases in which wartime leaders were ultimately able and willing to overrule or even dismiss generals with whom they disagreed. While the political risks of doing so are briefly acknowledged in Cohen’s landmark study, the appetite for taking them appears to largely be the idiosyncratic product of the “courage” exhibited by the genial leaders in question.⁷ It is surely true that these risks will not affect

⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State; The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1957). I borrow the classification of each respective school from Feaver, “The Right to Be Right.”

⁵ Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Free Press, 2002), 9.

⁶ Risa Brooks, “Paradoxes of Professionalism: Rethinking Civil-Military Relations in the United States,” *International Security* 44, no. 4 (Spring 2020): 7-44,

https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00374.

⁷ Cohen, *Supreme Command*, 250-52, 260.

each president equally, and many leaders will indeed assess the strategic benefits of countermanding the generals to be worth whatever domestic penalty results. Yet beyond the deference displayed by lesser statesmen, Cohen's work offers an implicit and potentially skewed account of the full range of methods that have been employed by leaders seeking to get the military "on board."

In seeking to identify a more concrete set of political strategies that match empirical reality, this article eschews these theories in favor of alternative approaches which recognize the messy and inherently political character of civil-military relations. "Civilian control is not a fact but a process," as Richard Kohn has argued, in which civilian and military leaders bargain over preferences.⁸ The outcome of any given civil-military bargain is highly contingent, influenced by the issues and personalities involved, with the result that civilian control is rarely exercised in perfect accordance with the recommendations of either the "professional supremacist" or "civilian supremacist" schools. "The dirty little secret of American civil-military relations," noted Andrew Bacevich amid fears of a "crisis" of civilian control during the Clinton years, "is that the commander in chief does not command the military establishment; he cajoles it, negotiates with it, and, as necessary, appeases it."⁹ In this sense, civil-military relations can be understood as a special case of what Elizabeth Saunders has called an "elite coalition game," in which presidents bargain with, accommodate and co-opt their advisers in order to manage the politics of using force.¹⁰ As Peter Feaver recently noted, the relationship between civilian leaders and their military

8 Richard H. Kohn, "The Erosion of Civilian Control of the Military in the United States Today," *Naval War College Review* 55, no. 3 (Summer 2002), 16, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol55/iss3/2>. See also Mackubin Thomas Owens, *US Civil-Military Relations After 9/11: Renegotiating the Civil-Military Bargain* (New York: Continuum, 2011); Stefano Recchia, *Reassuring the Reluctant Warriors: U.S. Civil-Military Relations and Multilateral Intervention* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

9 Andrew J. Bacevich, "Discord Still: Clinton and the Military," *Washington Post*, January 3, 1999, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1999/01/03/discord-still-clinton-and-the-military/f7f64313-f284-45c7-b000-40b1828d8436/>.

10 Elizabeth N. Saunders, "War and the Inner Circle: Democratic Elites and the Politics of Using Force," *Security Studies* 24, no. 3 (October 2015): 466-501, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2015.1070618>; Elizabeth N. Saunders, "Leaders, Advisers, and the Political Origins of Elite Support for War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62, no. 10 (November 2018): 2118-49, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002718785670>.

advisers is akin to “a stormy but durable marriage, one in which the spouses endlessly bicker and vie for advantage but never destroy each other or the union that binds them together.”¹¹

Among the major works of civil-military relations theory, it is indeed Feaver’s “agency theory” that is perhaps most relevant to the central puzzle concerning this article.¹² Feaver models civil-military relations as a strategic interaction between civilian principals and military agents, in which the former choose methods of monitoring the latter based on their expectations of whether the military will faithfully attempt to do what they ask them to do or not – that is, whether the military “works” or “shirks.” This is critical to the present study for two reasons. First, as will be explored below, “shirking” may be seen as broadly analogous to, or indeed constitutive of, the key mechanisms through which the military can impose political costs on the civilian leadership.¹³ Second, and crucially, the civilian’s ability to monitor and credibly punish such behavior depends on whether the civilian has the political power or will to do so. As Feaver acknowledges, this is not a foregone conclusion, particularly in cases where the military agent enjoys strong popular appeal or there is ambiguity about whether its behavior amounts to “shirking.”¹⁴ In such cases, the potential political costs incurred by disciplining the military officer in question might prove more damaging than simply tolerating the behavior. By treating the costs of monitoring and probability of punishment as exogenous to the model, however, “agency theory” has little to say about the particular strategies the civilian leadership might choose to employ to manage and mitigate these costs in any given case.¹⁵ While more recent work has gone further in attempting to specify the conditions under which civilian leaders might punish “shirking” agents – notably when the issue carries high salience for the principal and the civilian has the military’s support to pursue punishment – it is limited by its exclusive focus on cases involving clear insubordination.¹⁶ Most real-world instances of “shirking” occupy a much greyer area, and presidents may reasonably worry about the public revelation of a divergence

11 Peter Feaver, in Kori Schake et al., “Masters and Commanders: Are Civil-Military Relations in Crisis?” *Foreign Affairs* 100, No. 5 (September/October 2021): 233,

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-08-24/masters-and-commanders>.

12 Feaver, *Armed Servants*.

13 Ibid, 68.

14 Ibid, 90. The military’s advisory role makes this problem particularly acute. See *ibid*, 62.

15 Feaver, *Armed Servants*, 101-2.

16 Daniel Bessner and Eric Lorber, “Toward a Theory of Civil-Military Punishment,” *Armed Forces & Society* 38, No. 4 (2012): 649-68, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X12437685>.

of preferences even when the military “works.” As such, we are still left with a gap in the literature on what steps a president might take *ex ante* not simply to detect and punish clear cases of “shirking” but to manage or offset the political risks associated with asking the military to do something they would rather not do in the first place.

One way of obviating the costs of overruling the generals is of course to acquiesce to their preferences. As Polina Beliakova’s recent research examining the erosion of civilian control by deference makes clear, the desire to alleviate or prevent civil-military tension is a critical driver of civilian decisions to delegate responsibility for policy formulation.¹⁷ As will be explored further below, this article agrees that such behavior is partly rooted in the high levels of popular trust the military enjoys, which in turn also incentivizes deference for other reasons, including a civilian leader’s desire to boost approval for certain policies or avoid responsibility for courses of action that may be unpopular.¹⁸ However, this study departs from this work in two ways. First, where Beliakova sees a degree of convergence between civilian and military preferences as a pre-condition for deference, this study explores how and why presidents might use deference as a means of resolving a divergence of preferences.¹⁹ Second, I assume that deference is simply one method among many available to presidents seeking to do this. Moreover, it is not always a particularly attractive one, since the price for obviating the political costs of exerting civilian control in this way entails a complete abdication of the “right to be wrong” and inability to enact the civilian’s preferences. This article thus builds directly on existing work on deference by including it in a wider menu of political strategies that might enable a president to overcome the risks of challenging the military’s preferences while ensuring the military carries out at least some portion of the principal’s wishes.

The Political Cost of Civilian Control

Before exploring the case itself, it is first worth unpacking what makes a divergence of civil-military preferences so potentially costly and precisely why a president might be worried about it. The foundational component of the political cost of civilian control is no secret: extraordinarily high public confidence in the military. Indeed, it is frequently observed that

¹⁷ Polina Beliakova, “Erosion by Deference: Civilian Control and the Military in

Policymaking,” *Texas National Security Review* 4, No. 3 (Summer 2021), 69-71,

<http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/13988>.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 63-69.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 58.

the US military inspires higher confidence than any other national institution. According to polling data collected during the Iraq War, an average of 76% of respondents expressed either “quite a lot” or a “great deal” of confidence in the military, compared with just 40% who reported similar levels of trust in the presidency.²⁰ The high confidence expressed is remarkable not only for the wide disparity, but also because these historically high levels of confidence were expressed during a war which was perceived to be going badly for much of its duration.²¹ While the strength of public support for the armed forces is not in itself a bad thing, the chasm in attitudes generates a series of incentives which can be inimical to civilian control of the military.²² Most notably, it marks the senior military leadership out as more credible sources of information on the wisdom of a given policy compared to the civilian officials who are in fact accountable for that policy. Since the public relies to a considerable degree on elite cues in shaping their opinions about foreign policy, this credibility gap amplifies the significance of views held by the military, as well as the potential harm they can do to the political fortunes of their civilian masters.²³ In a 2017 study, military opposition to a proposed use of force was shown to negatively affect public opinion by as much as 7%.²⁴ Once engaged in a war, the public expects the president to buck conventional civil-military wisdom even further. One recent survey suggests some 83% of civilian mass opinion believe that the commander-in-chief should “basically follow the advice of the generals,” a marked

20 “Confidence in Institutions,” Gallup, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>.

21 See David T. Burbach, “Gaining Trust While Losing Wars: Confidence in the US Military after Iraq and Afghanistan,” *Orbis* 61, No. 2 (Spring 2017): 154-71, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2017.02.001>.

22 For a concise overview, see Jessica D. Blankshain and Max Z. Marguiles, “The Downside of High Trust in the Military,” *New York Times*, September 16, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/16/opinion/americans-trust-us-military.html>.

23 See Tyler Jost and Joshua D. Kertzer, “Armies and Influence: Public Deference to Foreign Policy Elites,” Working Paper, January 20, 2021, https://people.fas.harvard.edu/~jkertzer/Research_files/jost_kertzer.pdf; Robinson, *Dangerous Instrument*, 47-78.

24 James Golby, Peter Feaver and Kyle Dropp, “Elite Military Cues and Public Opinion About the Use of Force,” *Armed Forces & Society* 44, No. 1 (January 2017): 44-71, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X16687067>.

increase on the 67% that felt similarly in 1998.²⁵ A 2019 survey, meanwhile, found that over 45% of respondents felt that the president should use U.S. forces on the battlefield as the senior military leadership advised, *even if* the president disagreed with them.²⁶ This dynamic serves to discourage civilian leaders from questioning or countermanding the preferences of the “armed servants” they oversee. As James Cartwright, who served as Vice Chairman of the JCS during the period studied in this article, puts it, “the country spends all this time saying how wonderful the military is, so politically it’s very difficult to criticize them.”²⁷

These patterns are further exacerbated by their partisan dimensions. Indeed, party affiliation is an increasingly strong predictor of one’s confidence in the military, and public attitudes are sensitive to changes in the party controlling the White House. At the peak of the Iraq War under President Bush, for instance, Republicans were 75% likely to express high confidence, with Democrats lagging at just 39%, only for the gap to close significantly under President Obama.²⁸ This might suggest that the military is generally seen by the public as being aligned with the party of the president whose policies they carry out. However, in the event of a clash between the president and the military over the nature of those policies, public attitudes reveal a more nuanced picture. According to recent research, people tend to support the incumbent’s right to overrule the generals more when the president is from their favored party. When the other party holds the presidency, however, people are more likely to want the military to get their way, acting as a kind of check on presidential behavior.²⁹ It

25 See Figure 4.6 in Jim Golby, Lindsay P. Cohn and Peter D. Feaver, “Thanks for Your Service: Civilian and Veteran Attitudes after Fifteen Years of War,” in Kori Schake and Jim Mattis (eds), *Warriors & Citizens: American Views of Our Military* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2016), 117.

26 Ronald R. Krebs, Robert Ralston and Aaron Rapport, “No Right to Be Wrong: What Americans Think about Civil-Military Relations,” *Perspectives on Politics*, (2021), 7 <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592721000013>.

27 Author Interview with James E. Cartwright, Washington, D.C., March 26, 2018.

28 David T. Burbach, “Partisan Dimensions of Confidence in the US Military, 1973-2016,” *Armed Forces & Society* 45, No. 2 (Spring 2019): 211-33, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X17747205>.

29 In a specifically wartime context, see Krebs, Ralston and Rapport, “No Right to Be Wrong,” 12-13. See also Ronald R. Krebs and Robert Ralston, “Civilian Control of the Military Is a Partisan Issue,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 14, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-07-14/civilian-control-military->

follows that while presidents may be somewhat insulated from criticism by co-partisans for exercising civilian control, the potential political costs of overruling the military on an issue where there is alignment between the military's preferences and those of the president's political opponents may be particularly pronounced. In an increasingly polarized environment in which political elites face incentives to weaponize military opposition for partisan gain, even advice which is given earnestly and in line with the military's non-partisan ethic may be perceived to carry a significant degree of political risk.

An increasing tendency for military officers to engage in overtly political activities has also fueled perceptions of the military as a partisan agent. The number of retired officers willing to endorse political candidates has grown significantly in recent years.³⁰ While the military may continue to be associated more strongly with the Republican party, nominees of both parties have competed to attract the support of recently retired generals and admirals in recent campaigns. Even outside the context of explicitly electoral politics, the social media and press profiles of retired military leaders often reveal clear political orientations and attract audiences sharply skewed in partisan directions.³¹ While veterans may not be legally obliged to refrain from intervention in overtly partisan activities, the distinction is largely lost on the public. "Everyone knows that four-stars never really retire," writes Richard Kohn, "like princes of the church, they represent the culture and the profession just as authoritatively as their counterparts on active duty."³²

If public attitudes about the military and rising perceptions of partisanship serve as necessary conditions of the political cost of exerting civilian control, through which mechanisms are these costs imposed on the president?³³ First, there are *direct* pathways. [partisan-issue](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-09-28/why-conservatives-turned-us-military); Ronald R. Krebs and Robert Ralston, "Why Conservatives Turned on the U.S. Military," *Foreign Affairs*, September 28, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-09-28/why-conservatives-turned-us-military>.

30 See James Golby, Kyle Dropp, and Peter Feaver, *Military Campaigns: Veterans' Endorsements and Presidential Elections* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2012).

31 Robinson, *Dangerous Instrument*, 157-161.

32 Kohn, "The Erosion of Civilian Control," 28.

33 For a more disaggregated breakdown, see Risa A. Brooks, "Militaries and Political Activity in Democracies," in Suzanne C. Nielsen and Don M. Snider, *American Civil-Military Relations: The Soldier and the State in a New Era* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins

Military officers can trigger a backlash at the ballot box or in opinion polls by issuing direct appeals to the public criticizing the president's policy preferences. By letting the military's views be known through newspaper editorials, media interviews or a strategic "leak" of negative assessments of a proposed course of action, senior officers can provide important information which acts as a "fire alarm," alerting voters to problems with the president's policies. In part because military cues are perceived to be highly credible, these appeals have strong potential to "box" the president in and damage wider perceptions of his or her competence. Notable examples of such behavior include comments made by then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Colin Powell opposing intervention in Bosnia in 1992, and more recently the slew of on-the-record comments in the press by senior generals advocating for more troops during the 2009 Afghanistan "surge" debate.³⁴

Alternatively, the military can mobilize public opposition to the president or their policies through *indirect* means. Rather than issuing direct appeals to the public, officers may signal their concerns about a proposed policy to other elites who may be able to expose and amplify their reservations to a wider audience. Members of Congress are particularly powerful actors in this respect, as their position as another "civilian" in the civil-military relationship gives them the right to elicit views held by the senior military leadership which the executive might have preferred to stay private. The retired military community serves as another peculiarly influential group of elites who may be able to leverage the credibility of the institution they once served to influence the public while remaining technically free from the obligations of civilian control.³⁵ Both groups were engaged in different ways during the debate leading to the development of the "don't ask, don't tell" policy in 1992-93, with Colin Powell actively engaging in back-channel discussions with Senator Sam Nunn to pressure Bill Clinton into a compromise policy, while encouraging the retired military community to voice its opposition to the president's proposed policy of allowing gay people to serve openly.³⁶

University Press, 2009), 218-224.

34 On Powell, see Richard H. Kohn, "Out of Control: The Crisis in Civil-Military Relations," *The National Interest*, 35 (Spring 1994): 3-17, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42894926>. On fire alarms and Afghanistan, see Saunders, "Leaders, Advisers, and the Political Origins of Elite Support for War," 2140-43.

35 See Robinson, *Dangerous Instrument*, 136-67.

36 See Bessner and Lorber, "Toward a Theory of Civil-Military Punishment," 659-61.

Finally, the military may engage in obstructive *bureaucratic* practices in ways which impose costs on the civilian leadership. This may involve behaviors which constitute textbook cases of “shirking,” such as exaggerating the costs of a non-preferred policy option, engaging in “end-runs,” or delaying the implementation of an order the military dislikes. Yet senior officers may also raise the political stakes inadvertently in the way they present their recommendations. As others have argued, in an increasingly politicized environment, the very notion of “best military advice” can be problematic, since it implies that the military’s recommendation is somehow superior or separate from the multiple other sources of advice that a civilian might wish to consult. Moreover, it predisposes the civil-military relationship towards confrontation by presenting military counsel in a form which may be perceived as an ultimatum.³⁷ Each of these bureaucratic practices serves to pressure a president to adopt the military’s preferred option, which imposes political costs in one of two ways. First, by preventing the incumbent from unlocking the potential political benefits associated with the pursuit of alternative policies. Second, by requiring the president to engage in a direct challenge to the military, either punishing officers who “shirk” or overruling those who fail to offer options that lay within the president’s “decision space.”³⁸ President Trump’s difficulties in tasking the military with the withdrawal of troops from Syria and Afghanistan stands as a particularly notable example of the way in which the military may “slow ball” a presidential order, in this case frustrating the president’s clear desire to run for re-election claiming to have ended “endless war” in that region.³⁹

In sum, public attitudes towards the military, coupled with growing perceptions of partisan alignment, serve to mark senior military officers out as advisers with considerable latent political weight in the national security decision-making environment. As a result,

37 Jim Golby and Mara Karlin, “Why ‘Best Military Advice’ is Bad for the Military – and Worse for Civilians,” *Orbis* 62, No. 1 (Winter 2018): 137-153,

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2017.11.010>. See also Jeanine Davidson, “Civil-Military Friction and Presidential Decision Making: Explaining the Broken Dialogue,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 43, No. 1 (2013): 141, <https://doi.org/10.1111/psq.12006>.

38 William Rapp, “Civil Military Relations: The Role of Military Leaders in Strategy Making,” *Parameters* 45, No. 3, (2015): 23-4,

<https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol45/iss3/4>.

39 Jonathan Swan and Zachary Basu, “Episode 9: Trump’s War with His Generals,” *Axios*, May 16, 2021, <https://www.axios.com/off-the-rails-trump-military-withdraw-afghanistan-5717012a-d55d-4819-a79f-805d5eb3c6e2.html>.

presidents reasonably worry about the political implications of military opposition to their preferences, even if that advice is provided free of partisan intentions. In principle, of course, all policymaking in a liberal democracy is political, in the sense that gaining and maintaining public support for a policy is vital to ensuring its sustainability over time. It would therefore be odd if decisions involving the use of force – traditionally one of the few foreign policy domains in which the average voter takes an interest – were devoid of such considerations. Yet in a context in which the ongoing politicization of the military already threatens the norms underpinning civilian control, it stands to reason that leaders might wish to accommodate or bargain with their senior military advisers to a degree beyond what is expected by traditional civil-military relations theory. It is to the task of cataloguing the various ways in which a president might do this that this article now turns.

Presidential Decision-Making and Civilian Control during the Iraq War

The Iraq War serves as an ideal case for identifying and illustrating how presidents seek to manage the political costs of civilian control. First, it encompasses a period in which public confidence in the armed forces was at an all-time high, with the military consistently ranking higher than any other institution since 2000, according to General Social Survey (GSS) and Harris Polls.⁴⁰ Second, and relatedly, the conflict carried high public salience, particularly under George W. Bush during the period from 2003 to 2007, and was central to the political fortunes of his successor.⁴¹ The war also generated a number of widely covered instances of civil-military friction, including the 2006 “revolt of the generals,” which led many to worry about a broader trend of growing political assertiveness among those in uniform.⁴² While

⁴⁰ David T. Burbach, “Confidence without Sacrifice: American Public Opinion and the US Military,” in Lionel Beehner, Risa Brooks, and Daniel Maurer (eds), *Reconsidering American Civil-Military Relations: The Military, Society, Politics, and Modern War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 150.

⁴¹ Gary C. Jacobsen, “George W. Bush, the Iraq War, and the Election of Barack Obama,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (June 2010): 207-24, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23044817>.

⁴² Andrew Bacevich, “Warrior Politics,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, May 2007, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2007/05/warrior-politics/305764/>. For an alternative perspective, see Michael C. Desch, “Bush and the Generals,” *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 3 (May/June 2007): 97-108, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2007-05-01/bush-and-generals>.

methodological purists might question the validity of drawing inferences based on such an apparently exceptional case, this is justified in light of the intrinsic historical significance of the case, widespread fears that it may not turn out to be the outlier that it may currently seem, and the presence of within-case variation under two presidents of different parties and with opposing preferences towards the conflict in question. Since existing research on the case suggests that presidential behavior deviated from the expectations of classical civil-military relations theory, it should provide particularly fertile ground for cataloguing the strategies available to civilian leaders for interacting with the military in the inherently political context of national security decision-making.⁴³

Background

The war in Iraq remains arguably the most significant U.S. foreign policy misadventure of this century. Twenty years on from the invasion that ousted Saddam Hussein, debate rages on about the legacy and lessons to be drawn from a conflict which claimed the lives of more than 4,000 U.S. forces and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis.⁴⁴ This article focuses on the handling of the conflict under Presidents Bush and Obama, building on and contributing to recent efforts to uncover and make sense of decision-making in the second half of the war.⁴⁵

⁴³ Peter D. Feaver, “The Right to Be Right: Civil-Military Relations and the Iraq Surge Decision,” *International Security* 35, no. 4 (Spring 2011): 87-125, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00033. See also correspondence with Richard K. Betts, Michael C. Desch in *International Security* 36, No. 3 (Winter 2011/12): 179-99, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_c_00070; and Kori Schake, “Civil Military Relations and the 2006 Iraq Surge,” in Sayle et al. *The Last Card*, 314-27.

⁴⁴ For competing perspectives, see Hal Brands, “Blundering into Baghdad: The Right – and Wrong – Lessons of the Iraq War,” *Foreign Affairs* 102, no. 2 (March/April 2023): 176-184; David Frum, “The Iraq War Reconsidered,” *The Atlantic*, March 13, 2023; Paul R. Pillar “It Was 20 Years Ago But the Iraq War Folly Could Be Our Fate,” *Responsible Statecraft*, March 15, 2023. On the war’s broader regional implications, see especially Louise Fawcett, “The Iraq War 20 Years On: Towards a New Regional Architecture,” *International Affairs* 99, no. 2 (March 2023): 567-585, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iad002>.

⁴⁵ See, for instance, Timothy A. Sayle et al. (eds), *The Last Card: Inside George W. Bush’s Decision to Surge in Iraq* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2019); and Andrew Payne, “Presidents, Politics, and Military Strategy: Electoral Constraints during the Iraq War,” *International Security* 44, no. 3 (Winter 2019/20): 163-203,

After toppling Saddam Hussein with relative ease in the spring of 2003, the U.S.-led coalition struggled to contain a brewing insurgency against occupying forces. Following the formal transfer of sovereignty back to Iraqi authorities in mid-2004, coalition forces initially operated under a strategy that assumed that political progress would lead to improvements in security. Under the command of General George W. Casey, Jr, this transitional approach focused on fostering the development of democratic institutions while training local forces who would incrementally assume the responsibility for providing security. “As the Iraqis stand up,” explained the president, “we will stand down.”

By spring 2006, however, with local forces proving incapable of stemming a slide into largely uncontrolled sectarian violence, Iraq stood on the brink of civil war. Behind the scenes, the Bush administration embarked on a protracted internal process to determine whether and how to change course. Having become convinced of the need to try something new, the president faced significant opposition among the uniformed military, many of whom questioned the wisdom and feasibility of his emerging preference to do more. In January 2007, however, President Bush finally announced his decision to “surge” in Iraq, deploying five additional brigades to arrest the spiral of violence through a new population-centric counterinsurgency campaign, under the command of General David H. Petraeus.

The remainder of the war saw steady improvements in the security environment, as attention turned to questions about how best to manage the pace of the drawdown of forces in a manner that best preserved these gains. As he prepared to leave office in late 2008, President Bush signed a Status of Forces Agreement which provided legal protections for the ongoing presence of U.S. troops in Iraq and bequeathed to his successor a timeline for a final withdrawal by the end of 2011. It was then up to President Obama, an early opponent of the war, to refine this schedule in line with his previously stated preferences for a faster exit, before deciding whether to keep a residual force in place. After announcing the end of the “combat phase” in the summer of 2010, the president ultimately determined that all remaining forces would withdraw by the end of the following year.

How Bush and Obama Managed the Military

The origins of President Bush’s decision to surge and the wisdom of the pace and finality of the subsequent drawdown of troops under President Obama continue to attract fierce debate. For the present discussion, however, the most notable feature of this phase of the war is the undercurrent of civil-military friction that accompanied the development and execution of https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00371.

military strategy. In both cases, the preferences of the president regarding the appropriate strategy to be employed in Iraq grew increasingly at odds with those among the uniformed military tasked with implementing it. Alert to the considerable political cost associated with the exertion of civilian control, however, both administrations sought to resolve the divergence of preferences by employing four key decision-making strategies designed at least in part to offset the risks of countermanding those individuals unique among the national security bureaucracy for the presence of four politically powerful stars upon their shoulders.⁴⁶

The civil-military dynamics analyzed below did not take place in a vacuum, of course, and two points of context should be noted up front. First, when a president seeks to change or adapt a strategy during an ongoing war, the analytical challenge confronting them is distinct in many ways from that which faces a president weighing an initial decision to intervene. Embarking on a significant course-correction requires a president not simply to select an option which carries the greatest strategic utility in the abstract, but to weigh the opportunity costs of switching having already started down a certain path. As such, the president must come to believe that the existing strategy cannot be redeemed, that the sunk costs associated with changing course are tolerable, that sufficient resources are available to pursue an alternative, and, crucially, that the rest of the government can be brought along to align behind the new approach.⁴⁷ As will be shown with reference to debates about Iraq, these dynamics make mid-war strategy reviews particularly prone to civil-military tension. “People are very dug in to their positions, and they’ve been at it a long time,” thus recalled Stephen Hadley, National Security Adviser to President Bush at the time of the surge. “They obviously have confidence in the strategy with which they are very much associated. And the ability to say, ‘This strategy that I poured my heart and soul into is not working,’ is a very hard thing to say.”⁴⁸

46 Since political costs are principally incurred by an elected commander-in-chief, the focus here is on the president. It is nevertheless the case that military officers can also be complicit in encouraging or facilitating these behaviours and may exhibit other politicized behaviours which manifest at operational or tactical levels. On such “indirect politicization,” see Carrie A. Lee, *The Politics of Military Operations*, PhD Dissertation, Stanford University, 2015.

47 See Stephen Hadley, Meghan O’Sullivan and Peter Feaver, “How the ‘Surge’ Came to Be,” in Sayle et al, *The Last Card*, 237.

48 Stephen Hadley, Oral History Interview with Peter Feaver, Meghan O’Sullivan and Timothy Sayle, June 2, 2015, SMU Center for Presidential History, 15.

Second, and relatedly, a president's relationship with the senior military leadership is not static, but rather evolves over time, shaped by both the commander-in-chief's growing experience in managing the complexities of the civil-military relationship and the cumulative weight of past instances of civil-military friction. As others have noted, President Bush's approach to the strategy review which preceded the surge partly reflected residual concerns about triggering a similar fallout to that which had occurred in 2003, when General Eric Shinseki made public comments challenging the administration's plans for the post-invasion phase of the war.⁴⁹ If the character of civil-military relations at that stage owed more to the influence of Donald Rumsfeld than George Bush, the president's changing approach to the exertion of civilian control is an important sub-plot of the events described in this article. "In many respects there were two George W. Bushes," thus recalls Petraeus. "There was the one who, until November 2006, largely allowed the Sec[retary of] Def[ense] to run the war in Iraq... and the one after that, who very much took control of the war himself and directly oversaw its conduct."⁵⁰ In Obama's case, the ghost of previous civil-military tension during the Afghan surge debate of 2009 looms particularly large in any analysis of the president's relations with the military. Obama's frustrations with the military's apparent use of direct public appeals, leaks, and bureaucratic obstructionism in that episode have of course been well-documented, yet it is worth emphasizing the downstream impact that had. "Every public comment by a general was essentially an ultimatum that Obama would pay a political price to debate," thus notes Carter Malkasian, adding, "Against this backdrop, Obama came to mistrust the military."⁵¹ And while Obama, as a new president without military experience, may have faced an "impossible risk" in defying the military at that time, as his then-CIA Director Leon Panetta recalled, this study sheds light on some of the more nuanced ways in which Obama sought to manage that risk over time, beginning with but going well beyond deference.⁵²

49 Feaver, "The Right to Be Right," 119-20.

50 Author Email Correspondence with David H. Petraeus, March 5, 2020. See also Shake, "Civil Military Relations and the 2006 Iraq Surge," 325-26; Feaver, "The Right to Be Right," 98-99.

51 Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 236.

52 Leon Panetta, *Worthy Fights: A Memoir of Leadership in War and Peace* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 255.

Deference

The most intuitive way for civilian leaders to mitigate the political costs of imposing their preferences upon the military is simply to defer to their recommendations. For the first three-and-a-half years of the war in Iraq, the president made a virtue of doing just that. “Bush really wanted to be a president who listened to people in the field,” recalls former National Security Adviser for Iraq and Afghanistan, Meghan O’Sullivan. “And in many ways, he was.”⁵³ Indeed, upon assuming command of MNF-I, General Casey was struck by the absence of written guidance on what the administration’s goals were in Iraq or how he might go about achieving them. “I got a lot of questions,” recalls Casey, “but I didn’t get a lot of guidance or direction.”⁵⁴ Left to develop his own campaign plan, Casey crafted a strategy which sought to transition security responsibilities to Iraqi forces, thereby creating space for US troops to drawdown as fast as conditions permitted. The president signed off on each iteration of the plan, extended Casey’s tour of duty and took every opportunity in public forums to signal his steadfast support for the commander. Even as the situation in Iraq descended into civil war in the summer of 2006, with pressure mounting on Bush to outline a timetable for the withdrawal of US forces, the president insisted that “General Casey is a wise and smart man who has spent a lot of time in Baghdad recently,” and as such “it’s his judgment that I rely upon.” Not wanting to make any decision that appeared to be “based on political considerations” or affected by the “political moment,” he said he had told Casey, ““You decide, General. I want your judgment, your advice.”⁵⁵ Instead of juggling a politically hot potato, he chose to simply outsource his decision-making authority to a more credible military voice.

This delegative model may have promoted an image of civil-military comity, yet it papered over an emerging disconnect concerning the size and purpose of the US troop presence in Iraq. “I always had a sense that more would have been better for him,” recalls Casey, “but I didn’t think more was better for Iraq.”⁵⁶ If the fundamental obstacle to enduring stability in Iraq was the lack of political reconciliation between competing groups, as Casey believed, then additional US forces would provide at best temporary relief from the spiraling violence metrics. While he tried to brief the president on the evolving nature of sectarian

53 Author Phone Interview with Meghan L. O’Sullivan, June 11, 2018.

54 Author Interview with George W. Casey Jr., Arlington, Virginia, March 16, 2018.

55 “President Bush’s News Conference,” *New York Times*, July 7, 2006,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/07/washington/07text-bush.html>.

56 Author Interview with Casey.

conflict in and around Baghdad through 2006, Casey found it difficult to break through. “I was saying all the words,” recalls the general, “but it wasn’t connecting.”⁵⁷ In truth, and unbeknownst to him, the White House had been harboring doubts about the transition strategy since at least the spring, when the president had frankly told his National Security Adviser, “Hadley, this strategy is not working.”⁵⁸ “The sectarian violence had not erupted because our footprint was too big,” the president later recalled, echoing the views of sceptics who felt that political progress in Iraq could only take place under conditions of improved security. “With the Iraqis struggling to stand up” he explained, “it didn’t seem possible for us to stand down.”⁵⁹ This divergence of preferences is critical, since it signaled that the president’s deference was no longer considered an efficient means of managing the war by delegation to a military professional, but continued *despite* the principal’s discomfort with how his agent was handling the tasks assigned to him.

Yet, rather than order his field commander to rethink a strategy he considered to be flawed, the president swallowed his doubts and gave his blessing to its continuation over the summer of 2006. This included two ultimately unsuccessful attempts to restore security in Baghdad, *Operation Together Forward I* and *II*. While Casey made tactical adjustments between these efforts, both remained fundamentally premised on the importance of transferring responsibility for the provision of security to Iraqi forces, who were supposed to fight alongside coalition troops in sizeable numbers in each operation. Instead, large swathes of Iraqi forces failed to show up, and many of those that did were complicit in the sectarian violence they were sent to address. Yet despite the National Security Adviser recalling how it was “pretty clear” that the first iteration was “an empty operation” that was “achieving none of our objectives,” no objections were raised to having the military try again.⁶⁰ Charitably, Bush’s support for these operations might be interpreted as him giving one last chance to see if the existing strategy could be salvaged. “Casey wanted to demonstrate that his strategy was the right one,” thus reasoned O’Sullivan, “and President Bush wanted to give him that opportunity.”⁶¹ Yet the evidence suggests that Bush had already made up his mind. In recently published excerpts of a 2015 interview, Bush confirmed that by the time Casey had

57 Author Interview with Casey.

58 Hadley, Oral History Interview, 4.

59 George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York: Crown, 2010), 263.

60 Hadley, Oral History Interview, 16.

61 Author Interview with O’Sullivan.

briefed an updated version of his transition strategy at Camp David on 12 June 2006, he had already concluded that it was not working – and could not work.⁶²

In explaining why Bush failed to overrule Casey sooner than he eventually did, many observers have pointed to the president's fear of sparking a politically damaging "revolt of the generals." It was not just the commander of MNF-I who was opposed to sending more troops to Iraq, after all. "There was no appetite to surge among the JCS or the operational commanders," recalls Douglas Lute, then director of operations of the Joint Staff.⁶³ Peter Feaver, a leading civil-military relations scholar who had a ringside seat to events through his position on the NSC staff, suggests that the president was concerned that the uniformed military might have signaled their opposition by resigning in protest, accelerating their own retirement, or sharing candid views in congressional testimony that might have proven problematic for the administration.⁶⁴ The salience of such high profile military dissent had been demonstrated as recently as March 2006, when a slew of retired flag officers called for the replacement of Donald Rumsfeld over his handling of the war in a series of opinion-editorials and media appearances. Then, the president's response was to double down on his support for Rumsfeld, not wanting to be seen to bow to pressure from opponents the secretary had repeatedly cast in partisan terms as "Clinton's generals."⁶⁵ Yet Bush appeared to draw a qualitative distinction with any anticipated criticism from officers on active duty for whom he had considerable respect. In the febrile political atmosphere of the congressional midterm campaign, moreover, it mattered not just that the military expressed discomfort with any increased commitment of troops, but that this preference largely aligned with the views of the president's partisan opponents. In the summer, a dozen Democratic congressional leaders had signed a letter calling on the president begin a phased redeployment of troops by the end of the year.⁶⁶ In this context, the president knew that the direct imposition his preferences, however legitimate under civilian control, presented considerable risk of creating a schism that could be exploited by his critics. "I think President Bush understood this dynamic well,"

62 Joel D. Rayburn and Frank K. Sobchak, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War, Volume I: Invasion, Insurgency, Civil War, 2003-2006* (Carlisle: United States Army War College Press, 2019), 578. See also Payne, "Politics, Presidents and Military Strategy," 174-77.

63 Author Interview with Douglas E. Lute, Rosslyn, Virginia, April 3, 2018.

64 Feaver, "The Right to Be Right," 117-20.

65 See Sayle et al., *The Last Card*, 151-53.

66 Adam Nagourney, "Democratic Leaders Ask Bush to Redeploy Troops in Iraq," *New York Times*, August 1, 2006.

recalls Mullen, “and did not want to get himself into a position where people could accuse him of bullying the chiefs or pulling us through a knothole to get our support.”⁶⁷

Of course, Bush *did* ultimately overrule the senior military leadership in this episode, suddenly imposing his preference for an increased troop presence on the Joint Chiefs and installing a new commander, General Petraeus, to carry the new strategy out. Yet the timing of this decision, just weeks after the Republicans hemorrhaged seats in the 2006 congressional elections and Bush entered a period of waning political influence as a “lame duck,” only underscores the extent to which a president’s willingness to intervene in military strategy is conditional on the political context at hand. The president’s reduced sensitivity to electoral constraints in the aftermath of the midterms also afforded him the political space necessary to remove another powerful obstacle to a change of course in Iraq, Donald Rumsfeld. Yet if that meant that there were also important “civil-civil” components of the surge story, it remains the case that the secretary’s removal also yielded a sea change of approach in civil-military terms at the presidential level.⁶⁸ Eliot Cohen’s *Supreme Command* may have been on the president’s vacation reading list as early as the summer of 2002, but the author, who perhaps tellingly ended up serving in the administration during the implementation of the surge, had in 2006 struggled to impress upon the president the need for the commander-in-chief to hold the senior military leadership accountable for its failures. Only after the midterms and Rumsfeld’s departure would Bush become the “paragon of a wartime commander in chief” that Cohen had in mind.⁶⁹

President Obama would also undergo a shift in his approach to handling the senior military leadership, but he, too, began by exhibiting a degree of deference on the first decision facing him concerning Iraq: whether to accelerate the withdrawal of troops beyond the terms of the Status of Forces Agreement negotiated by Bush. Having committed during the campaign to withdrawing U.S. combat forces within sixteen months of taking office, Obama understood that the military viewed such a timetable with concern. Indeed, Petraeus had already told him as much in a tense meeting in July 2008, when the commander had warned that the sixteen-month timeframe “would box the president into a drawdown plan that would prove unwise in terms of maintaining the security gains of the surge.”⁷⁰ Petraeus’ successor at MNF-I, General Raymond Odierno, wasted no time during the transition in

⁶⁷ Author Interview with Mullen.

⁶⁸ See Schake, “Civil Military Relations and the 2006 Iraq Surge,” 315.

⁶⁹ Mansoor, *Surge*, 115.

⁷⁰ Author Email Correspondence with Petraeus, March 23, 2020.

coming to the same conclusion, assessing that a sixteen-month timeframe would “substantially increase risk” to a level that would “most likely keep us from meeting our refined realistic objectives.”⁷¹ Sensing the political winds, however, Odierno went into “full bore planning mode” during the transition to develop a slower option that the incoming president might be able to live with.⁷² Importantly for this paper’s purposes, Odierno’s efforts leaked to the *New York Times*, prompting two of Obama’s political advisers to complain that the president-elect was being set up for a politically damaging split with the military “right out of the gate,” just as Clinton had been.⁷³ In weighing the potential political costs of going against the military’s preference, it mattered, too, that while Obama was fresh from victory over John McCain, the Republican nominee’s outspoken advocacy for the surge – which likely played a role in attracting endorsements from over 300 retired generals and admirals – added a perceived partisan edge to any such risks.⁷⁴

Given how contentious the civil-military debate over the Afghan “surge” would be, it is striking how little resistance the president offered on what had hitherto been the war of far greater political significance. While Obama demurred on Odierno’s twenty-three month option, he readily agreed to an alternative nineteen-month plan, which was briefed and approved exactly as it had been drafted, much to the general’s later satisfaction.⁷⁵ Moreover, the president granted the commander’s request to stagger the withdrawals to keep as many troops in theatre as possible until after the window of highest risk following the March 2010 Iraqi elections, *and* keep a 35,000-50,000-strong residual force in place, albeit under a revised advise-and-assist mission. Indeed, from several accounts, it appears the president did not take much convincing, apparently sold on the Secretary of Defense’s argument that the proposed option enabled him to demonstrate that he was not blindly committed to his campaign promise and would instead listen to his commanders – a common refrain among

71 Email, Odierno to Mullen, “RISK ASSESSMENT,” December 6, 2008, Papers of George W. Casey, Jr., Box 23, National Defense University.

72 Author Zoom Interview with Raymond T. Odierno, May 1, 2020.

73 Quoted in Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Knopf, 2014), 323.

74 “Press Release - 300 Retired Generals and Admirals Endorse John McCain For President,” September 26, 2008, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/press-release-300-retired-generals-and-admirals-endorse-john-mccain-for-president>.

75 Author Interview with Odierno.

political opponents. Noting that the military's middle option was therefore "good politically," Obama later explained "that commanders who were knee-deep in the fighting deserved some deference when it came to tactical decisions."⁷⁶

Deference was thus an important means of evading the political cost of civilian control used by both presidents. Yet these examples also demonstrate a fundamental limitation of this political strategy – namely, that it only makes sense if the president's sensitivity to incurring a political penalty outweighs the strength of their conviction in their own policy preferences, relative to those held by the military. In the case of the surge, Bush's hardening belief that the existing strategy was failing combined with a changed political context eventually eroded his willingness to continue abdicating his "right to be wrong." Obama, as we will see, was also unwilling to completely sacrifice his preferences at the altar of civil-military harmony. Deference is thus a blunt instrument that is rarely attractive on its own. However, there were other bureaucratic tools at both presidents' disposal that allowed them to alleviate or offset the military's concerns without capitulating to their preferences.

Horse-Trading

Instead of simply acquiescing to the military, a president may choose to negotiate directly with his advisers to find some mutually acceptable compromise when preferences diverge. While the principal-agent structure of any such negotiation may give the president an inherent advantage, the familiar "pulling and hauling" of bureaucratic politics otherwise still applies to the civil-military context.⁷⁷ As such, there is room for a degree of horse-trading over elements of a policy decision which the military does not consider to be mission-critical, such as the exact number or composition of troops needed, or the timetable for their deployment. Like their civilian counterparts in other governmental agencies, senior military leaders – and the service chiefs in particular – engage in the national security decision-making process at least in part as representatives of certain organizational interests, prizing resources and bureaucratic power. It follows that civilian leaders may also be able to offset potentially damaging opposition from the military by providing side-payments which fulfil

76 Quoted in Gates, *Duty*, 325; Barack Obama, *A Promised Land* (New York: Crown, 2020), 314.

77 See Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Longman, 1999, 2nd edition); Saunders, "Leaders, Advisers, and the Political Origins of Elite Support for War," 2140-43.

some other objective they hold. During the Iraq War, there is plenty of evidence of these bargaining behaviors in both administrations.

In the winter of 2006-07, President Bush employed some of these tactics to overcome the residual resistance of his senior military leadership to the surge. Meeting with the Joint Chiefs on their own turf in the “tank” that December amounted to something of a symbolic concession in itself, coming after years of Rumsfeld’s refusal to step foot in the Joint Chiefs’ conference room – a habit that reflected the secretary’s approach to civilian control, which at least one service chief considered “complete BS.”⁷⁸ More important still, however, were the “sweeteners” that Bush had brought with him to help elicit the chief’s reluctant support, in the shape of pledges to increase the size of the active-duty Army and Marine Corps.⁷⁹ Though their effects would not be immediately felt, these side payments went some way to address the chiefs’ primary organizational reservation about a surge – that it would place intolerable stress on the force and limit the military’s ability to respond to other crises elsewhere in the world. To be sure, the president did not share his advisers’ concerns, insisting instead that “the surest way to break the military would be to lose in Iraq.”⁸⁰ In order to avoid that, Bush had already determined that troop numbers had to go up, not down. Yet since the chiefs also remained skeptical of the strategic logic of a surge, the president sought to extract at least a grudging acquiescence by recognizing that the service chiefs wore “two hats,” as then Chairman Pace put it, with responsibilities not just to provide military advice but also to maintain, train and equip the force.⁸¹ By offering concessions which helped serve the latter, Bush was better able to reject the former without sparking major bureaucratic resistance. As such, the apparently “seminal” meeting in the tank actually amounted to a kabuki dance choreographed by the White House *not* with the intent of engaging in a dynamic, problem-focused strategic dialogue, but rather in the hope of fashioning some log-rolled compromise that papered over an underlying policy disagreement and maintained a public façade of unity.⁸² Looking back, the president was transparent on this point, admitting that the effort was a “practical” move designed to insure against the possibility that any dissent among the

78 Author Interview with Mullen. See also Sayle et al, *The Last Card*, 172-23.

79 Woodward, *The War Within*, 286.

80 Bush, *Decision Points*, 376.

81 Pace, quoted in Sayle et al, *The Last Card*, 176.

82 See Hadley and Feaver in Sayle et al, *The Last Card*, 175, 178.

Joint Chiefs would leak out to the press in such a way that could give Republicans encouragement to fight the administration over funding for the war effort.⁸³

During the Obama presidency, civil-military haggling became an art form, and was particularly visible in the debate over whether to leave a follow-on force in Iraq beyond the December 2011 withdrawal deadline imposed under the terms of the 2008 Status of Forces Agreement. That the military favored some residual presence was no secret. Odierno had in fact put his recommendation on the table more than a year out. “It was my opinion that we should keep people on the ground for the foreseeable future,” recalled Odierno, adding, “I was very adamant about 25,000.”⁸⁴ By contrast, even officials quite close to the president, such as Michèle Flournoy, readily admit that “President Obama was at best ambivalent about a residual force.”⁸⁵ The continued deployment of thousands of U.S. forces in wars overseas already “cast a pall over the midterms,” as Obama later recalled, and opening a potentially divisive debate with the military about keeping them there was not politically prudent.⁸⁶ Indeed, in Odierno’s view, the administration’s concerns about the mismatch between his preference and those of the president was a key reason why Obama deferred the decision until Odierno handed over command in September 2010. As he later learned from Tom Donilon, one of Obama’s advisers most closely attuned to the politics of national security, the White House had apparently been “shocked” that the military actually executed the nineteen-month timeline for the withdrawal of combat troops as had been agreed in early 2009.⁸⁷ If the administration thus had concerns about whether the military would follow a course of action *that the field commander had briefed*, it is perhaps easy to appreciate why there might have been similar concerns about how the military might respond to a presidential reluctance to keep troops in Iraq beyond 2011, especially as the drama of the Afghan “surge” debate had since brought civil-military harmony to a nadir.

Unfortunately for Obama, Odierno’s successor, General Lloyd Austin, largely shared the view that a considerable deployment of troops would be required to ensure stability in Iraq. If Obama wanted to run for re-election having fulfilled his pledge to end the war in Iraq, he could not simply defer to the military. Austin’s initial recommendation of leaving behind a residual force of between 20,000 and 24,000 troops indicated to the White House that “the

⁸³ See Bush in Sayle et al, *The Last Card*, 180-81.

⁸⁴ Author Interview with Odierno.

⁸⁵ Author Interview with Flournoy, Washington D.C., April 3, 2018.

⁸⁶ Obama, *A Promised Land*, 576.

⁸⁷ Author Interview with Odierno.

military wanted in effect a mini version of what we had before,” as Tony Blinken recalls, “which was a non-starter for the president.”⁸⁸ In order to bridge the divide in civil-military preferences, there followed months of negotiation in which Pentagon officials sought to whittle down the military’s headline figures by redoing the troop-to-task analysis, prodded by the White House, which was “all up in the Pentagon’s knickers on Iraq,” as one senior official put it.⁸⁹ After first getting down to 19,000 as the preferred option, an NSC meeting was held in late April to explore a subsequent recommendation of 16,000 troops, with “high-risk” alternatives of 8,000 and 10,000.⁹⁰

Yet if each administration managed to reconcile potentially damaging disagreement through bureaucratic means – offering side-payments to offset concerns in Bush’s case, and via fairly straightforward haggling in Obama’s case – there were also limits to what could be achieved through this strategy alone. This is revealed most clearly in the latter case, where the Obama administration could only barter its military down so far. As the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs made clear in a memorandum to the White House, the 10,000 figure that had been briefed in April was a “floor,” beyond which any further bargaining that took the numbers lower risked mission failure. The memorandum was met with “a thud; they didn’t want to hear it,” recalls the former Chairman. Since they get to the crux of the civil-military dynamics in play, Mullen’s recollections are worth detailing in full:

“They believed – incorrectly, I might add – that the chiefs were going to somehow make it more difficult politically for them because critics in Congress would use the memo to attack their policies. That wasn’t the purpose of the memo, and it certainly didn’t cross my mind when I submitted it that it would be used as some sort of political football. It was my best military advice, period. I was surprised and disappointed that anyone thought different of my motives. That’s the thud. And it bothered me.”⁹¹

Mullen’s comments illustrate nicely how actions by senior military leaders which lack an ostensive partisan purpose can trigger concerns among the civilian leadership about the political costs associated with a divergence of civil-military preferences. Looking back, Mullen sees the episode as emblematic of the challenges senior officers face in providing

88 Author Phone Interview with Antony Blinken, June 8, 2018.

89 Author Interview with Colin H. Kahl, Washington D.C., March 15, 2018.

90 See Gordon and Trainor, *Endgame*, 653-56.

91 Author Interview with Mullen.

objective professional advice when “you’re the only person in the room that isn’t doing what they’re trying to do, which is deliver politically.”⁹² In this sense, this may be an example of what Risa Brooks has described as a “blind spot” among officers who reflexively self-identify as apolitical such that they may fail to recognize the unintended political impact of their actions.⁹³

While observers may debate whether Mullen was consciously trying to “box in” the president, for the purposes of this paper it is sufficient to note that his actions did create that perception among the civilian leadership. By presenting the White House with what sounded like an ultimatum, framed definitively as “best military advice,” the chairman had left the president with nowhere to go. Worse still, that advice had come in the form of a written memorandum that, if the Afghan debate was any guide, could easily leak. As the available record indicates, senior White House officials were alarmed that the military was again creating a potential political liability by providing PowerPoint briefs with “high risk” stamped in red on the options that were closest to the president’s preferences.⁹⁴ “The problem was they were being squeezed by the military,” concludes James Jeffrey, then Ambassador to Iraq, “the Chairman wanted to keep troops on, and they did not want to take on the military.”⁹⁵ If Obama wanted to go lower than Mullen’s “floor,” he would need to employ another method to overcome the military’s opposition.

Side-Stepping

If the gap between the president and military’s preferences is too wide to bridge through direct negotiation, the commander-in-chief may simply go around the bureaucratic source of resistance. Since there is usually a degree of heterogeneity of viewpoints within the military, the president’s challenge may not be deciding *whether* to listen to the generals, but deciding *which* generals to listen to.⁹⁶ And given that the public makes little distinction between military leaders who are in the chain of command and those who are not – let alone whether

92 Author Interview with Mullen.

93 Brooks, “Paradoxes of Professionalism,” 17-18.

94 Gordon and Trainor, *Endgame*, 657.

95 Author Phone Interview with James Jeffrey, June 28, 2018.

96 See Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, “Civil-Military Relations in the United States: What Senior Leaders Need to Know (and Usually Don’t),” *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Vol 15, No. 2 (Summer 2021), 17,

https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/SSQ/documents/Volume-15_Issue-2/Feaver.pdf.

they are active duty or retired – the probability of finding individuals who share the president’s preferences is not inconsiderable.

While the origins of the “surge” remain contested, the available record indicates that President Bush looked significantly beyond the chain of command for alternative counsel when deciding to increase the US commitment to the war in Iraq. In Tom Ricks’ account, for instance, Jack Keane, a retired four-star general, is cast as the “spiritual godfather” of the surge, with primary responsibility for lobbying for a new approach and coordinating the thinking in Washington.⁹⁷ Petraeus himself had spent several months across the second half of 2006 engaging in a back channel of meetings and phone calls with O’Sullivan, despite only having formal responsibility for revising the Army’s counterinsurgency field manual over in Fort Leavenworth.⁹⁸ Odierno, meanwhile, who would become the operational architect of the surge, shared the skeptics’ reservations about Casey’s transition strategy even as he sought to carry elements of it out as commander of III Corps and then as the second-highest ranking officer in Iraq at MNC-I. He, too, spent much of late 2006 engaging with “any expert you could think of that was talking about Iraq at the time,” including both Keane and Petraeus, to chart a new path forward. Having also recently served as liaison to the Secretary of State, Odierno’s network allowed him to cultivate indirect links to the White House as a means of lobbying for and consulting on proposed changes to force levels largely outside of his superior’s eye. “I had to be very careful,” recalled Odierno, “because I was working for General Casey at the time.”⁹⁹

The degree of side-stepping in this case was in fact sufficiently strong that it created considerable discord among the military. Members of the Joint Chiefs were particularly alarmed that they were so out of the loop. Then-Chairman Peter Pace “was not very clear with what was going on in the White House throughout this,” recalls Mullen, then Chief of Naval Operations, adding that when his fellow service chiefs heard that Jack Keane had been briefing the president, the alarm grew, with Army Chief Pete Schoomaker asking, “what the hell is Keane doing in the White House, when we can’t see the President?”¹⁰⁰ O’Sullivan acknowledged that her consultations with Petraeus made for a “delicate situation” given his role outside the chain of command. “In some ways, he shouldn’t have been giving input to

⁹⁷ Ricks, *The Gamble*, 107. See also Perry, *The Pentagon’s Wars*, 214-5.

⁹⁸ Author Email Correspondence with Petraeus, March 9, 2020.

⁹⁹ Author Interview with Odierno.

¹⁰⁰ Author Interview with Mullen.

the White House,” she explained.¹⁰¹ When Abizaid and Casey later found out that they had been routinely bypassed in the lead-up to the surge, they were equally disappointed that neither Keane nor Petraeus had even taken the courtesy of calling the officers who were actually responsible for the strategy in question. Abizaid would admit to taking “great umbrage” at their behavior, which he considered “very unprofessional,” while Casey would later confront Keane directly, telling the former Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, “you are way too out in front in advocating a policy for which you are not accountable. And that’s a problem.”¹⁰² Looking back, Petraeus cites bureaucratic realities – and the stakes involved – when defending his less-than-textbook approach to organizational practice. “These were not normal times and providing my thoughts to General Abizaid (as he was retiring) or to General Casey would have been of no value at that point,” he recently explained. “The bottom line was that I knew I was going back and I was determined to ensure we had what we needed. The war was headed in a very dangerous direction, and it was not time for timidity.”¹⁰³

Even in alternative accounts, in which the surge story carries more of a “made in Washington” character, evidence of side-stepping remains if anything clearer still.¹⁰⁴ In such accounts, the role of Jack Keane was not as a principal author of the surge, but instead an “external validator” that might cushion the political landing of a controversial option which had already been decided on by the president.¹⁰⁵ His briefing in December 2006 could thus serve as a “stalking horse” that allowed the Joint Chiefs to comment on an option that had already been briefed at high levels, and as such, recalls Feaver, was “an important catalyst for getting through the civil-military challenge of overruling generals on a strategic issue.”¹⁰⁶ In getting to the decision to increase the commitment to Iraq in the first place, meanwhile, the chain of command had also been quietly pushed aside. Until the formal strategic review was eventually launched in November 2006, General Casey was mostly kept in the dark regarding

101 O’Sullivan in Sayle et al, *The Last Card*, 188.

102 Abizaid, quoted in Sayle et al., *The Last Card*, 188. Casey, quoted in Thomas E. Ricks, *The Generals: American Military Command from World War II to Today* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 434.

103 Author Email Correspondence with Petraeus, March 9, 2020.

104 See, for instance, Hadley, O’Sullivan and Feaver, “How the ‘Surge’ Came to Be,” 207-38.

105 Hadley, in Sayle et al, *The Last Card*, 169.

106 Quoted in Sayle et al, *The Last Card*, 171.

a series of siloed efforts to prompt a change of course, conscious only of the “Council of Colonels” study commissioned by Pace, which in any case recommended “basically what we were doing.” Even as the formal review progressed, key elements, like the size of the surge, came as a surprise to the field commander. “All of a sudden, they said, ‘what about these five brigades?’” recalls Casey, who, having slowly come round to the idea of a more modest additional deployment, was left to ask, “where has that come from?”¹⁰⁷ The answer, he later discovered, was David Petraeus and Jack Keane. Having been asked by O’Sullivan for his recommendation of how many forces he would need if he were commander, Petraeus had been clear: “Everything you can get your hands on. Everything we have.”¹⁰⁸ And it was Keane’s military advice, not that of the chiefs or the ground force commander, which the civilian leadership apparently heeded when fleshing out exactly what that meant. As one observer put it, while Keane’s lack of formal position in the national security bureaucracy gave him little power to independently pursue his preferences, “the NSC didn’t have the military expertise that Keane had. So, neither one of them had all of the amino acids necessary to create a protein, but they each had a part and they played their respective role in very constructive ways.”¹⁰⁹

In Obama’s case, the president was able to overcome the opposition of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs by appealing to his deputy, General James Cartwright. As Vice Chairman, Cartwright had routinely been referred to as “Obama’s favorite general,” a characterization he tellingly put down to his willingness to buck the conventional wisdom of his fellow chiefs when providing military advice.¹¹⁰ By contrast, the president enjoyed a much more abrasive relationship with the Chairman, whose “outspokenness” and prior actions during the 2009 debate over the surge in Afghanistan fueled the president’s perception that “an entire agency under my charge was working its own agenda” through seemingly routine press leaks.¹¹¹ Obama had in fact planned to replace Mullen with Cartwright within months of assuming office, and would likely have done so were it not for the intervention of the Secretary of Defense.¹¹² Crucially, underlying the tension between Obama and Mullen appears to have been an undercurrent of partisan mistrust on the president’s part. Recalling the earlier

¹⁰⁷ Author Interview with Casey.

¹⁰⁸ Author Email Correspondence with Petraeus, March 9, 2020.

¹⁰⁹ Author Interview with Steven Biddle, Washington, D.C., March 28, 2018.

¹¹⁰ Author Interview with Cartwright.

¹¹¹ Obama, *A Promised Land*, 434-5.

¹¹² Perry, *The Pentagon’s Wars*, 243.

Afghanistan debate, Obama acknowledges directly asking Mullen whether the military was intentionally trying to undercut the president's intentions "because they don't like my politics."¹¹³ And, as shown above, it was precisely that politically motivated reasoning that Mullen felt to be behind the administration's reaction to his recommendations during the debate over the 2011 withdrawal from Iraq, too. "This goes to my general point on political," recalls Mullen, "They would like the military to be as malleable as possible. They didn't like my independence, and they wanted to hear more and more of what I was supposed to deduce they wanted to hear, and I just wasn't willing to do that."¹¹⁴

Disagreement among the Joint Chiefs had been critical in providing Obama with the political space to challenge the military's favored approach in Afghanistan in 2009, and a similar dynamic would also be present during the deliberations over the future US commitment to Iraq in 2011. Faced with Mullen's memorandum laying out the red line of 10,000 troops, the White House turned to Cartwright to scope out alternative options. Not only did the Vice Chairman sympathize with the president's frustration with his colleagues' apparent inflexibility – "no matter what the question was, the answer was always the same" – he recognized that the civil-military dispute reflected a fundamental disconnect over the end-states each side desired. The president's priority, Cartwright surmised, was not "winning" the war in Iraq, a goal his colleagues still clung to, but rather "trying to achieve the most decisive move to Afghanistan."¹¹⁵ Cartwright understood that in dissenting from the unanimous position of the chain of command, and working directly with the White House on a series of lighter-footprint approaches, he was effectively legitimizing the president's rejection of the military's preferred recommendations and reducing the penalty associated with doing so. One of only a handful of four-star generals in the armed forces, Cartwright understood that his endorsement would add credibility to the kind of proposals his colleagues had rejected. In some ways, that was the point. It was important to show the president that "there is more than one right answer to a problem," even if his actions amounted to "heresy" among the rest of the senior military leadership.¹¹⁶

As deliberations played out over the summer of 2011, the sharp intramural discord among the military continued to work to the White House's advantage in diffusing a potential political crisis. Just as Obama sought Cartwright's views in 2009 on the grounds that he

¹¹³ Obama, *A Promised Land*, 435.

¹¹⁴ Author Interview with Mullen.

¹¹⁵ Author Interview with Cartwright. See also Obama, *A Promised Land*, 319-20.

¹¹⁶ Author Interview with Cartwright.

“should be able to talk to anyone in uniform as commander in chief,” so too did his administration listen to the Vice Chairman’s contrary advice in 2011.¹¹⁷ The final package the administration settled on over the summer, comprising a smaller force of around 3,500 troops with a further 1,500 in a rotational posture, reflected elements of Cartwright’s ideas which had been briefed to White House officials without the knowledge of the Chairman or the Secretary of Defense. “It was typical Cartwright,” recalls Mullen, “he bypassed me, and he bypassed Gates.” Worse still, the Chairman considered several of the ideas floated by his deputy that summer to be “half-baked” and “blind to reality.” The problem, recalls Mullen, was that, “Cartwright didn’t understand much about war fighting,” and while ideas like a rapid reaction force being placed across the border might carry political appeal in the White House, “the ground people reacted that that option just wasn’t going to be very effective.”¹¹⁸ Leaving the merits of the proposal to one side, the disunity among the military afforded the administration an opportunity to mitigate the costs of confronting Mullen’s objections. “They weren’t speaking with one voice,” recalls Colin Kahl, then a senior Pentagon official, “so, in a White House that was inclined not to want to leave a lot of troops there, the military’s position gave them some wiggle room to do that.”¹¹⁹

Stacking the Deck

A final strategy available to presidents seeking to obviate the political costs of civilian control is to pre-empt the emergence of a divergence of preferences in the first place by stacking the deck. Instead of overruling the senior military leadership at the point of decision, when the risk of triggering a backlash is greatest, a tactful civilian leader may be able to nudge the military towards the president’s preference at an earlier stage of a review process in such a way that diffuses the military’s opposition over time. Alternatively, the White House may be able to install favored players in bureaucratic channels to minimize the likelihood of major disagreements emerging down the road. These methods may be considered two sides of the same coin, united by the civilian’s desire to have the military recommend a course of action he or she wants.

The Bush administration’s efforts to socialize both the idea of initiating a strategy review and the proposal to increase troop levels are excellent examples of this behavior. According to Stephen Hadley, then National Security Adviser, the delay in changing a strategy that the

¹¹⁷ Obama, quoted in Gates, *Duty*, 378.

¹¹⁸ Author Interview with Mullen.

¹¹⁹ Author Interview with Kahl.

president considered to be failing as early as spring 2006 was largely attributable to the desire to have the impetus for any review coming from those on the ground. “If not handled right,” Hadley explains, “a case where the President and his military are at odds in the middle of a war is a Constitutional crisis.”¹²⁰ Not wanting to give political ammunition to critics wishing to capitalize on any civil-military split, the White House therefore took a series of gradual steps over the summer in order to encourage the military to come to its own conclusion that it was time for a rethink. These included a presidentially sanctioned “fifty-questions exercise,” in which NSC officials bombarded General Casey with hard-hitting questions designed to provoke the field commander into a re-examination of the viability of his transition strategy.¹²¹ It also included a more direct “signal” being sent in a meeting of August 17, in which the president strongly hinted at his emergent preference for increasing troop levels. “If they can’t do it,” Bush said, referring to Iraqi forces, “we will.”¹²² These actions were not immediately successful, insofar as the field commander continued to insist on the wisdom of his strategy, rather than embark on a root-and-branch study of alternatives. “I gave him one option, which was our plan,” recalls Casey, acknowledging that, looking back on the episode, “I’d say, ‘You idiot, you should have given him several options.’”¹²³ Yet it did seem to encourage others in the military, notably the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, to begin a quiet, informal review process that would eventually begin to gather steam.

As the strategy review picked up in the fall, the White House took even more active steps to ensure that it produced a recommendation that aligned with the president’s preference. In October, for instance, Hadley passed General Pace a study conducted by an NSC official which assessed what a surge might look like. Essentially validating an option that others in the NSC had been working on, the paper foreshadowed the decision that would eventually be made, recommending a five-brigade increase of troops. Yet by commissioning the study and passing it to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs fairly early in the informal review process he had set in motion, Hadley hoped to ensure that an option the president increasingly favored might emerge naturally in their recommendations. Only that way, he believed, could the White House avoid appearing to “jam the surge down the throat of the military” in a manner that could trigger a politically costly and strategically inimical “not invented here” reaction.¹²⁴

120 Hadley, Oral History Interview, 15.

121 Hadley, Oral History Interview, 11-12.

122 Bush, *Decision Points*, 371.

123 Author Interview with Casey.

124 Hadley, Oral History Interview, 20-21, 10.

And as the formal NSC review took shape in the following two months, Hadley's efforts continued. In a meeting with the deputies on November 17, the National Security Adviser frankly told the review group, "You have got to give the president the option of a surge in forces."¹²⁵ By adopting this approach, senior NSC officials had succeeded in pre-empting a damaging civil-military spat. "Some leaned right, some leaned left, and not everyone was happy," wrote Hadley, O'Sullivan and Feaver, "But President Bush had skillfully avoided a split with the military and a constitutional crisis between the military heads and their commander in chief."¹²⁶ "The result of how he did it," agrees Pace, capturing the essence of stacking the deck well, "was that he then had his entire military team recommending to him... a course of action with which he was comfortable."¹²⁷

There was also a degree of this behavior on display in the way in which the Bush administration sought to manage the politics of keeping troops in Iraq for the remainder of the president's term in office. With bipartisan anti-war sentiment rising and the prospect of a serious fight over congressional funding on the horizon, Bush and his new Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, understood that time would soon run out on the "Washington clock" if progress could not be demonstrated in Iraq. Installing a general who was sensitive to these political realities went some way towards solving this problem. Petraeus maintained a close relationship with prominent individuals in the media and think tank community and proved willing to act as the administration's spokesman on the war. "President Bush realized that he had lost a great deal of credibility with the American people, yet they needed to hear about the situation in Iraq from an authoritative source," thus recalls Pete Mansoor, adding, "Petraeus had the credibility that the president lacked; his voice carried weight on all segments of the political spectrum."¹²⁸ While it is difficult to fault a field commander from making the case for his own strategy, the contrast with his predecessor is striking. "I didn't see public opinion as my problem. That was the civilian leaders' issue," recalls General Casey. While he understood that the administration's lack of credibility with the public, stemming from the failure to find weapons of mass destruction, had contributed not just to the

¹²⁵ Hadley, O'Sullivan and Feaver, "How the 'Surge' Came to Be," 217.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 222.

¹²⁷ Peter Pace, Oral History Interview with Aaron Crawford and Evan McCormick, January 20, 2016, SMU Center for Presidential History, 57.

¹²⁸ Mansoor, *Surge*, 158. See also Michael R. Kenwick and Sarah Maxey, "You and Whose Army? How Civilian Leaders Leverage the Military's Prestige to Shape Public Opinion," 4 September 2020, *SSRN*, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3686738.

deference shown to him by the president but also the pressure on him to become the face of the war, Casey was uncomfortable in playing such a visible role. “I was always concerned that I had to walk a fine line between talking about what the force was doing, which is my responsibility,” he said, “but at the same time not becoming a mouthpiece for the administration.”¹²⁹

In conjunction with the Secretary of Defense, President Bush concluded that the best way to stave off anti-war sentiment at home and maximize the possibility of keeping a substantial number of forces in Iraq for the foreseeable future was to announce a modest withdrawal in the fall of 2007 as a signal that the new strategy was working. Yet, perhaps precisely because the administration had placed Petraeus on a pedestal, the White House was aware – as was the field commander – of the latent political power he wielded in determining the pace of the drawdown of surge units. As such, agreed Bush and Gates, “The initiative for any drawdown would have to come from Petraeus.”¹³⁰ With the president’s blessing, Gates embarked on a sustained effort to socialize the White House’s preferred plan in several meetings with Petraeus in 2007, clearly hoping to influence the recommendations he would make in late August. As an example of stacking the deck, this was perhaps milder than the decision-making process leading to the surge itself, since Petraeus was ultimately receptive to the logic Gates presented him with. Petraeus explained his approach to both presidents as follows: “I will *base* my advice and recommendations on the mission you have given us and facts on the ground, on the military situation – *informed* by an awareness of the issues beyond my purview that you nonetheless must consider (e.g. strain on the force, budget deficits, the opportunity cost of forces in Iraq or Afghanistan, domestic politics, congressional politics, etc., etc.) – but, in the end, *driven* by the facts on the ground.”¹³¹ Yet if Petraeus appreciated the political realities of the situation, “he didn’t have to like it,” recalls Gates. Indeed, in one conversation in which the Secretary of Defense was again encouraging Petraeus to play the long game with the drawdown schedule, the general said, “You know, I could make your life miserable,” a comment which Gates perceived as a threat.¹³² In the end, however, the White House’s strategy worked. Petraeus’ recommendations to begin redeploying US forces in September 2007 and charting a glide path to have all surge units out by July 2008 reflected the direction Gates had been gently pressing for months. While the field commander could

129 Author Interview with Casey.

130 Gates, *Duty*, 57.

131 Author Email Correspondence with Petraeus, March 5, 2020.

132 Gates, *Duty*, 68.

honestly say the recommendations were his own, they had been developed amid a backdrop of several meetings in which the Secretary of Defense had made the White House's expectations transparent.

President Obama also attempted to stack the deck in his interactions with the military, but did so less frequently and with much less success than his predecessor. When asking for the military's recommendations for an accelerated drawdown in early 2009, for instance, Obama insisted that his sixteen-month plan be included as part of Odierno's recommendations, much as Hadley had ensured that the "surge" emerged as part of the formal review process in late 2006.¹³³ Though the president ultimately gave ground on this, as we have seen, it was nevertheless notable that he tasked the military up front with finding a "sweet spot" between their requirements and his campaign promise.¹³⁴ The Obama administration would also attempt to stack the deck later that summer, when National Security Adviser Jim Jones was dispatched to Afghanistan in June to consult with General McChrystal, who the White House feared (correctly) was preparing a request for additional troops. The effort to head off such a request was ultimately forlorn, however – McChrystal proved unfazed by Jones' warning that any such request would cause a "Whiskey Tango Foxtrot" response from a White House that already felt it had been "jammed" by the military when approving reinforcements earlier that year.¹³⁵ Civilian control had been the "subtext of the Afghan debate," Obama later wrote, and it seems the experience left him willing to be more assertive in imposing his preferences on a recalcitrant military going forward, even if he did not repeat the unusual practice of issuing a written order, a move he "regretted almost immediately."¹³⁶ And though Obama failed to install Cartwright as Mullen's successor as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, it was clear that he had no interest in elevating "Bush's generals" to that position. As Secretary Gates told Petraeus, in explaining why he would not be considered for the position, "there's room inside the beltway for just one superstar, and it's not going to be you."¹³⁷ Obama thereby largely failed in his efforts to stack the deck on Iraq, and his efforts to do so in Afghanistan left him less willing to try.

¹³³ Gates, *Duty*, 324.

¹³⁴ Gordon and Trainor, *Endgame*, 561.

¹³⁵ Gates, *Duty*, 350, 338; Obama, *A Promised Land*, 318-19.

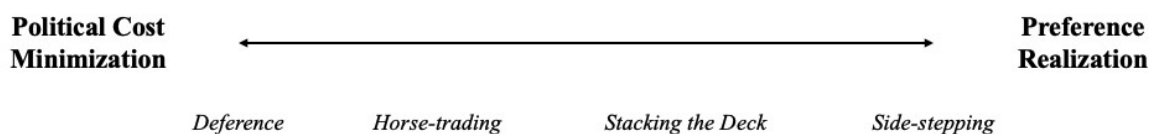
¹³⁶ Obama, *A Promised Land*, 436, 443.

¹³⁷ Author Email Correspondence with Petraeus, March 27, 2020. See also Elisabeth Bumiller, "Voice of Bush's Favored General is Now Harder to Hear," October 4, 2009, *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/05/world/05military.html>.

The Use and Utility of Different Strategies

As an exercise in inductive category-building, this article leaves it to future research to fully test the generalizability of the political strategies it identifies. However, recognizing the inferential limits of the case study approach adopted here, this section offers an exploratory discussion to guide any future extension of this work. Based on the preceding analysis, we can draw several plausible insights concerning the effectiveness of each of the observed strategies and the conditions under which we might expect a president to use them.

For simplicity, we might think of civil-military bargaining in rationalist terms, whereby civilian leaders seek to find an optimal balance between their desire to have the military pursue certain policy preferences on one hand, and the need to do so at minimal political cost



on the other. Understood as such, it is clear that the four strategies identified in this article are not of equal utility, as illustrated in *Figure 1*.

Figure 1: a hierarchy of efficacy

At one end of the spectrum, *deference* all-but eliminates the potential cost of exerting civilian control, but does so at maximum expense to the president's desire to enact at least some measure of their preferred policies. In this sense, this strategy is the logical opposite of the straightforward imposition of civilian preferences envisaged in "civilian supremacist" models. Each of the three alternative strategies occupy a middle ground between these two extremes. Yet whereas *horse-trading* implies some concession to the preferences of the military, either in the form of a compromise on the substance of the policy in question or to provision of a side payment on some other issue, both *side-stepping* and *stacking the deck* hold the promise of being able to realize a greater measure of the civilian leader's policy preference. The principal drawback of *side-stepping*, as several comments in the case study make plain, is that it is not entirely cost-free in terms of maintaining trust with the military advisers within the chain of command, in ways that plausibly increase the risks of precisely the kind of political blowback that the strategy is designed to obviate. *Stacking the deck* avoids this situation by keeping skeptical advisers engaged in the process. The limiting factor

of this strategy, however, is therefore the willingness of those individuals to include the full degree of the civilian leadership's preference in their own recommendations.

Not all of these strategies are mutually exclusive. Indeed, the Iraq case offers plenty of evidence of presidents employing more than one at a time. Some appear to be logically complementary. For example, with respect to *side-stepping* in cases where the preferences of officers outside of the decision-making loop are closer but not identical to those of the civilian leadership, a degree of *horse-trading* might still be required to bridge the remaining gap. Similarly, a civilian leader might be more successful in an attempt to *stack the deck* if he or she is also prepared to move closer to the military's preferences through *horse-trading*. Other combinations of strategies, like *side-stepping* and *stacking the deck*, might appear logically inconsistent. Yet this is precisely the behavior that can be observed in the present case. While this may appear to be a case of throwing spaghetti at a wall to see what sticks, it might also be understood as a prudent approach. In complex decision-making environments in which there may be a heterogeneity of views among the uniformed military, it might make good sense to go around the principal source of opposition while seeking to bring individuals with more reconcilable views on board. It is quite conceivable, for instance, that a version of the surge might have been agreed to General Casey – indeed, he had actually proposed a roughly 9,000-strong increase in troops, which broadly aligned with the two-brigade maximum that the Joint Chiefs had originally envisaged but was considered “too modest” by the president and his civilian advisers.¹³⁸ In order to reach the five-brigade option, then, it was reasonable for the president to feel the need to look beyond the existing commander, while working to offset the remaining resistance among the service chiefs.

Based on the preceding analysis, perhaps the two most significant factors shaping a president's choice of strategy are the *intensity* of their policy preferences, and the degree of *divergence* between their preferences and those of the military. *Figure 2* models the interaction between these simple conditions.

138 George W. Casey, Jr, *Strategic Reflections* (Washington, D.C.: NDU Press, 2012), 145-46; Payne, *War on the Ballot*, 173.

		Preference Intensity	
		Weak	Strong
Preference Divergence	Narrow	<i>Horse-trading</i>	<i>Stacking the Deck</i>
	Wide	<i>Deference</i>	<i>Side-stepping</i>

Figure 2: selection dynamics¹³⁹

If the president’s policy preference is only weakly held and not dissimilar to that of the uniformed military, a degree of *horse-trading* should be sufficient to iron out any minor differences. If, however, there is a wide gulf between the president’s views and those of the military, a commander-in-chief might decide that it is not worth fighting over a weakly held preference and hence choose to *defer* to the military’s views. In cases where the president has a strong preference about a proposed course of action which is relatively close to that of his or her senior military advisers, *stacking the deck* may offer a fruitful means of realizing that preference without provoking a damaging split. By contrast, if they are firmly committed to a course of action that significantly jars with the preference of the senior military leadership, a president may be more likely to go around the source of opposition through *side-stepping*. In general, we might also plausibly expect leaders with more intense preferences to be more likely to embrace multiple strategies at once, or particular combinations, such as those mentioned above, that increase the chances of realizing some measure of their favored policies.

139 This framework necessarily simplifies the decision-making process into a stylized model whereby preferences are treated as fixed and exogenous to the civil-military bargaining process, and in which the military is assumed to be a unitary actor. Future work may wish to relax these assumptions to gain additional insights into the full complexity of civil-military bargaining beyond that which can be feasibly addressed in this article.

When considered in the context of the case study presented here, two additional contingent factors emerge that may mediate the dynamics presented so far. The first concerns the president's *sensitivity* to the political costs of civilian control. As existing scholarship on the role of partisanship and polarization implies, the commander-in-chief's concerns about the political implications of civil-military friction appear to have been greatest when the military's preferences aligned with the views of their political opponents. Both presidents hewed towards strategies which prioritize cost minimization, notably including *deference*, during phases of the war in which partisan criticism could be expected to be at its sharpest, such as the run-up to the 2006 midterms, and while the war still carried relatively high salience in early 2009. By contrast, Bush proved more willing to employ a combination of the other behaviors in the immediate aftermath of the midterms as he became a "lame duck," newly freed from the constraints of electoral accountability. Obama's appetite for continued *horse-trading*, meanwhile, notably waned over time, with the president eventually preferring to *side-step* the uniformed military in order to achieve a policy outcome that by 2011 carried widespread support, even among Republicans.¹⁴⁰

The second mediating condition concerns the bureaucratic *skill* and *experience* of the civilian leader. Some of the strategies identified here may be wielded more effectively by individuals who possess a relatively high capacity for engaging in the "pulling and hauling" of bureaucratic politics. While any leader can engage in *horse-trading*, a skilled operator might be able to extract more concessions with fewer resources than a bureaucratic novice. *Stacking the deck*, meanwhile, requires a degree of tact if an effort to elicit certain recommendations is not to be perceived as a thinly veiled effort to simply impose the civilian's preferences. A leader's level of foreign policy experience also plausibly matters.¹⁴¹ A relatively inexperienced president may be more likely to give the benefit of the doubt to senior military officials who "know better" on issues of defense policy, given that their position depends on accumulation of considerable professional expertise in such areas. This likely explains why both Bush and Obama – two presidents with relatively light backgrounds in foreign affairs – tended towards *deference* in the opening phase of their administrations, before assuming more assertive strategies as they became more familiar with the substance of

140 See Peyton M. Craighill, "Public Opinion is Settled as Iraq War Concludes," *Washington Post*, November 6, 2011.

141 See Elizabeth N. Saunders, "No Substitute for Experience: Presidents, Advisers, and Information in Group Decision Making," *International Organization* 71, Supplement (2017): S219-S247, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002081831600045X>.

the policies they oversaw. It also plausibly explains why Joe Biden – who twice served as chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee – found it easier than his two immediate predecessors as president to overcome the resistance of the senior military leadership in ending the war in Afghanistan. For similar reasons, presidents with relatively weak experience may prefer to bypass than bargain with senior military officers. In turn, this may help account for Bush and Obama’s recourse to *side-stepping*, whereby each sought out alternative sources of advice from individuals outside of the chain of command.

Conclusion

Civilian control of the military remains a bedrock principle embedded in the US constitution. However, in the inherently political context of national security decision-making, there are powerful disincentives for commanders-in-chief to challenge the preferences of their senior military advisers. Rooted in high public confidence in the military and exacerbated by the growing tendency for the armed forces to be viewed through a partisan lens, the political weight carried by the senior military leadership presents a serious challenge for publicly accountable elected officials seeking to overrule their military advisers. While civilian leaders may therefore have the “right to be wrong,” they may not always have sufficient political capital to test that proposition. “As powerful as presidents can be, they know the importance of having the military on board,” thus recalls Admiral Mullen, adding, “I don’t mean actively espousing policy. Military leaders shouldn’t do that. But it does help inoculate the president from criticism if he can say he has consulted the Pentagon and his commanders helped inform the policy and are comfortable carrying it out.”¹⁴² This article unpacked this “consultation” process, identifying how two presidents choose to employ one or more decision-making strategies in an effort to mitigate the political fallout that might follow the exertion of civilian control in the event of a mismatch of preferences with their most senior military advisers. When considering decisions to respectively escalate and de-escalate the U.S. commitment to the war in Iraq, both President Bush and President Obama variously *deferred* to military officials on the broad strategic direction of the war; engaged in *horse-trading* over troop deployments; *side-stepped* those leaders who disagreed with their preferences; and *stacked the deck* to elicit the recommendations they wanted.

The catalogue of strategies identified in this article is not definitive; rather, it is intended as a first cut at answering an important theoretical and empirical question. Additional studies might fruitfully explore additional cases to test the degree to which the behaviors observed in

¹⁴² Author Interview with Mullen.

this paper might also manifest elsewhere. First, outside of a wartime context, might we expect to see similar dynamics? Given that considerations involving the use of force in an ongoing conflict fall so squarely within the military's area of professional expertise, it stands to reason that presidents might perceive increased pressure to accommodate the military's preferences in such cases. It follows that presidents may rely less on those strategies which sacrifice a greater measure of their policy preferences, such as *deference* or *horse-trading*, in peacetime contexts. Given that the public expresses a surprising degree of comfort with and deference to policy advocacy by senior military officials even on non-military issues, however, presidents may still reasonably worry about military opposition in such contexts.¹⁴³ Indeed, the history of high-profile civil-military friction over contentious policies in peacetime – notably including the debate over “don't ask, don't tell” – offers *prima facie* evidence that presidents may face incentives to employ one or more of the strategies identified in this article across any issue that is sufficiently salient to attract public attention.

Second, there may be variation in the applicability of these findings across time and space that could be fruitful to explore. After all, while contemporary trends of increasing politicization of the military surely exacerbate the challenges associated with managing the political costs of civilian control, the basic problem is not new. Indeed, in many of the dynamics explored in this article we may see echoes of Harry Truman's fraught relationship with Douglas MacArthur. While the president's dismissal of the commander of UN forces in Korea in 1951 is a superficially attractive example of a president exerting civilian control, the manner in which he previously sought to conciliate the general whom he perceived to be a clear political threat is less well understood.¹⁴⁴ In Vietnam, of course, there were plenty more examples of civil-military preference misalignment and inter-service rivalry which might usefully be re-examined with the political strategies identified here in mind.¹⁴⁵ The decades that followed also saw significant changes in the military's position in society and in the structure of its advisory role. Specifically, the increase in public confidence in the military and empowerment of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff through the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols reforms plausibly altered both the cost of civilian control and the mechanisms

¹⁴³ Krebs, Ralston and Rapport, “No Right to Be Wrong,” 7; Jost and Kertzer, “Armies and Influence.”

¹⁴⁴ See Andrew Payne, *War on the Ballot: How the Election Cycle Shapes Presidential Decision-Making in War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023), 63-69.

¹⁴⁵ H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson and Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997).

through which they may be imposed on the president.¹⁴⁶ These societal and institutional dynamics of course also contrast with civil-military relations of other countries. While U.S. presidents are surely not alone among elected leaders in confronting the basic challenge described here, we know for example that differences in a nation's political structure can shape its civil-military relations in ways that materially affect the way in which they fight wars.¹⁴⁷ Placing this case in a comparative perspective might therefore yield additional insights about what might be distinctive about the experience of the United States.

Finally, while this article makes no strong claim concerning the ultimate strategic wisdom of the decisions in question, scholars may wish to explore the normative implications of the evidence presented here. For example, the frequent resort to behaviors outside the norms prescribed by most normative civil-military theorists raises critical questions around the appropriate role of senior military officers operating at the highest level of national security decision-making – and how civilian leaders engage with them. As Mullen observes, navigating this environment can be a difficult task. “Really key is how little many of us understood the civ-mil reality until you’re in these jobs for a while,” he recalls. “There’s no training ground for these jobs. Precious little understanding of what it means to be apolitically involved in a ridiculously political world, which has only gotten that much more political in the subsequent years.”¹⁴⁸ A concerted effort to refrain from engaging in overt acts of politicization on the part of both civilian and military leaders will surely help to build trust and make it easier to resolve differences through constructive strategic dialogue. Fully eliminating the political cost of civilian control, however, may be impossible. Rather than pretending that the uniformed military can remain politically sterile in such an environment, the case presented here might be taken as further evidence of the need for a redefinition of what it means to be “political.”¹⁴⁹ The task at hand is not simply about depoliticizing a space which is and always will be political, then, but also enhancing the capacity of both civilian and military leaders’ to navigate it.

146 See, respectively, Peter D. Feaver, *Thanks for Your Service: The Causes and Consequences of Public Confidence in the US Military* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023) and Sharon K. Weiner, *Managing the Military: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and Civil-Military Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022).

147 Deborah Avant, *Political Institutions and Military Change* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1994).

148 Author Interview with Mullen.

149 Brooks, “Paradoxes of Professionalism.”

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