Don M Snider, a retired officer, is professor of political science at the United States Military Academy at West Point.

America's Postmodern Military

Don M. Snider

The first decade of the new millennium promises to be a turbulent period for U.S. military institutions and for the militaries of the Western democracies generally. During recent months there have been many startling reports:

•Several researchers, seeking reasons for the continuing shortage of volunteer recruits for the U.S. armed forces, have found that while Americans still have great respect for their military institutions, they are increasingly unwilling to support them personally. A few even predict the imminent demise of the all-volunteer force, which has been in place since 1973.[1]

•Academics studying the civil-military "gap" report that the American officer corps is abandoning its traditional political neutrality, and that its members are increasingly identifying themselves as Republicans, a shift very much at odds with the civilian elites in America, a majority of whom still identify themselves as independents or as Democrats.[2]

•On the campaign trail, Al Gore and Bill Bradley, engaged in a public contest for the gay vote, have both promised to bring U.S. military leaders to heel on the issue of gays serving openly in the military. By implication, the candidates are questioning the obedience of the military, or, at the very least, suggesting that the military has been permitted too much autonomy under the Clinton administration

•"Gap researchers" also report that a resounding 75–80 percent of officers strongly oppose gays serving openly in the American military, and over a quarter say they will resign if gays are allowed to do so, thereby disrupting the cohesion they believe to be critical to the success of the military's mission.

•A recent empirical study, *American Military Culture in the 21st Century*, documents the low morale, and the chasms of mistrust between the bottom and the top, of the U.S. military services.[3] It presents a picture of a "stressed and over-committed" institution suffering from declining professionalism.

•Contrary to history and tradition, the British government, bowing to the rulings of the European Court of Justice, announced in early January that gays would no longer be banned from serving in the British armed forces. In a similar manner and for similar reasons, the German government recently announced that females will now be permitted to serve in the Bundeswehr.

What is happening, and why is there such significant change and adaptation now? What factors are influencing military institutions and their organizational structures, and how are they doing so? How is the interested American, accustomed for decades to hearing about the military primarily, if not solely, in terms of budget battles between the Pentagon and Capitol Hill, to understand the welter of information coming from Washington and other capitals about changing military institutions?

Competing Imperatives

It has long been accepted that military institutions under democratic regimes are shaped by two competing imperatives, one from the

society they serve and the other growing out of the socially useful function—protecting the nation-state and defending its people and their interests—they perform.[4]

Military institutions reflect—as they must—the societies from which they are drawn and are sworn to serve and protect. Given that armies are primarily human institutions, the existence of this social imperative should not be surprising. The method used to provide soldiers—conscription, voluntary service, or some combination of the two—does over time influence the degree to which a military is representative of the society it serves. "They" are "we," or at least a part of us. In America, the ideal and tradition of the citizen-soldier remains strong in our affections, though much less so within the military today than in the past.

Democratic societies do not want, nor are they comfortable with, "their" militaries being too different or too separate from them. The "supremacy of civilian values" has long been bedrock to the Western, and American, approach to civil-military relations.[5] The citizenry is sovereign, thus its values and way of life are what the military is defending. But soldiers will not be inclined to defend those values, particularly at the risk of death, unless they hold them dear, as being worthy of their individual and corporate self-sacrifice.

At the same time, militaries—responding to the functional imperative—are influenced and shaped by the demands of winning wars, a societal endeavor so illogical and irrational as to have its own "grammar," if not its own logic. Thus, military culture, and its central ethic, focuses on what is required to accomplish its mission. As Gen. Douglas MacArthur once said in an address to the cadets at West Point: "Yours is the profession of arms, the will to win, the sure knowledge that in war there is no substitute for victory, that if you lose the nation will be destroyed, that the very obsession of your public service must be Duty, Honor, and Country."[6] Self-abnegation and self-sacrifice are inherent in the soldier's concept of duty. The moral obligation exists not only to do one's duty when called upon by society, but also to be prepared at all times to be so called.

The study of the military art and of history has for decades convinced military professionals of the necessity of well-trained and disciplined soldiers organized into the cohesive and responsive units, the well-integrated teams and weapons crews with which wars are now fought and won. Thus, the needs of the mission and the unit are always more important than those of the individual. The military ethic is cooperative and cohesive in spirit, meritocratic, and fundamentally anti-individualist and anti-careerist. It holds dear the concept of devotion to duty, the ideals of honor, integrity, trustworthiness, and allegiance to country.

There is a stark, but potentially healthy, tension between the two imperatives and the character and ethos of their respective cultures, civilian and military. This is the tension between the freedoms and individualism so esteemed in America, whereby individual citizens can flourish, and the corporate nature of the military that demands sacrifice, that the individual soldier abnegate self to the higher good of his mission.

The "Postmodern Military"

While always reflecting this inherent tension, military institutions within democratic states also evolve and change over time in identifiable, if often unpredictable, ways.[7] A typology comparing the American military of the Second World War era to that of the late Cold War era reveals several important differences between the two.[8] The earlier type of military focused on threats of attack upon or invasion of America's homeland; it was a mass, conscripted force; it had a supportive public; and officers saw themselves as combat leaders. There were few civilians within military institutions; women were segregated or excluded; and families were not a part of the military, except for those

of officers, which were considered integral to military society.

In contrast, at the height of the Cold War in the late 1980s, the military was focused on the prevention of nuclear war and a conventional invasion of Europe. The forces were all-volunteer; their mission was to contain communism "well forward" along the "Iron Curtain"; officers viewed themselves as managers of violence; and, given the nuclear dimension, public support for the military had become increasingly ambivalent. There were a significant number of civilians within military organizations, even overseas; women were partially integrated into the services; and families of all ranks were becoming integral to military society.

More to the point, the question now is what will the American armed forces look like at the end of this decade, when the current evolution toward a "postmodern military" will have been completed. Observers of the military, particularly sociologists, now believe that the historic tension between the social and functional imperatives will be resolved in quite different ways than before. This is primarily because the threat has changed so remarkably since the end of the Cold War. Even though the American military has not often changed rapidly, whenit has done so, the catalyst for significant institutional adaptation and evolution has always been just such a stark change in the security environment.

Simply stated, there is now a consensus that no direct threat exists to the security of the United States, nor to its interests abroad.[9] If judged in terms of how the military has been used since the end of the Gulf War, the new "threat" is not a direct one but one of conflict and instability in regions of interest to the United States. Thus, the military's new task, the one catalyzing current change, is to be able to act, in concert with allies, within a context of increased subnational conflict and violence, often to enable transitions to liberal democratic regimes and economic orders. Such constabulary missions, using very limited military force for very limited political objectives—and most often with inconclusive results—are a major change from the warfighting focus of American armed forces for the past six decades. Thus, the nature of the military imperative has changed markedly.

At the same time, the military recognizes the possibility of renewed great-power conflict at some point in the future, for an engagement potentially fought with high-technology weapons in vastly extended battle spaces. But there is, as yet, little or no political consensus as to the likelihood or timing of such a conflict, or even as to the potential opponents. Given these two very different missions, and in the absence of well-established civilian priorities, it is no surprise that the military is not adapting effectively for either one.[10]

A Shifting Balance

Further, since Americans feel no lack of security, well-organized minorities have been demanding changes to make the military "less different and separate"—a request now more tolerated by the larger public than in the past. The balance between the social imperative and the military imperative has shifted in favor of the former. Not surprisingly, with the Cold War successfully concluded, and with no neutral middle in the political spectrum where the military might be treated as more than "pork,"[11] the military has again become a battlefield upon which the nation's cultural wars are being fought.

The postmodern military is likely to focus primarily on peacekeeping and humanitarian missions; to be a smaller, all-volunteer force of professionals, with officers who see themselves as soldier-statesmen rather than as combat leaders or managers of violence; and to enjoy only tepid public support (or worse, outright indifference—witness recent recruiting failures). Civilians will be well integrated into military organizations, female soldiers will be fully integrated into

the services, and gays will be able to serve openly under the same standards of conduct as heterosexual soldiers.

Those who study the military expect the social imperative to continue to exert the stronger influence during the next decade, at least until the nation's security situation comes into greater focus and the functional imperative can be more clearly defined—at which time, the question will be: are American forces to be mid-tech constables policing U.S. interests globally or high-tech warriors facing a certain adversary?

The Civil-Military Gap

Many gaps in values and perspectives exist between those in the military and the members of the larger society. As noted earlier, many of these gaps are well known and expected because of the unique nature of the military's function. Thus, not all observed gaps are dangerous; at the same time, not all convergences between the two cultures are functional and thus desirable.

But since the end of the Cold War, the tensions between civilian and military leaders (particularly during the first Clinton administration), and between American society and its military subsociety have increased. At the leadership level, the tensions have been most clearly seen in the president's inability to change the military's policy banning openly gay behavior and in the reluctance of the military in 1992 to send U.S. forces into Bosnia.[12] At the societal level, the tensions were most obvious as progressive advocates pushed aspects of the "not too different or too separate" social imperative in an effort to change military institutions and their unique cultures, and as the military expressed its occasionally disdainful views toward the society it was defending.

With private foundation support, a group of scholars under the auspices of the Triangle Institute of Security Studies (TISS) in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, have recently completed a massive research project into the values, attitudes, and opinions of American society and its military subsociety.[13] The project, in which researchers questioned military leaders, civilian leaders, and members of the public, was designed to determine if there were growing gaps between the two societies that were contributing to these observed tensions. The results are instructive as to the likely character of the emerging postmodern military.

The first finding, which was somewhat surprising given the observed civilian-military tensions, was that a broad consensus exists between the two sets of leaders on a wide range of foreign policy and defense issues. Many of these issues—such as preventing nuclear proliferation, strengthening the United Nations, and the importance of cohesion, discipline and tradition to the effectiveness of military institutions—were quite contentious ones during the Cold War.

Similarly, the two leadership groups agree on the relative efficacy of military and nonmilitary tools in addressing current threats to our national security, and on the success of military institutions in adapting to changes in American society in the last half-century. For instance, they agree that using the military for "social engineering" — redressing historical discrimination—is not now a very important goal: very few civilian (7 percent) and military leaders (1 percent) see it as "very important," although somewhat greater percentages of both groups (civilian, 23 percent; military, 14 percent) believe it to be "important." Further, while military leaders are considerably more conservative than civilian leaders, their conservatism compares well with that of the public; in fact, on some civil rights issues officers are more liberal than the general public.

Thus, the researchers believe it unlikely that there will be future conflict between the two societies over basic civic values or foreign and defense policies, and that the military continues to adapt well to the broad changes in America's security environment.

The second finding was that there is the potential for civil-military estrangement in the near future. The researchers found that beneath the surface expressions of mutual confidence and respect, military and civilian leaders view each other's culture negatively and hold strong negative stereotypes of the other. Military officers believe American society has broken down, that the military could help restore it by "leading by example," and that "civilian society would be better off" by adopting "more of the military's customs and values." Civilian leaders share the concern over a moral decline, but they do not see military institutions as having a role in cultural reformation. Officers are more likely to believe that military leaders, rather than civilian political leaders, share the values of the American people.

Because attitude and value gaps are widest between active-duty military leaders and civilian nonveteran leaders (a group increasing in size as fewer and fewer Americans serve in the military), estrangement will grow unless efforts are taken to keep the two leadership elites connected. (Since 1995, and for the first time in the twentieth century, the makeup of Congress underrepresents the percentage of veterans in the general population. Thus, the historic "veteran's bonus" has disappeared.)

The researchers believe that such estrangement is likely to lead to continued recruiting problems for the military; a decline in public confidence in military institutions whose leaders hold occasionally condescending attitudes about American society; a continued decline in public interest in and understanding of military affairs and issues; and difficulty in attracting and retaining the best of American youth to the officer corps. There is also the potential for new policies that could disrupt the armed forces. For example, on the issue of gays serving openly in the military, 75 percent of military leaders are opposed to changing the current policy, but 57 percent of the public and 54 percent of civilian leaders are in favor of doing so.

The third finding revealed that the two sets of leaders are in conflict over issues involving the use of military force. Contrary to the traditions of the American civil-military relationship (wherein the responsibility of uniformed officers was only to advise civilian decisionmakers through official, nonpublic channels before executing an approved policy), a majority of the senior officers polled now believe it proper to engage in a public discussion of military policy, either to explain or defend government policy or to advocate policies they think best for the country. As for the use of force, a majority of officers also think it proper to go beyond giving advice and to insist on a role for the military in setting rules of engagement, developing exit strategies, establishing clear military goals, and selecting the type of forces to be used in any given situation.

The public is even more permissive of uniformed participation in public advocacy and of turning over considerations of the application of force to the military. At the same time, a majority believe the military will try to avoid carrying out orders it dislikes. Forty-six percent of the public does not believe "that civilian control of the military is absolutely safe and secure in the United States."

Less Neutral Officers

In the past quarter-century, officers have grown less neutral and more partisan in their political identification and are now more apt to identify (64 percent) with a political party than either civilian leaders or the mass public. Thus, on such issues as the use of force for humanitarian intervention, over which the two major U.S. political parties are often sharply divided, the professional military is increasingly perceived as unable to remain a neutral advisor.

Unfortunately, the implications of the third finding are for weakened civilian control of the military; continued friction in senior-level decisionmaking; and a possible decline in support for military institu-

tions if the military is perceived as just another interest group pursuing narrowly defined institutional interests.

The fourth finding is more complex than the first three, and was drawn from the data on casualty aversion. The study confirmed what academics have known for some time but have been unable to convince either the military or civilian leaders of—that the American public is *not* casualty-averse. Further, the data confirmed that for such nonwarfighting missions as peacekeeping and humanitarian intervention, *military leaders* are much more casualty-averse than civilian leaders or the public. Why this is so is not clear, but it is possible that it is because military leaders equate casualties with failure or because they believe that such nontraditional missions as they are increasingly being asked to undertake are not strongly in the nation's interest and are therefore not worth the loss of soldiers' lives.

The studies also parsed another issue from the data: from 1816 to the present, the differences in opinion between veterans and nonveterans within the nation's political leadership have strongly influenced both the nation's propensity to use force and how that force has been applied, either massively or with restraint. The fewer the number of veterans, the more likely it was that force would be used, but that it would be used with restraint. This fact, combined with the differences already noted with respect to casualty aversion, means there is likely to be continued civil-military friction over the decision to intervene abroad —which poses potential difficulties for alliance relationships and global leadership. Moreover, so long as the myth that the public is casualty-averse prevails, this can only encourage potential future U.S. adversaries.

So how is the emerging postmodern military to be understood and engaged by those interested in it, and in the nation's future security? I think there are three conclusions that can be drawn from what we see today, including from the research discussed above about the current gaps between the military and society at large.

Alientation and Its Effects

First, it is clear that during the past decade the social, rather than the functional, imperative has become more influential in the thinking of policymakers with respect to military institutions. We cannot know whether this is due to the particular fiscal, social, and intervention policies pursued by the Clinton administration, to the inexplicable reluctance of military leaders to represent effectively the needs of the functional imperative, or to such factors as the absence of a publicly perceived threat. But, irrespective of cause, this fact would be considered a negative if war loomed. Currently, however, it can be considered a positive in that it is forcing the military to address human resource issues it has treated cavalierly in the past. The services can no longer take recruiting for granted, nor can they afford to put other than the best leaders into unit command, the very place that the competition between the social and functional imperatives must be resolved every day.

Further, the services appear to be learning to take very seriously the quality of the workplace within which soldiers serve, regardless of their race, gender, or sexual orientation. Only when all of the services establish and maintain standards of performance and conduct in which all soldiers are seen to be treated meritocratically—males the same as females, heterosexuals the same as homosexuals, and latinos and blacks the same as whites—will the social imperative be met. And, not incidentally, these standards, fairly enforced, will at the same time be most conducive to meeting the needs of the functional imperative. Unfortunately, this fact is not yet recognized within all of our military institutions.

The second conclusion is that the professionalism of the military has declined since the end of the Gulf War, and markedly so. Whether measured by military-

technical (warfighting), ethical, or sociopolitical standards of professionalism, this decline can be readily seen. And while to a degree this is to be expected in a transitional, peacetime period, one only has to understand America's role in the world today and then recall the horrors of our military unpreparedness during the early days of the Korean War to be very concerned about this decline.

Here the "gap literature" reveals two problems—one of attitude and one of understanding—about which we ought to be concerned. First, there appears to exist within the officer corps the belief that because the services have dealt effectively with many of the ills still too prevalent in American society—drug abuse, gang culture, racial discord, sexual harassment, poor schools—their military subsociety is now somehow "better" than the American society it serves. Obviously, this is a pernicious attitude, undermining the very basis of the military ethic, which is characterized by self-abnegating service to the nation-state.

Second, both military cadets and senior officers appear to hold an incorrect understanding of the acceptable role of military officers engaged in the decisionmaking process with civilian leaders. This is no longer an issue just for senior officers, given the number of captains and majors in decentralized advisory roles in constabulary missions (in Bosnia and Kosovo, for example). The data make clear that officers today believe it appropriate to do more than just advise civilian leaders; indeed, that they should publicly advocate a preferred policy. But they cannot do so, if history is any guide, without further politicizing the military, which will only make it more difficult to address the decline in professionalism.

Thus, restoring professionalism in all three of its components emerges as the single most urgently needed response from the officer corps in charge of our armed forces. But, as noted earlier, in this era of "divided government," in which the absence of a politically neutral middle supportive of a reprofessionalized military is only too apparent, this will indeed be a daunting task for military leaders.

A Wasted Decade

The "gap literature" shows quite clearly the likelihood of continued and even increased alienation between civilian and military leaders. Increasingly uninformed about, and out of contact with, the military profession, civilian leaders may become so "willfully ignorant" that they fail to understand the need for limited autonomy for the military so that professionalism can be restored.[14] And restored it must be if the services are to do a better job of adapting themselves to fight future wars than they did over the past decade. As one astute observer of our military institutions said of that period: "The result has been a wasted decade—not wasted as the 1930s were, for no challenger looms who has exploited this time wisely, but time frittered away nonetheless. That, and a slow seeping away of effectiveness and confidence among the armed forces in its uniformed and civilian leadership, a slackening of morale and warrior spirit, a dulling of the intellectual, as well as the practical edge of the sword."[15]

Thus, it is imperative for civilians—intellectual, business, media, and political leaders—to reconnect with our military institutions and their leaders, to understand what they need and why, and to provide determined political leadership so as to arrive—despite the military's own reluctance—at a new balance between the social and functional imperatives. Only then will we be assured of having a military equal to the challenges of the twenty-first century.●

Notes

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Department of the Army or the Department of Defense.

1. M. Thomas Davis, "Operation Dire Straits," *Washington Post*, January 16, 2000.

2. Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, "Project on the Gap between the Military and Civilian Society: Digest of Findings and Studies," (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Triangle Institute of Security Studies, October 1999), at http://www.poli.duke.edu/civmil.

3. *American Military Culture in the 21st Century* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 2000).

4. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and The State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), chap. 1.

5. Allan R. Millett, "The American Political System and Civilian Control of the Military: A Historical Perspective," A Mershon Center Position Paper in the Policy Sciences, no. 4 (Columbus: Ohio State University, April 1997), pp. 1–4.

6. Gen. Douglas MacArthur, "Address to the Corps of Cadets, West Point, N.Y., May 12, 1962," in *Lend Me Your Ears: Great Speeches in History*, ed. William Safire (New York: Norton, 1962), pp. 74–78.

7. Steven P. Rosen, *Winning the Next War: Innovation and the Modern Military* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett, eds., *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

8. Charles Moskos, John Allen Williams, David R. Segal, eds., *The Postmodern Military* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), chaps. 1–2.

9. James Chace, "The Age of Anxiety," *World Policy Journal*, vol. 16 (spring 1999), pp. 107–108.

10. Don M. Snider, John A. Nagl, and Tony Pfaff, *Army Professionalism, The Military Ethic and Officership in the 21st Century* (Carlisle, Penn.: Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, December 1999).

11. Peter Connolly, "Clinton and the Two Nations," *Dissent*, vol. 46 (winter 1999), pp. 8–13.

12. Richard H. Kohn, "Out of Control," *National Interest*, vol. 35 (spring 1994), pp. 3–17.

13. See note 2.

14. Judith Hicks Stiehm, "The Civilian Mind," *It's Our Military Too! Women and the U.S. Military*, ed. Judith Hicks Stiehm (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).

15. Elliott A. Cohen, "Prepared for the Last (Cold) War," *Wall Street Journal*, November 12, 1999.