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Commentary and Reply

On “Civil-Military Relations and Today’s Policy Environment”

George J. Fust

This commentary responds to Thomas N. Garner’s article “Civil-Military Relations and Today’s Policy Environment” published in the Winter 2018–19 issue of Parameters (vol. 48, no. 4).

Thomas Garner, my peer and former United States Military Academy Department of Social Science alumnus, offers commentary suggesting it is the military’s responsibility to bridge the civil-military divide.¹ He also places the blame for this divide squarely on the military. This is an unfair assertion and a one-sided argument replete with faulty logic and fallacies. The author leverages select readings from the syllabus for an American politics course taught to all cadets at the United States Military Academy. Several key readings are missing from his approach. More importantly, he fails to address the contemporary literature that offers a holistic framework for assessing who is really at fault for the civil-military divide.

The material he failed to highlight also offers alternative perspectives on how to resolve this friction point. The civil-military divide is not an existential threat as Garner suggests. The beauty of the western civil-military relations system he describes is its stability. Scholars and pundits offer commentary on the fringes of civil-military relations theory and often portray unhealthy civil-military interactions to be direr than they really are. Garner’s article is one such example.

To begin, Garner asserts: “The problem is that civilian trust in the military institution is becoming meaningless because of the public’s lack of understanding of the military and the military’s acceptance of that trust as confirmation of its efforts. Therefore, the onus is on the military to be far more critical of itself than the public.”² No evidence for this assertion is given. It also does not take into account the current oversight from the media and Congress.³ One only needs to watch the latest congressional committee grilling of academy superintendents over sexual assault reform to understand.⁴

Another possibility not taken into consideration is the military could be doing the right thing. The military services have been transparent in recent years regarding senior leader misconduct. This effort has continued despite trends suggesting no change in behavioral trends.

1 Thomas N. Garner, “Civil-Military Relations and Today’s Policy Environment,” *Parameters* 48, no. 4 (Winter 2018–19): 5–9.

2 Garner, “Civil Military Relations,” 7.

3 Frank Jones, “A Strategic Congress Emerges: National Security and the 116th Congress,” War Room US Army War College, August 12, 2019.

4 “Sexual Assault at Military Service Academies,” C-SPAN, February 13, 2019.

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Should the services highlight failures simply to highlight them? The public has a tendency to weigh in when reform is required. Retired senior leaders also demonstrate their willingness to police other leaders or criticize them when required. Former chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Retired General Martin E. Dempsey, is well-known for calling out the negative behaviors of other general officers.⁵ In short, Garner's premise that the military does not have adequate self-criticism is unfounded.

The second main argument Garner makes is the military has not earned the trust bestowed on it but merely receives it as a result of a lack of "meaningful connection" between the military and society.⁶ Civil-military relations theory does not make a distinction about types of trust or how it is generated. A 1962 classic work by Samuel E. Finer, *The Man on Horseback: The Role of the Military in Politics*, explains the foundation of healthy civil-military relations require society to trust and respect the military.⁷ Is it possible to have unearned trust? If perception is what Garner meant, he is still off base. Eric Nordlinger theorizes in *Soldiers in Politics*, when public perception of the military is high, good civil-military relations can occur.⁸ Again, he draws no distinction on the efficacy of the perception because perception is reality.

The counterargument to Garner's "lack of meaningful connections" is an easy one. Connections between society and the military are constantly on display. Debates over flag burning or kneeling at football games are two contemporary examples that highlight ongoing debates involving society and the military. If anything, the military has become uncomfortable with the amount of connections being made to it.⁹ Politicians, notably the sitting president, routinely invoke the military and draw it into the political realm.¹⁰ There is no lack of conversation today surrounding the military and its role in society.

If one does not buy into this counterargument, another approach can be employed. Perhaps it is not the soldier who has lost touch, but society. Soldiers are reminded of their oath to serve. They are reminded of the cost when waving goodbye to family members on a tarmac. They know why they serve. It is society that needs the reminder. The "meaningful connection" is the social contract, otherwise known in our system as the Constitution. Montesquieu and the Federalist outline our representative democracy. The citizens elect someone to speak on their behalf and represent their interests. These representatives must maintain an understanding of the military. They provide the oversight required for healthy civil-military relations. As previously indicated, Congress is currently performing this function.

5 Martin Dempsey, "Keep Your Politics Private, My Fellow Generals and Admirals," *Defense One*, August 1, 2016.

6 Garner, "Civil Military Relations," 7.

7 Samuel Edward Finer, *The Man on Horseback: The Role of the Military in Politics* (New York: Praeger, 1962).

8 Eric A. Nordlinger, *Soldiers in Politics: Military Coups and Governments* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1977), 127–32.

9 Alex Horton, "Pentagon Tells White House: Keep Politics Away from the Military," *Washington Post*, June 2, 2019; and James Stavridis, "Ret. Admiral: President Trump's Actions Are Making Many Military Leaders Uncomfortable," *Time*, April 16, 2018.

10 Robert Burns, Lolita Baldor, and Darlene Superville, "Trump Touts July 4 Military 'Salute;' Critics See Politics," *Military Times*, July 2, 2019.

Garner's core argument is the "civil-military rift is the military's to close because of the concept of the military profession's responsibility to society enumerated by Huntington."¹¹ This misinterpretation of Huntington is only plausible because Garner does not offer any supporting evidence or consider any alternatives. The glaring mistake is the military has made the relationship with American society work. In 2019, it was the most trusted institution!¹² The history of US civil-military relations began with a near coup. George Washington resolved this mutiny with his famous Newburgh Address and established our military's culture of subservience to the civilian government.

Russell Weigley outlined the establishment of the military's unique culture from its earliest beginnings, through the Civil War era, to modern day. He suggested America sent its military into the frontier so it would not be a threat to society. This fostered a unique culture "of discipline, virtue, responsibility" within the military but also contributed to its resentment of society.¹³ The military saw itself as the keeper of virtue and honor, which is often referred to as the starting point for the cause of the divide—resentment. A contemporary analysis by Mara Karlin argues, "The gap in civilian and military experiences . . . since 9/11 has led to persuasive, persistent, and unrealistic myths that have eroded faith in civilian leadership of defense policy."¹⁴ Despite the evidence of a gap, the US military is not a threat to the society it protects. Nor is there any indication it will be anytime soon.

Garner criticizes the military for not "conducting outreach, discussing shared values, and engaging in public discussions."¹⁵ His recommendations—to have military families leave their garrisons and move into civilian communities and to have military personnel write critically of the profession—are already a common occurrence. He fails to highlight any of the military's current efforts to connect with society.

The military's public affairs branch and most major commands have public engagement as a priority effort. Most units have partnerships with their local community. They host air shows, fun runs, Fourth of July celebrations, and vehicle demonstrations. The military funds hundreds of ROTC programs simply to have a presence in higher education, even if they are cost-prohibitive. National Football League commercials and pre-game shows are filled with military linkages. The Army and the Air Force fund and facilitate World Class Athlete Programs (for athletes training for the Olympics), which allows these athletes to serve as ambassadors for the military. A legislative liaison office for each branch exists in the Pentagon and at every combatant command. What more can be done?

Garner's article along with this commentary serves as evidence that military officers engage in public debate. Garner criticizes servicemembers for not closing an apparent civil-military gap. He

11 Garner, "Civil Military Relations," 7.

12 Gallup, "Confidence in Institutions," poll, accessed August 13, 2019.

13 Russell F. Weigley, "The American Civil-Military Cultural Gap: A Historical Perspective, Colonial Times to the Present," in *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security*, ed. Peter D. Feaver and Richard Kohns (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 215.

14 Mara Karlin and Alice Friend, "Military Worship Hurts U.S. Democracy: Battlefield Experience Shouldn't Trump the Outsider Benefits of Civilian Leadership," *Foreign Policy*, September 21, 2018.

15 Garner, "Civil Military Relations," 8.

believes “the majority of the professional force cannot remain silent.”¹⁶ If they did speak, what would they say? What more can be said beyond the weak critique offered by Garner? Few constraints prevent members of the military from criticizing their branch. Perhaps they are too busy upholding their end of the social contract to make time for corrections on the margin. Perhaps most of them adhere to the professional ethic espoused by Huntington. Perhaps they abide by the discipline required to maintain good order and the trust of society.

The military should have some degree of separation from society. This is the functional imperative of which Huntington spoke.¹⁷ It is what makes the western model of civil-military relations stronger over time. Garner suggests the degree of separation is too great. He suggests military families are too isolated on their posts. This is a convenient point often used to explain the gap but lacks merit. Military installations are an integral component of the ecosystem they belong to.

Look at the arguments anytime base realignment and closure is mentioned.¹⁸ No elected representative wants to lose the economic benefits military bases provide. They employ civilians both on and off the installation, which suggests daily interactions between military members and civilians. Military spouses enroll their children in swim lessons off post, they shop at local stores, they fill their gas tanks, they join civic groups, they meet people at local parks, and they join church groups. All these activities help close the civil-military gap. Military bases are necessary for the functioning of the military. The idea they are islands unattached to society is not supported by reality.

The US military has earned the trust of its citizens. It is not a threat to the society it protects. Under a Hobbesian notion, the social contract has been fulfilled. The people have given up some liberties in exchange for security. Under a Lockean concept, the military has secured the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and property, so much so that the country is the most sought-after place to immigrate to. Ask any citizen of any country with a history of coups if their military has earned their trust. The US military has protected this nation at great personal cost.

So who is ultimately at fault if a civil-military gap exists? Garner says it best in his closing thoughts, “The gap may well be a failure in civic responsibility on the part of the citizen.”¹⁹ Declining social capital is a possible cause for the civil-military divide.²⁰ The average American doesn’t talk to her or his neighbor, what makes us think he or she cares what the military is doing? Even if the military were to implement Garner’s suggestions, the citizenry would be required to listen and digest the military’s transparency. Unless this transparency is splashed across social media, it is unlikely to be consumed but will invariably lower trust. The military cannot mobilize society to care.²¹ It

16 Garner, “Civil Military Relations,” 8.

17 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 16.

18 “Base Realignment and Closure,” RAND Corporation, accessed August 13, 2019.

19 Garner, “Civil-Military Relations,” 8.

20 Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).

21 Steven J. Rosenstone and John Hansen, *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 399–415.

can, however, continue to execute its duty and keep society safe enough to have these discussions.

The civil-military divide is not a growing existential threat to American democracy. A gap has existed since the nation's founding and is an inherent part of the US system. The strength and commitment of civilian control results "from the active and sustained commitment of both civilians and military professionals to an idea that had proven itself in good times and bad."²² The military has not forgotten this idea. The same cannot be said of civilians.

The Author Replies

Thomas N. Garner

I am happy my commentary on civil-military relations in *Parameters* is eliciting discourse. George Fust states my article is "an unfair assertion and a one-sided argument replete with faulty logic and fallacies." I am happy to take criticism on any logical fallacies for which I am guilty. But he merely makes the statement without elaborating or providing evidence for any specific fallacies I may have committed. After correctly identifying my core argument—that it is the military's responsibility to close the civil-military divide with society—Fust goes on to argue against positions I do not hold, the very definition of the straw-man fallacy. Since it is difficult for me to defend arguments I did not make, I will instead expand upon the points in my article for clarity and address some of the specific points Fust makes about my work.

I will begin where I ended my article, with the example from Richard Kohn.²³ I agree with Kohn there is a professional duty to teach and shape relationships in any profession, with no such expectation for those who are served to be students of any particular profession. In my argument, I focused on the military's relationship to the society writ large, not the military's relationship to its civilian political leadership.²⁴ Kohn's sentiment is reflected in specific literature on the subject in the idea professions hold "authority."²⁵ Ernest Greenwood lays out that the relationship between a professional and a client is predominately based on that professional's authority or extensive education in the "systematic theory of his discipline."²⁶

Because clients lack the expertise or training of the professional, they are hindered in their ability to understand that profession, appraise the quality of service received, or question a professional's judgment on his or her subject of expertise. The professional's authority is the

22 David Trask, "Democracy and Defense: Civilian Control of the Military in the United States," *Issues of Democracy* 2, no 3 (1997): 18.

23 Richard H. Kohn, "Building Trust: Civil-Military Behaviors for Effective National Security," in *American Civil-Military Relations: The Soldier and the State in a New Era*, ed. Suzanne C. Nielsen and Don. M. Snider (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 287.

24 Garner, "Civil-Military Relations," 6–8.

25 Earnest Greenwood, "Attributes of a Profession," *Social Work* 2, no. 3 (July 1957): 45.

26 Greenwood, "Attributes of a Profession," 47.