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Review Essay 84

Sharon K. Weiner. *Managing the Military: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and Civil-Military Relations*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022. ISBN 9780231207355 (paperback, $30).

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Sharon Weiner's review of the role of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) in US civil-military relations is concise and incisive. She focuses on the activity of the Chairman of the JCS, a post that was elevated to be much more than merely the first among equals in the reforms introduced by Senators Barry Goldwater and John Nichols in the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986.[1] Her book is a reflection on the pros and cons of what those reforms accomplished. She concludes that the Chairman of the JCS does indeed possess the increased clout that the reforms intended but has not achieved the independence from the services that many observers have claimed.[2] The Chairman may be at the top of the heap, Weiner argues, but this power derives to a great extent from the support that can be achieved from the Chiefs who are technically below the Chairman in rank and protocol. The continued power of the service chiefs means that the old bogeyman of American civil-military relations of interservice rivalry remains a challenge, even if it has been latent in recent years.

Weiner's argument is a helpful rebalance in the skew of analytical and pundit attention that characterizes the day-to-day media coverage.[3] It is correct in the domain to which Weiner focuses her analytical gaze: staffing and equipping the armed forces. But it risks overstating the case given the Chairman's outsized role in the development of strategy and the oversight (though not the command) of operations. In an age when the attention of everyone, including political leaders, is more and more distracted, the Chairman increasingly enjoys the advantage of being a single-voice source of military opinion making this position far more than a first among equals.

Weiner traces her argument through a review of the history of the JCS leading up to the Goldwater-Nichols reforms of the mid-1980s. This review is supplemented by three case studies of decisions made in the era of the supposedly all-powerful Chairman: the post-Cold War downsizing under General Colin Powell's chairmanship (93-118); the debates over transformation between Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and

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[1] Congress.gov., "H.R.3622 – 99th Congress (1985-1986): Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986," 1 October 1986, https://www.congress.gov/bill/99th-congress/house-bill/3622.

[2] James R. Locher III, "Taking Stock of Goldwater-Nichols," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 13 (Autumn 1996): 10-16; Clark A. Murdock, Michele A. Flournoy, Christopher A. Williams and Kurt M. Campbell, *Beyond Goldwater-Nichols: Defense Reform for a New Strategic Era,* Phase 1 Report (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2004); and Kurt M. Campbell, "All Rise for Chairman Powell," *National Interest* 23 (Spring 1991): 51-60.

[3] For example, Susan B. Glasser and Peter Baker, "Inside the War between Trump and His Generals," *The New Yorker*, 8 August 2022, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/08/15/inside-the-war-between-trump-and-his-generals.

then Chairmen General Richard Myers and General Peter Pace (119-136); and the sequestration controversy under the chairmanship of Admiral Michael Mullen and General Martin Dempsey (137-174). These three cases all concern spending, which makes them the most-likely cases for Weiner's preferred argument of a relatively tethered Chairman. It was understood at the time of the reform effort that the services would still enjoy the whip hand when it came to the budgets for building the forces. The reforms did try to strengthen the hand of the Chairman in this domain with a more-empowered Vice-Chairman and a stronger Joint Staff to help the Combatant Commands make their case to the services for specific needs they needed filled. But this was hardly the centerpiece of the reforms. The place where the Chairman was expected to have—and, I would argue still has—the greatest independence is in crisis management, military operations, and perhaps hot-button political issues, the kinds of issues where proximity to the president would matter most and thus where the Chairman's unique advantages vis-à-vis the other chiefs would come into play.

Weiner's book is a useful corrective to a bias in much of the recent civil-military relations literature.[4] Much of the contemporary debate in American civil-military relations focuses on questions of civilian control, the politicization of the military, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies, and questions of accountability for uneven war performance. These are indeed important topics that dominate the headlines and beltway debates, but, when viewed against the record of civil-military relations over the past 75 years, these contemporary topics have one common idiosyncratic feature: for the most part, there is very little inter-service rivalry in play. There is plenty of friction, but it is mostly across the civilian vs. military divide. Where there are intramural military debates, they tend to be geographically driven, with combatant commands on one side and the Washington, D.C.-based hierarchy on the other—or between combatant commands who are vying for attention and the D.C.-based hierarchy who divide the baby of risk and resources in Solomonic fashion. Weiner's book serves a useful reminder that this is not how the longer history of American civil-military relations has played out. On the contrary, the rivalry between the services was arguably the single most-important factor in civil-military relations for most of the Cold War and, indeed, for the entire twentieth century up until the end of the Cold War.

In the book's post-Goldwater-Nichols cases, Weiner shows that the services mattered more than the conventional accounts seem to acknowledge.[5] Her richest case involves tracing Chairman Powell's efforts to shape the post-Cold War drawdown. Powell was caught between the irresistible force of a civilian-led (especially Democratic Party-led) desire for a "peace dividend," which involves deep cuts in the defense budget that would free up discretionary funds for other non-security priorities, and the immovable object of service interests that were determined to protect as much of the existing force structure as possible. Democrats in Congress (who soon became senior officials in President Bill Clinton's administration) were calling for a "bottom-up review," which involves starting with a blank sheet of paper and designing the force structure to manage all future threats. The expectation was that such a force would be significantly smaller; after all, if the US needed a military of such-and-such a size to hold the mighty Soviet Union at bay, and the Soviet Union disappeared, it stood to reason that the US could make do with a much smaller (and cheaper) force. And as the budget shrunk then perhaps it would be time to revisit such hoary questions of whether all four services needed their own air forces or whether the US still needed two separate land forces.

[4] Mara E. Karlin, *The Inheritance: America's Military After Two Decades of War* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2022); Rosa Brooks, *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017); Peter D. Feaver, *Thanks for Your Service: The Causes and Consequences of Public Confidence in the US Military* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023). Neither my review of the literature in 1999 nor Risa Brooks' update in 2019 devoted significant space to the issues of budgets and service composition. See Peter D. Feaver, "Civil-Military Relations," *Annual Review of Political Science* 2:1 (1999): 211-242; and Risa Brooks, "Integrating the Civil-Miliary Relations Subfield," *Annual Review of Political Science* 22:1 (2019): 379-398.

[5] Compare, for example, with Clark A. Murdock and Michèle A. Flournoy, *Beyond Goldwater-Nichols: Defense Reform for a New Strategic Era,* Phase 1 Report (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2004).

The services also had an intuitive argument on their side. The Soviet Union was gone but threats to US interests did not disappear, especially with growing fears of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferation, the catastrophes of failed states, and the renewal of long-suppressed ethnic conflict. The painful lesson of history was that the United States downsized too fast and too far, leaving it unable to deter the next war and ill-prepared to wage it. This time, with the memory of World War II still fresh enough in the minds of older political leaders, the services argued that the United States could be more prudent and avoid taking reckless steps like disrupting the decades-long bargains on roles and missions.

Into this mess walked the newly empowered Chairman Powell who offered a Joint Staff compromise, the "Base Force." It was a bureaucratic masterpiece, especially since it stole the march on any civilian-led review, even if it was analytically fairly simple. It entailed a 25 percent reduction imposed on the entire budget, applied proportionally to each of the services. Basically, it was the Cold War bargain after a haircut—significant but not so short that it required fundamental rethinking of how the military operated. Weiner shows how Powell skillfully maneuvered through the later years of the President George H.W. Bush administration and early part of the Clinton administration to ensure that his Base Force concept prevailed over more radical proposals. Versions of this story have been told before and they emphasize how Powell wielded influence and power that, on paper at least, should have been the prerogative of his civilian bosses.[6] This is an important part of the conventional narrative of a super-empowered Chairman, and Weiner shows that there is a lot of evidence in support of it.

But she goes a step further and notes that Powell had to work just as hard to get the services to follow his lead and that his proposals never really forced the services to accept anything they did not want. Indeed, it was Powell who retreated on roles and missions, Weiner argues, not the services. This, it would seem, is proof of the services' enduring influence (104). Weiner's argument is convincing, though the case would be stronger if there was evidence that Powell's Base Force concept went against his own preferred solution—that is, evidence that the services imposed it on him (as she provides with roles and missions)—which would rebut an alternative hypothesis that Powell's own views mostly aligned with those of the services. When one considers the powerful civilian actors that Powell had to deal with—legendary beltway players like secretaries of defense Dick Cheney and Les Aspin, as well as Senator Sam Nunn—it is hard to escape the conclusion that the Base Force saga showed just how much an exceptionally capable actor, using the enhanced powers of the new Chairmanship, could accomplish. Yet Weiner correctly posits that even Powell was constrained by service interests, though it was a different saga than the ones from the 1950s when the Chairman was a supporting actor rather than the lead.[7]

Weiner's second major case, Rumsfeld's mostly unsuccessful efforts at transformation, is paradoxically shorter in scope even though it supports her thesis better. In this case, a determined, cagey, and otherwise quite powerful civilian actor, Donald Rumsfeld, found himself unable to make the progress he wanted on the dramatic transformation of the military to a leaner, meaner, more agile force because of foot-dragging by the services. In this, the services were abetted by the two Chairmen, Generals Hugh Shelton and Richard Myers, albeit in markedly different ways. Shelton, who was a lame duck when Rumsfeld arrived, fought a rear-guard action against Rumsfeld's reforms and enjoyed the support of the services in doing so; Myers got much closer to Rumsfeld, too close, from the services' perspective, and ended up neither influencing Rumsfeld nor enjoying much service support. Yet, as Weiner documents, Rumsfeld's transformation agenda was as much a casualty of the Iraq war, and particularly Rumsfeld's failure to adequately plan for "the war he got rather than

[6] Don M. Snider, "Strategy, Forces and Budgets: Dominant Influences in Executive Decision Making, Post-Cold War, 1989-91," *Professional Readings in Military Strategy* 8, Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College (1993): 1-61, https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA266688.pdf.

[7] See, for example, President Eisenhower's fight with General Ridgway over the appropriate role for the Army in the nuclear age. A. J. Bacevich, "The Paradox of Professionalism: Eisenhower, Ridgway, and the Challenge to Civilian Control, 1953-1955," *The Journal of Military History* 61:2 (1997): 303, https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/paradox-professionalism-eisenhower-ridgway/docview/1296645910/se-2.

the war he wanted to get," which plunged the entire Defense Department, and, indeed, the entire administration of President George W. Bush, into damage control mode that sucked the oxygen away from any dramatic reforms.[8] It raises an obvious counterfactual that Weiner does not fully address: if the war in Iraq had gone as Rumsfeld expected, would service interests have been strong enough to prevent him from accomplishing his transformation agenda and, in that world, would the Chairman have mattered more than the services?

Weiner's third case is the most interesting one since she was a participant-observer: the deep cuts in defense imposed by the administration of President Barack Obama that culminated in the sequestration debacle where even deeper and more arbitrary cuts were imposed across the board. During part of this time, Weiner served in the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and thus had the rare opportunity to be a civil-military theorist who could witness whether her arguments worked outside the seminar room and in the field. A good portion of the book draws on her dissertation, which was completed long before this assignment; this thus served as a test of her theory.[9] The Obama Administration was divided, and the Chairman played something of a tipping role. On the one hand, there was a White House that wanted deep cuts and could even stomach the sequester— an across-the-board cut that applied to every account in the federal discretionary budget without regard to whether it was judged to be too high or too low—as the lesser evil than accepting cuts to domestic programs. Obama's first secretary of defense, Robert Gates, opposed those cuts, but when he retired, the new, more cut-compliant secretaries, first Leon Panetta and then Chuck Hagel, took his place. Chairman Mullen broke with Gates and signaled his support for cuts (though not for the sequester, which came after his tenure). Weiner claims that Mullen's successor, General Dempsey, mostly acceded to the defense cuts until the sequester. Weiner narrates this story in greater detail than I have seen in accounts by other scholars and doubtless is able to do so because of her inside knowledge.[10] By itself, this chapter is a useful case study that will show up on syllabi in advanced national security courses, especially within the Professional Military Education (PME) system. The footnotes, however, reveal the absence of primary sources, and this seems like a missed opportunity to explore, for example, how Dempsey might have described his motivations.

To her credit, Weiner does not try to squeeze the evidence into her argument, and notes in several places where the service dogs did not bark as she expected them to, most notably in the failure of the services to cut side-deals with Congress to get around the pre-sequester cuts. She credits General Dempsey's willingness to work with the Obama administration as a partial explanation, even though that would seem to discredit her argument of a constrained Chairman; in the book's conclusion, she withdraws that credit and argues that Dempsey was mostly irrelevant (181). (Again, it would be interesting to hear Dempsey's view on this.) She also flags a factor that is prescient given contemporary debates, namely the rise of the anti-defense (or at least, pro-cuts-to-defense) wing of the Republican Party, in the form of the Tea Party. In other words, there was no deal to be made with Congress because Congress was too divided itself (160).

One wonders if Weiner would have reached a different judgment about how the services place fetters on the post-Goldwater-Nichols Chairmen if the book's three cases were the controversial choices in the first Gulf War, the second war in Iraq, and the Syrian civil war and rise of ISIS. Those three cases overlap with the cases she focuses on, and in each one General Powell, Generals Myers and Pace, and Admiral Mullen and General Dempsey all operated with considerable autonomy with respect to the service chiefs. Weiner includes

[8] Rumsfeld (in)famously stated in response to a question about the lack or armor on military Humvees, "You go to war with the army you have, not the army you might want or wish to have at a later time." See Eric Schmitt, "Troops' Queries Leave Rumsfeld on the Defensive," *New York Times,* 9 December 2004, https://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/09/world/middleeast/troops-queries-leave-rumsfeld-on-the-defensive.html.

[9] Sharon Weiner, *Defending Congress: The Politics of Defense Organization*, Ph.D. Dissertation, MIT, 1998.

[10] See, for instance, Molly E. Reynolds and Philip A. Wallach, "The Fiscal Fights of the Obama Administration," *Brookings*, 8 December 2016, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-fiscal-fights-of-the-obama-administration/.

brief references to this in each of her chapters but future work should do a more detailed comparison. Yet she is surely right to argue that the conventional accounts, or at least in the popular media,[11] have gone too far in pushing service actors into the background of the strategic narrative of the evolution of national security.

This book makes the case for focusing more attention on the services. It does so without torching straw-persons or advancing a problematically elaborate grand theory of civil-military relations. This book is a worthy contribution to the literature of policy-oriented, theoretically informed, interpretive history that has relevance to contemporary debates. Today's policymakers must consider the question of whether it is time for a new burst of defense reform, given the end of the global war on terror, the at-best ambivalent outcomes of the major combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the rise of great-power competition. As they do, they should read and internalize the insights Weiner offers in this assessment of earlier efforts. And if they do not, Weiner's book is a useful cautionary that service rivalry could frustrate their efforts.

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[11] Kristina Wong, "Republicans Look Forward to Grilling General Mark Milley on Undermining Trump, Wokeness, Afghanistan," Breitbart.com, 15 September 2022, https://www.breitbart.com/politics/2022/09/15/republicans-look-forward-grilling-general-milley-undermining-trump-wokeness-afghanistan/.