

# Washington's Principle:

Civil-Military Relations 1776-2008

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“The President shall be Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States.” So begins Section 2 of Article II of the United States Constitution. The intent of the Founding Fathers cannot be made clearer: civilian control of the military, through the orders of the executive branch and funded through the legislative branch, is the law of the United States. The evolution of civil-military relations in the United States began before the drafting of the Constitution. The experience of the colonies with the British regular army institutionalized a fear of standing armies, which colored civil-military relations for the next 200 years. Frequent confrontations between civilian and military leaders over the political and military objectives of war have been commonplace throughout US history. While most of these confrontations are resolved through discussion, oftentimes the President will find it necessary to exercise his power to remove his commanders and replace them with others that agree with his policies. One such confrontation arose in 1862 in the early stages of the American Civil War. Major General George B. McClellan, the commander of the Army of the Potomac, was at loggerheads with President Abraham Lincoln for nearly a year leading up to his dismissal in November 1862. The main source of their disagreement was their difference of opinion over the way the war would be fought. Eighty-nine years later in 1951, another confrontation arose, this time with two men 10,000 miles apart. General Douglas MacArthur’s habitual disregard of his superiors and insubordination towards the Commander-in-Chief led President Harry S Truman to dismiss MacArthur as the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers. Both of these situations did not arise in a vacuum: rather, each situation was the result of hundreds of years of history and precedent. Both conflicts fundamentally represent the constant struggle of civilian authorities to maintain control of the military. The human variable in both crises cannot be discounted. In both 1862 and 1951, two men with enormous ego and titanic power clashed on a personal,

political, and strategic level. Both conflicts and their eventual resolutions changed the course of American and world history. Even today, the civil-military relationship is affected by the actions of these two Presidents decades ago. The ideal of a civilian controlled military can only be maintained through the vigorous action of civilian authorities to exercise their right to dismiss those generals and admirals that publicly oppose their policies.

The paradox of the creation of a Continental Army by the Continental Congress was not lost on Congress. Americans did not support standing armies for two crucial reasons. First, they saw them as a tool of monarchy to repress their liberties. Samuel Adams said that a “Standing Army, however necessary it may be at some times, is always dangerous to the Liberties of the people.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, Adams believed that the army must be “watched with a jealous Eye.”<sup>2</sup> The Continental Congress demanded that Washington follow all orders given and to give status reports frequently to Congress. In addition, the Congress was responsible for determining the war’s objective, the army’s size, and even the strategy Washington was to employ.

Second, regular armies required regular taxes. In the late 1770s, the only thing the colonists hated more than taxes was the crown itself. After rebelling against King George for what the colonists believed was an unfair imposition of taxes, they were not willing to give the newly formed Congress the power to tax. The Congress relied mostly on printing paper money in the early stages of the war and loans from France in the later stages of the war (post-1779).

The cornerstone of civil-military relations was laid by the Master Mason himself, George Washington. As Commander in Chief of the Continental Army, he established the tradition of deferring to civilian authority. His every request was placed through the Continental Congress. In 1783, with the war complete, the army was quartered in Newburgh, New York. General Alexander McDougall was dispatched from Newburgh to bring a demand to the Continental

Congress: pay army officers a postwar pension or they would defy congressional control.

Additionally, two documents were circulated in the Newburgh encampment: one calling for a meeting to address grievances and another condemning Congressional authority. While Washington understood the sentiment behind the documents, they still alarmed him. Washington believed that Congress had treated the army with disdain and had not properly compensated the men for what they had endured. However, Washington rigorously held to the principle of civilian control of the military. He called his own meeting in Newburgh, gave an impassioned speech, and quelled the potential insurrection. The officers of Newburgh issued a statement deploring the documents that had circulated earlier. Washington established and constantly worked to maintain the principle of a civilian controlled military.

Four score years later, one of the greatest challenges to presidential and civilian control came in the midst of a terrible American Civil War. As the defeated Union troops from the Battle of Bull Run streamed back to Washington, so too did McClellan. Personally called by Lincoln to defend Washington against General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, McClellan arrived in Washington July 26, 1861. Lincoln immediately appointed him commander of the Military Division of the Potomac. McClellan immediately set about to consolidate several Virginian military units and the Military Division into the Army of the Potomac. He spent the summer and fall of 1861 creating impregnable defenses for Washington including 48 forts, 480 guns, and 7200 artillerists manning the guns.

While McClellan turned Washington into a fortress, he frequently argued with Lieutenant General Winfield Scott over the grand strategy of the Union forces. McClellan preferred the Napoleonic style, where a single, grand battle would crush the rebellion in its infancy. Scott favored a much more gradual, patient approach. His strategic plan was known as the "Anaconda

Plan” because it encircled and slowly cut off resources from the Confederacy. Instead of a Napoleonic victory in which Lee’s army would be crushed, Scott wanted to take the Mississippi, impose a naval blockade, and allow the South to wither. Cut off from foreign aid and trade and without a strong industrial base or vast supply of manpower, the South would soon capitulate.

The acrimonious debate between Scott and McClellan quickly became personal. McClellan wrote to his wife on August 10, 1861 that “Genl Scott...is either a traitor, or an incompetent.”<sup>3</sup> Scott became so frustrated with McClellan’s unreasonableness that he offered his resignation. Lincoln initially was reluctant to accept it. On October 18, at the advice of his Cabinet, Lincoln allowed Scott to resign for “reasons of health.”<sup>4</sup> Effective November 1, Scott resigned as general-in-chief of the Union armies. Lincoln asked McClellan if he was able to shoulder the tremendous dual burden of general-in-chief and commander of the Army of the Potomac. McClellan responded that he was ready for the challenge.

With Lee sitting on the doorstep of Washington, Lincoln and many other Northerners questioned why McClellan had yet to expel him now that he had control of the entire Union forces. On January 12, 1862, a council of war was held by Lincoln at the White House. McClellan was called to present his war plans. McClellan proposed moving on Urbanna, Virginia by using the Rappahannock River to outflank the Confederates near Washington. He would then march unopposed to Richmond and capture the capital of the Confederacy.

Lincoln did not trust McClellan moving on his own accord. On January 27, 1862, Lincoln issued an order that all Union forces must begin offensive operations by Washington’s birthday, February 22, 1862. With McClellan still not responding, Lincoln ordered the Army of the Potomac to move against the Confederate forces at Manassas Junction and Centreville. McClellan shot back a 22 page response to Lincoln, objecting to every facet of the plan and

advocating his plan to move against Urbanna. However, before McClellan implemented his campaign against Urbanna, the Confederates moved their position from just outside of Washington to a position south of the Rappahannock, destroying McClellan's plan. McClellan reworked it so that the troops would land at Fort Monroe, Virginia and march north to Richmond. This landing and subsequent battles became known as the Peninsula Campaign, widely regarded as a failure.

Lincoln, distrusting McClellan's plan, called several of McClellan's subordinates to the White House on March 8 to ascertain their opinion of the Urbanna campaign. McClellan was not invited nor informed of this meeting. On March 11, 1862, Lincoln removed McClellan as general-in-chief of the Union armies. Ostensibly, McClellan's removal allowed him to concentrate more time on the operations of the Army of the Potomac. The truth is this was a public display of Lincoln's loss of trust in McClellan's ability to lead and win the war against the south. Lincoln recognized McClellan's amazing ability to build, equip, and train armies; he was less than impressed with McClellan's war-making capacity.

The relationship between McClellan and Lincoln continued to deteriorate throughout the summer and fall of 1862. Both before and throughout the war, McClellan had never been an abolitionist. He had supported Lincoln's opponent in the 1860 election, Stephen Douglas. He often wrote disparagingly to his wife about Lincoln, saying "the presdt. is nothing more than a well meaning baboon."<sup>5</sup> Besides these personal attacks, McClellan felt that he had "not one single friend at the seat of government."<sup>6</sup>

The proverbial straw that broke the camel's back came after the Battle of Antietam. McClellan commanded a force twice the size of Lee's and on Northern soil. On September 13, 1862, a copy of Lee's dispersion of troops was accidently recovered by Union troops. Upon its

delivery to army headquarters, McClellan exclaimed: "Here is a paper with which if I cannot whip Bobbie Lee, I will be willing to go home!"<sup>7</sup> In order to capitalize on this intelligence, McClellan should have attacked *en masse* immediately. Instead, he dawdled, allowing Lee to reposition his troops and rendering his intelligence coup impotent. McClellan smashed through Lee's defensive line in the Battle of South Mountain on September 14 but again delayed his attack on Lee's main column. It was not until September 17 that McClellan finally launched his attack east of Sharpsburg, Virginia. Lee was ready for him and the result was the bloodiest day in American history.

Lincoln could not tolerate McClellan's incompetence any longer. Lincoln famously wrote: "If General McClellan does not want to use the army, I would like to borrow it."<sup>8</sup> Lincoln acted on these words by removing McClellan from commander of the Army of the Potomac on November 5, 1862. The order was received by McClellan on November 7, 1862 and McClellan handed the command over to Major General Ambrose Burnside. The year of animosity between a President and his general had come to a close.

There were three major reasons for McClellan's hesitancy in prosecuting the war vigorously. The first reason why McClellan was always so hesitant was mainly due to the unreliable intelligence reports he relied on. McClellan consistently believed that the Confederate forces he faced were two to three times as large as they actually were. In the Battle of Antietam, McClellan believed that he was facing over 100,000 Confederate troops, paralyzing his actions. In fact, McClellan had more men in his reserves than Lee did in total. McClellan's hesitation would have been excusable, if only Lee's army had sized up to McClellan's intelligence estimates.

The second factor contributing to McClellan's indecisiveness was his insecurity towards his command. McClellan fervently believed that he was fighting two enemies: Lee and the politicians back in Washington. In a letter to his wife on May 3, 1862, McClellan wrote: "Any day may bring me an order relieving me from my command. If they simply let me alone I feel sure of success, but will they do it?" Clearly, his insecurity was not unfounded, especially because of the bitter feud that was brewing between Lincoln and him.

The third quirk of McClellan that crippled his ability to successfully execute a campaign against Lee was his love for men. While McClellan has been rated as one of the poorest combat generals by historians, he was tremendously respected for his training and logistical abilities. Morale, in the beginning of the war, was never higher than in troops that served under "Little Mac," as his troops affectionately nicknamed him. The will to command good men to die unsettled McClellan and rendered him incapable of accomplishing anything but mediocre draws and agonizing defeats.

Lincoln publicly displayed his lack of confidence in McClellan twice: once when he removed him as general-in-chief of Union forces and second when he removed him as General of the Army of the Potomac. General Douglas MacArthur did not enjoy the luxury of a warning, although he knew his actions would provoke the President to take action.

The war record of General MacArthur cannot be justly summarized in this piece. After years of meritorious service, MacArthur was presented with a Gold Medal from Congress that read "Protector of Australia; Liberator of the Philippines; Conqueror of Japan; Defender of Korea." No other man can claim such titles. Without MacArthur's brilliance in three of these international incidents, the world would be a far different place. First, his record in World War II began with bitter defeat in the Philippines and ended with him accepting the unconditional

surrender of Japan. Forced to run from Bataan and then making a daring midnight boat run from the fortress island Corregidor, MacArthur swore that “I came through, and I shall return.” As the war progressed, MacArthur’s brilliant and daring moves became the antithesis of McClellan’s tottering gait. As he raised the flag above the American embassy in Tokyo, MacArthur commented that his “purpose was to bring to Japan an era of enlightenment and progress.”<sup>9</sup> And so he did. The second trial MacArthur triumphed was the recovery and occupation of postwar Japan. The occupation was remarkably successful. The Japanese institutions, constitution, government, and military were reconstituted in MacArthur’s image and have served Japan admirably for the past six decades. Japan’s revitalization from a nation utterly destroyed by war to the second largest economy in the world is an astounding testimony to the foundation MacArthur laid for Japan.

MacArthur’s third and greatest achievement was his planning, preparation, and execution of the landing at Inchon, code named Operation CHROMITE. Based on his experience with the Marine Corps in World War II, he knew that they excelled at amphibious landings: just the men he needed to storm the beaches of Inchon. When the operation commenced on September 15, 1950, the North Koreans held Seoul and had pushed the United Nations (UN) forces back to the Pusan perimeter, a mere sliver of South Korea. Pusan represents less than 10% of the land mass of the Korean peninsula. Many observers of the war saw defeat rapidly approaching for the UN forces. After the incredible success of Inchon, Seoul was recaptured and the UN forces broke out of Pusan. The UN pushed rapidly north, recapturing all of South Korea and pushing far into North Korea. As the UN approached the Yalu River, dividing the Korean peninsula from China, Chairman Mao Zedong ordered the Chinese People’s Volunteer Army (PVA) to begin assembling on the Chinese side of the Yalu River. The Chinese saw the rapidly advancing UN

forces as a threat to their national security and sovereignty, and acted to defend against the aggressors led by the United States.

On October 15, 1950, Truman held a conference on Wake Island with MacArthur to discuss the course of the war. MacArthur was of the opinion that the “Chinese are not coming.”<sup>10</sup> Truman had earlier heard the same story from the Central Intelligence Agency, and so saw no need for concern. He warned MacArthur to be extremely careful when operating near the Chinese border, and not to give the impression of invasion. MacArthur acknowledged that he understood Truman’s request, but also made it clear that his opinion was that once a war began, he intended to finish it with total victory.

On October 25, 1950, PVA forces made contact with UN forces. At first, due to vague intelligence reports, MacArthur did not believe he was facing a large force. The Chinese worked hard to maintain this deception, travelling at night and using copious amounts of camouflage. In late November, the Chinese began massive operations, driving the Eighth Army into the longest retreat by an American military unit in history. Seoul fell once again to the Communists. The retreating UN forces finally stabilized in central South Korea and began the long drive back to the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel. During this time, MacArthur recognized the new nature of the war. No longer just a war between UN and North Korean forces, this was a war between the UN and the Chinese, aided by North Korea and the Soviets. MacArthur frequently requested permission to launch airstrikes in Manchuria. He even made several hints to reporters that the United States was not ruling out the use of atomic weapons to stave off the Chinese forces.

MacArthur’s enormous popular appeal may have delayed Truman’s dismissal of him. Truman repeatedly informed MacArthur that he was not to go to the press corps, and that the use of atomic weapons was not authorized. MacArthur believed that Truman did not recognize the

new state of the war. MacArthur sent a letter to the House of Representatives Minority Leader, a Republican from Massachusetts named Joe Martin. In the letter, he argued that Truman's policy of limited warfare was doomed to fail and did not represent the best interest of the United States. MacArthur believed that Truman's willful denial of the Chinese involvement was nearly paramount to treason. Additionally, MacArthur sent an ultimatum to the Chinese, negating a cease-fire deal Truman was working on. When Congressman Martin read the letter MacArthur had sent to him on the floor of the House on April 5, 1951, this was the final blow to the Truman-MacArthur relationship. Truman issued the fateful order on April 11: "You will turn over your commands, effective at once, to Lt. Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway." After thirteen years abroad, MacArthur returned home, humiliated by the president, but welcomed by the largest tickertape parade in New York City.

It can be difficult to ascertain the effects on the war had McClellan or MacArthur not been replaced. McClellan's inaction against Lee may have dragged the war out enough that the Union would grow tired of it. In order for the South to win, it only had to make it cost too much Union blood and treasure to quell the secession. Lee was remarkably good at spilling enormous amounts of Union blood while sustaining parity casualties. However, the evidence clearly shows that the South would still have lost the war. With an ever-tightening blockade cutting the South off from its essential European markets and without any substantial industrial or capital base, the South started off the war on unequal footing with the North. General Ulysses S. Grant described the South's situation best: "You people of the South don't know what you are doing... You are rushing into war with one of the most powerful, ingeniously mechanical, and determined people on Earth -- right at your doors. You are bound to fail."

Had MacArthur had his way, the results may have been disastrous. A serious, escalating war between the United States and China would have been devastating for both parties. The use of atomic weapons may have brought the Soviet Union into the war. Because of the concentration of US forces in Asia, Europe was undermanned at the time. If the Soviet Union became involved, it may have pushed on two fronts, both in the Pacific and in Europe. Truman recognized this and used it as part of his reasoning for not wanting to escalate the war. Additionally, if MacArthur had not been replaced, General James Van Fleet would have never become commander of the UN forces in Korea. Van Fleet was instrumental in building the military of South Korea into a respectable fighting force. He implemented a professional officer training program, a military academy, and arranged for Koreans to study military science in the United States. He also established the Korea Society, the first non-profit society dedicated to building relations between the United States and Korea. Throughout the Cold War, the United States only had a token force deployed in Korea to augment Korean forces. If Van Fleet had not developed the forces of Korea like he did, our commitment to Korea may have been much more costly.

One of the most essential comparisons of McClellan and MacArthur is their post-war political careers. Both generals were considered as nominees to run in the opposition party to the incumbent president. MacArthur gave the keynote speech at the Republican National Convention in 1952. McClellan actually ran against Lincoln in the 1864 election, but the tide of the war had changed dramatically with Grant's incessant hounding of Lee's army and Sherman's capture of Atlanta in September 1864. Both men were incredible egotists, believing that they alone saw the war for what it was and understood the ramifications of their actions.

The United States was an extremely different nation in the Civil War and the Korean War. In 1864, the United States GDP was \$72 billion,<sup>11</sup> about 8% of world GDP. In 1950, US GDP was \$1777 billion or 26% of world GDP. The United States had no sizable standing army to speak of before the Civil War and was not engaged in wars of conquest. The forces McClellan commanded were not international by any means. MacArthur, on the other hand, commanded a multinational force under the auspices of the United Nations. The United States managed a global empire with protectorates in the Philippines, Guam, Germany, Japan, and Puerto Rico. It had just defeated two of the most powerful empires and had the largest economy in the world. Clearly there were differences between the developing nation Lincoln governed and the global empire Truman was entrusted with. However, the principle of civilian control applies to both. The standing armies the Founding Fathers had feared never had access to such fearsome weaponry as atomic bombs or tanks. A standing army is evermore ready to crush liberty when its weapons far outclass the weapons of the citizenry. The response of Truman to MacArthur's insubordination upheld the principle Washington worked so hard to enshrine in the military.

The struggle between civilian authorities and military leaders has never ceased. In modern times, the "imperial presidency" has quashed many dissenters within the highest ranks of the military. In the ramp up to the current Iraq War, several generals made it clear that they did not agree with the Bush administration's troop levels. The most famous incident was General Eric Shinseki, the Army Chief of Staff before the conflict with Iraq began. In a statement before Congress, Shinseki stated that "something on the order of several hundred thousand soldiers" would be required to occupy postwar Iraq<sup>12</sup>. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld contradicted the general's statement the next day. When the United States invaded, it did so with

192,000 troops which rapidly shrunk to 108,900. General Shinseki's advice was ignored and he retired, as scheduled, four months after his testimony before Congress. No senior civilian official attended his retirement ceremony.

On March 5, 2008, Thomas Barnett, a journalist for *Esquire* magazine, published an interview he performed with Admiral William "Fox" Fallon. Fallon was the head of US Central Command and responsible for US military strategy in the most violent, troubled, and unstable regions of the world. Described by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates as "one of the best strategic thinkers in uniform today,"<sup>13</sup> Fallon was a controversial figure in the Bush administration. While Fallon's boss, President George W. Bush, beats the drum of war in regards to Iran, Fallon has often gone to news services with a different, more reasoned message. Fallon sees a war against Iran as strategically unsound and is not afraid to tell the President or a reporter his opinion. Foreign newspapers' headlines will scream "US RULES OUT STRIKE AGAINST IRAN," with a picture of Fallon meeting with a foreign leader. Fallon acts in a clear MacArthurian style, using the press corps as a tool against the President. In contrast to the MacArthur/Truman confrontation, Fallon supports a more reasoned and controlled course of action, while Bush promotes a more militaristic response to Iran.

In true MacArthurian style, Fallon was forced from his command on March 11, 2008. Fallon claimed that the article made it appear that he had differing objectives from the President, when in fact he never had. Regardless of the reason, Bush has reasserted civilian control over military leaders. The modern interpretation of civil-military relations has made it clear that public dissent of the admirals and generals is not tolerated by the current administration.

I believe that public criticism of a president or his war policies by his generals does not serve the generals interest, the presidents, or the national interest. It is important to present a

unified front on foreign policy. In some cases, however, the President must allow dissenting voices in the military. When Fallon presents a more nuanced face to the foreign leaders in the US Central Command region, he works towards stabilizing the region he's been placed in charge of. Similarly, MacArthur was given nearly free reign to manage his affairs in Japan as Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers. This was necessary as the president often cannot ascertain the situation as well as the commander on the scene. Ulysses S. Grant summarizes this position well: "So long as I hold my present position, I do not believe I have the right to criticize the policy or orders of those above me, or give utterance to views of my own, except to authorities in Washington."<sup>14</sup>

In order to maintain Washington's principle of civilian controlled military, it is essential that military leaders, no matter their length of service or their amount of expertise, submit to the civilian authority constitutionally placed over them. McClellan's disregard of Lincoln's orders was dealt with by Lincoln in the best way possible. While MacArthur had served the nation admirably in over five wars and was a strategic genius, his flippant attitude towards the civilian leadership meant dismissal was the only recourse Truman had. Civilian authorities must maintain control over their generals and admirals through dynamic leadership, including dismissal if necessary.

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<sup>1</sup> Millet, Allan R. and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America* (New York: Macmillan, 1994), 61.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Beatie, Russel H, *Army of the Potomac: Birth of Command, November 1860 – September 1861* (Da Capo Press, 2002), 472.

<sup>4</sup> McPherson, James, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*, (New York: Oxford University Press US, 2003), 360.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 364.

<sup>6</sup> Millet, *For the Common Defense*, 182.

<sup>7</sup> Sears, Stephen W, *Landscape Turned Red: The Battle of Antietam*, (Houghton Mifflin Books, 2003), 115.

<sup>8</sup> Rhodes, James Ford, *History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1895), 580.

<sup>9</sup> Bradley, James, *Flyboys: A True Story of Courage*, (Boston, MA: Back Bay, 2003), 304.

<sup>10</sup> Halberstam, David, *The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War*, (Hyperion, 2007), 388.

<sup>11</sup> All figures in 2000 dollars.

<sup>12</sup> Schmitt, Eric. "Pentagon Contradicts General on Iraq Occupation Force's Size", *New York Times*, February 28, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Barnett, Thomas P.M. "The Man Between War and Peace." *Esquire* <http://www.esquire.com/features/fox-fallon>. (accessed March 12, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Williams, T. Harry, *The Selected Essays of T. Harry Williams*, (Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 1983), 180.