

U.S. Civil Military Relations

Scribed by Carolyn Rodriguez

Our speaker, Dr. Marybeth P Ulrich, is a Professor of Government in the Department of National Security and Strategy at the U.S. Army War College. She has taught at different levels and different educational institutions such as the Baltic Defense College, the Naval Postgraduate School, the U.S. Air Force Academy, and the Japanese National Defense Academy. Dr. Ulrich served 15 years in the military as a pilot and as a political science instructor.

Dr. Ulrich believes that military and civilian leaders need to be well informed on the norms of civil-military relations. Civil-military relations need to be taught equally to each, but the roles for each are different. It is important for them to understand their role so our constitutional system works well.

What are Civil-Military relations? Dr. Ulrich defined Civil Military relations by defining “the military as an institution that interacts with other institutions in the state.” Civil-Military relations focus on the trinity relationship between the state, society, and the military. On the strategic level it focuses on the civilian political leadership and the military leadership. This can be seen as the military’s role in the political process. Congress, the Constitution, and the executive are on the same level in regard to military oversight. While some people think the military reports only to the President, in fact it reports to the President, the Secretary of Defense, and the Congress.

The military’s role is to protect the country and manage violence. No one else can do this job and because of that it is imperative that the military be strong enough to protect the country but subordinate enough to do what the citizens need it to do. This is why civilian leadership and military leadership must work closely together. Civilian leadership can’t properly function without the military to watch over national security and give them advice. The military should support democracy without specifically supporting a political party or political executive.

There is an unequal dialog between the political leadership and the military leadership. The military leadership gives advice to the political leader who decides whether to follow that advice. If the advice is not followed, it is not because the advice is necessarily bad. It is because the

political leader has to think of the bigger picture and sometimes the military advice won’t work there. The civilian political leader should frame the issue so that the military can give its professional advice without bias.

According to Dr. Ulrich, military leaders need to be non-partisan, but appropriately political, in the sense of influencing policy. Advocacy or arguing for policy is even okay as long as it does not cross the boundary and become insistence, because then the military is either making the decision or taking options away from the civilian leadership. An example of the military leadership crossing this line was the Joint Chiefs of Staff’s opposition to President’s Clinton’s proposed open gay policy for the military. They threatened to resign which led to the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” compromise.

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Web Editor: Lou Thieblemont
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