AUDACITY & ALLIANCES

MASTHEAD ●

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CRACKS IN THE IVORY TOWER?

Francis J. Gavin

In his introduction to Volume 7, Issue 1, the chair of our editorial board, Frank Gavin, reflects on the joys of being a professor and the importance of higher education. He also expresses concern about the health of American universities and calls on them to defend values such as asking big questions and encouraging debate.

I love being a professor. To paraphrase something Allan Bloom wrote four decades ago, I am beyond grateful to live in a world that allows me to read, think, write, and teach young people.[1] I have spent much of my adult life in universities and will continue to be there until they drag me from the classroom. It has been a wonderful adventure. Which is why I am so worried about the current state of higher education.

It was not inevitable I would become an academic. My grandfather on my dad's side immigrated from County Mayo, Ireland, and became a Philly cop. Most of his sons became mailmen or cops as well. My dad, the youngest of ten, was the first and only one in his family to go to college — locally and for a business degree. My grandfather on my mom's side dropped out of school in sixth grade to work at what was, at the time, the world's largest shipyard, Hog Island in South Philadelphia — the sandwiches brought by the immigrants to work were called "hoagies" — before spending the rest of his career as a lineman for Bell Telephone. There were no scholars in the extended Gavin-McBride clan, nor did anyone know any academics — if they did, they would simply assume they were some malevolent combination of stuck up, foreign, and communist. Informing my family that I hoped to quarterback the Philadelphia Eagles would have made more sense, and seemed more plausible, than becoming a professor.

For one thing, they never really understood why I stayed in school so long. When I went to Oxford for a master's degree, one uncle (another Philly cop) asked how I could attend a university located in a country, the United Kingdom, that had historically persecuted my Irish Catholic people. When I was admitted for a Ph.D. in history at the University of Pennsylvania, with free tuition and a modest stipend, my father asked whether I wasn't already overeducated. Still, they were proud. When I was awarded tenure at the University of Texas, my mother told everyone I had "ten-year," as if I had paid off my passage to the new world and could now operate my own blacksmith shop. To be fair, tenure is a hard concept to describe. When my daughter, then in kindergarten, asked if I could be fired, I said no. "What if you don't wear pants to work?" After considering the question, I said, "I'd receive a warning but would not be fired." I found out later she told her friends that her father didn't have to wear pants to work, which helped explain why the other parents eyed me so suspiciously at school events.

It was my undergraduate experience at the University of Chicago that convinced me to pursue the life of the mind. To be clear, it was not a happy time — I was tall and gangly, decidedly uncool, and poorly read. Chicago was a dangerous city, it appeared to snow nine months a year, and the campus fully earned its nickname, "where fun goes to die." It was, however, the first place I had ever been where the most valuable, treasured item was ideas. Clarity of thought and the power of insight were rewarded, and wrestling with and debating complex, difficult, and controversial concepts and ideas was not only demanded — it was enjoyed. I did not know such places existed, but once I discovered they did, I never wanted to leave.

It was one class in particular that made the difference: Karl Weintraub's year-long course, the History of Western Civilization. The course was so popular that you had to sleep out the night before in-person registration to gain admission. Weintraub, who was part Jewish, fled Germany in the mid-1930s to the Netherlands, where he hid in a small attic during World War II. He immigrated to Chicago, supported himself with odd jobs, including being a hotel bellhop, while he went to the University of Chicago as an undergraduate, Ph.D. student, and professor, where he remained for the rest of his career.[2] Assigning only original sources, he was an intimidating, even terrifying presence, interrogating students in a Socratic method that made John Houseman's portrayal of the demanding professor in the 1973 film *The Paper Chase* look like child's play.[3] He also believed that the best way to demonstrate his deep love for his students and their learning was to push them hard to question everything they thought they knew about

1   Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 245.

2   "Campus Life: Chicago; A Tough Teacher Whose Classes are a Big Draw," *The New York Times*, May 27, 1990, https://www.nytimes.com/1990/05/27/style/campus-life-chicago-a-tough-teacher-whose-classes-are-a-big-draw.html

3   "The Paper Chase: The Socratic Method," movie clip, accessed January 17, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lE1ImIZpn_w

the world. In addition to the normal three hours of seminar, Weintraub required students to attend a 90-minute lecture on Wednesday evenings.

It was in that classroom in Cobb Hall that I first encountered the Ancient Greek concept of *arete*, or human excellence, and learned how the phalanx was both a powerful military innovation and reflected the cohesion and loyalty of citizens to their city-state. I was mesmerized by the portrayal of monasticism, especially St. Anthony of Egypt's extreme ascetic efforts in the desert to deny himself all forms of human pleasure and companionship, feats that Weintraub ironically pointed out made him the rock star of his age, followed everywhere by adoring woman, which tortured Anthony further. Weintraub took great delight in telling us that "for this miserable existence, he was rewarded with a life of 104 years!" The rise of manorialism, feudalism, and the battles over enclosure in medieval England produced a phrase I've never forgotten: "the sheep are eating the men."[4] The image of the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry IV, kneeling barefoot in the snow, seeking pope Gregory's VII's absolution, captured a major theme of the course and Weintraub's worldview: how the unresolved tension created by the struggle between the City of God, Jerusalem, and the City of Man, Rome, shaped Western culture and its institutions, while driving its success as a civilization.

Decades later, I no longer believe Weintraub's thesis, informed by his admiration of St. Augustine of Hippo. Yet one of his most haunting Wednesday evening lectures, inspired by this theme, has stayed with me: a lesson portraying the great Christian humanist, Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, who tried to bring the best of both Jerusalem and Rome, faith and reason, together, to save a broken world. I recently revisited the fading notes of that address, delivered on a cold, wintry Wednesday evening in early 1986.

Weintraub explained that while Erasmus, a Catholic priest, was deeply religious, he believed Socrates was a saint, saw Cicero as exceptional, and considered Plato a Christian thinker. Erasmus was a scholar of great wit and insight, whose "In Praise of Folly" was a 16th century sensation marked by an early Renaissance sensibility. But he lived in a time of great polarization, passion, violence, and anger. Many seethed at the excesses and corruption of the religious elite and the Church in Rome. Erasmus was sympathetic: He too saw the Church and its practices as deeply flawed. But unlike the Protestant revolutionaries — John Calvin and especially Martin Luther, with whom he corresponded before they fell out — he did not think human beings were inherently bad or sinful. Weintraub explained that Erasmus believed man had a kind and benevolent nature, possessing a free will but hindered by institutions. He recoiled at the radicals whose "pens dipped in blood" spread overheated rhetoric like an uncontrollable virus through the new technology of the printing press, stirring up those less knowledgeable and fueling the desire to burn down flawed but vital institutions that had survived a millennia and a half. Erasmus was clearly a hero to Weintraub, who, as a refugee from Adolf Hitler's Europe, understood what horrors radicalization and revolution could deliver and believed in the redeeming, ennobling qualities that civilization conveyed upon humanity. Erasmus loathed conflict, loved peace, and preached tolerance. He was, however, a moderate in an extreme age, disliked and mocked both by the reactionaries within the Church and the reformers from without. It goes without saying that our current world could use more figures in Erasmus' mold.

How common are classes like Weintraub's today? His course offered a vast scope — over two and a half millennia — while focusing on facts as narrow as the milk production of a typical 12th-century cow. The class made controversial choices — to even discuss something like the rise of Western civilization might draw hackles on some campuses today, as would the explicit recognition of the power of religious faith to drive human progress. Weintraub made it clear that civilization was, at heart, about morality, the effort to create shared, ordered systems of ethics, rules, and explanations to help humans make sense of their world and their place in it, with all its mysteries and complexities — and, particularly, to instruct them on who they should be and how they should behave, while preserving and improving their societies for future generations. He demanded his students leave behind their own assumptions and pre-conceived notions about what mattered, what was right and what was wrong, and to visit the past as it was and take it seriously on its own terms. Weintraub's class is why I became a professor.

Who Should We Be?

There are, of course, many hypotheses about why the modern American university is, in many respects, flailing, especially in the humanities and social sciences. Wokeness, politicization, arguments over free speech, the bureaucratization and financialization of universities, the narrowing of disciplines, and their disconnect from the world outside of the ivory tower: all are likely culprits. At heart, however, I believe higher education is struggling because it fails

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4   The origins of this term are uncertain. Charles Clay Doyle, "'Sheep Eat Men': A Retrospective Proverb," *Moreana* 51, no. 197-198, issue 3-4 (2014): 166-179.

to satisfactorily address a simple question: What is the purpose of education and learning?[5]

Given the spiraling costs of higher education, graduates, their parents, and society at large understandably demand that expensive tuition dollars be converted into skills that lead to stable, even lucrative, jobs and vocations. Universities, in other words, are judged by career outcomes and contributions to the economy. Students obtain competencies that translate into things you can do in the world. Contemporary American universities and colleges are, in other words, all about *what* you should be. When I think about what is best in a university, however, and what is absolutely essential about learning in general, it is not about *what* to be: It is about *who we should be*.

It is not a coincidence that the college experience takes place when young people are wrestling with this very question: *Who* are they? Questions of identity, justice, loyalty, service, affinity, belonging, ethics, friendship, and love become the core issues young people struggle with, all while they separate from their families and try to form their own selves. As an undergraduate, my friends and I read and debated novels, philosophy, and history while exploring new music, art, travel, fashion, and food. We did so less as academic exercises and more because they complemented what we learned from great texts and inspired professors in the classroom, all part of trying to make sense of our place in a complex, confusing world. Perhaps the most difficult class I took at Chicago was focused on one book, Georg Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, taught by the legendary political theorist Joseph Cropsey in the spring of 1987. Today, I couldn't tell you a thing about Hegel's impenetrable classic, but I remember Cropsey saying that, if we wanted to understand Central Europe and the profound changes it was undergoing, we should read a newly translated Czech author, Milan Kundera. My friends and I devoured his novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, and soon thereafter I read everything of Kundera's I could get my hands on. In my advanced age, I have a less generous view of Kundera's oeuvre now — one of the great points of learning is to change our minds. For years, however, Kundera was a touchpoint for discussion and often fierce debate about identity, love, and commitment, closed versus open societies, the interplay between larger historical forces and individual choices, memory and narrative, and the role of philosophy in everyday life.

This leads to another wonderful feature of my undergraduate education at the University of Chicago: a common core. We were required to take a year-long series in the humanities, physical, biological, and social sciences, as well as math, language, and history courses. The core offered a broad sense of the known world of knowledge and provided a chance to discover and satisfy an intellectual interest an 18 year-old might never have known they had. More to the point, it gave smart young people with diverse backgrounds, values, and interests a common set of courses, ideas, concepts, and, most importantly, questions over which they could debate, argue, and learn amongst each other. Common cores are controversial, especially in the humanities and social sciences, because there is an understandable concern over who gets to select what is read and what thinkers, groups, or ideas are marginalized or ignored. This reasonable worry, however, misses a more important point. The art, culture, and writing of many societies in most times center around common human themes: struggle and strife, identity and belonging, tradition and novelty, power and justice, choice and fate, meaning and purpose, while trying to understand and tame the natural environment. These are shared elements of the human experience. It is less *where* the core comes from and more that it provides a shared learning experience, allowing young people to come together, inside and outside the classroom, to wrestle with, explore, try on, and dispense or keep new ideas, while they try to figure out who they are and what their place is in the world. It also teaches them how to identify the most compelling questions, while furnishing them with the tools to discuss and debate — at times ferociously but always respectfully — the perspectives and views of those who understand the world differently. That is the way we learn.

Scholarship Still Matters

There are several reasons why a journal devoted to national and international security, foreign policy, and grand strategy should be concerned about the state of higher education. As an academic outlet, we rely on scholars, many who reside and most of whom were trained in the ivory tower, to provide us with their best, most insightful work. And as this excellent issue demonstrates, an extraordinary pipeline of innovative, cutting edge, and important scholarship and policy commentary still exists. In these pages, Verónica Bäcker-Peral and Gene Park explore alliance commitments in a period of increased polarization. Risa A. Brooks, Michael A. Robinson, and Heidi Urben confront the challenge of balancing between free

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5   Again, the University of Chicago is a notable exception. Every year since 1961, my *alma mater* asks a faculty member to deliver an address, "The Aims of Education," to incoming students, who then return to their residence halls to discuss and debate. https://college.uchicago.edu/student-life/aims-education

speech amidst polarization and shifting norms. Jon R. Lindsay highlights the unexpected consequences that may emerge from institutionalizing emerging technologies for battlefield use.

The trends lines in the academy, however, are not entirely encouraging. The study and practice of international relations depends on the scholarly fields that are most connected to it — political science, history, sociology, law, economics, anthropology, etc. If those fields incentivize subjects, methods, and perspectives that are at odds with the values of this journal, then we are in trouble. Those values include asking big questions while engaging the public sphere in meaningful and accessible ways and encouraging sharp, vigorous debate to generate smarter policy and better outcomes in the world — and they remain crucial to high-quality scholarship and informed policy.

There is a deeper issue. The health, or lack of health, of higher education reflects the health of our society. American universities and colleges produce the world's best-trained engineers, journalists, scientists, doctors, programmers, lawyers, and financiers, fueling an innovative, powerful economy that generates unimaginable wealth and data. More than at any time or any place in human history, we know how to produce things, including information, and we know how to measure and count those things. This impressive outcome takes place in a society, however, that appears increasingly polarized, divided, and unhappy, that lacks a sense of common purpose and cohesion, which denigrates the moderation and tolerance of an Erasmus and that often seems at war with itself and adrift in the world. We rarely ask why or to what end we make the things we do, while failing to understand that data and information are far from knowledge and wisdom. Our unparalleled ability to produce, count, and measure things often appears to do little to make us happy or fulfilled or answer the questions that vex us most.

Generative artificial intelligence, no matter what its future capabilities, will never fully explain who and why we love, the sources for our rage and the driver of our conflicts, and who we truly are and how we relate to the world around us. It will remain as confused as we are as to why some experiences tie us together in a common humanity, while others drive us to see and understand the world completely differently. Human-made technology will fail, as we have failed for millennia, to resolve once and for all divergent worldviews and perspectives and the great tensions between power and justice, innovation and inequity, and our individual desires and our collective responsibilities — in other words, what it means to be human.

Indeed, the reason ChatGPT will not find answers to these and other fundamental questions is because they have no final answer. It is, however, in the often contentious act of wrestling with these core issues of who we are and what we are doing, questions of meaning and historical direction, power and purpose, identity and belonging, that humanity reveals itself at its best, and, when done poorly, its worst. These issues are an often underappreciated driver of how individuals, leaders, states, cultures, and, yes, even civilizations engage with each other, their histories and imagined futures, and the world around them in ways that bring human triumph and often unimaginable tragedy. How these debates and discussions unfold is often the true measure of art and scholarship, of learning and thinking, and of higher education. Facilitating these conversations in a serious, honest, and rigorous way is the noblest, most important role that the ivory tower — and journals such as the *Texas National Security Review* — can play. ♟

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Image: *Catarina Oberlander (CC BY 2.0 DEED)[6]*

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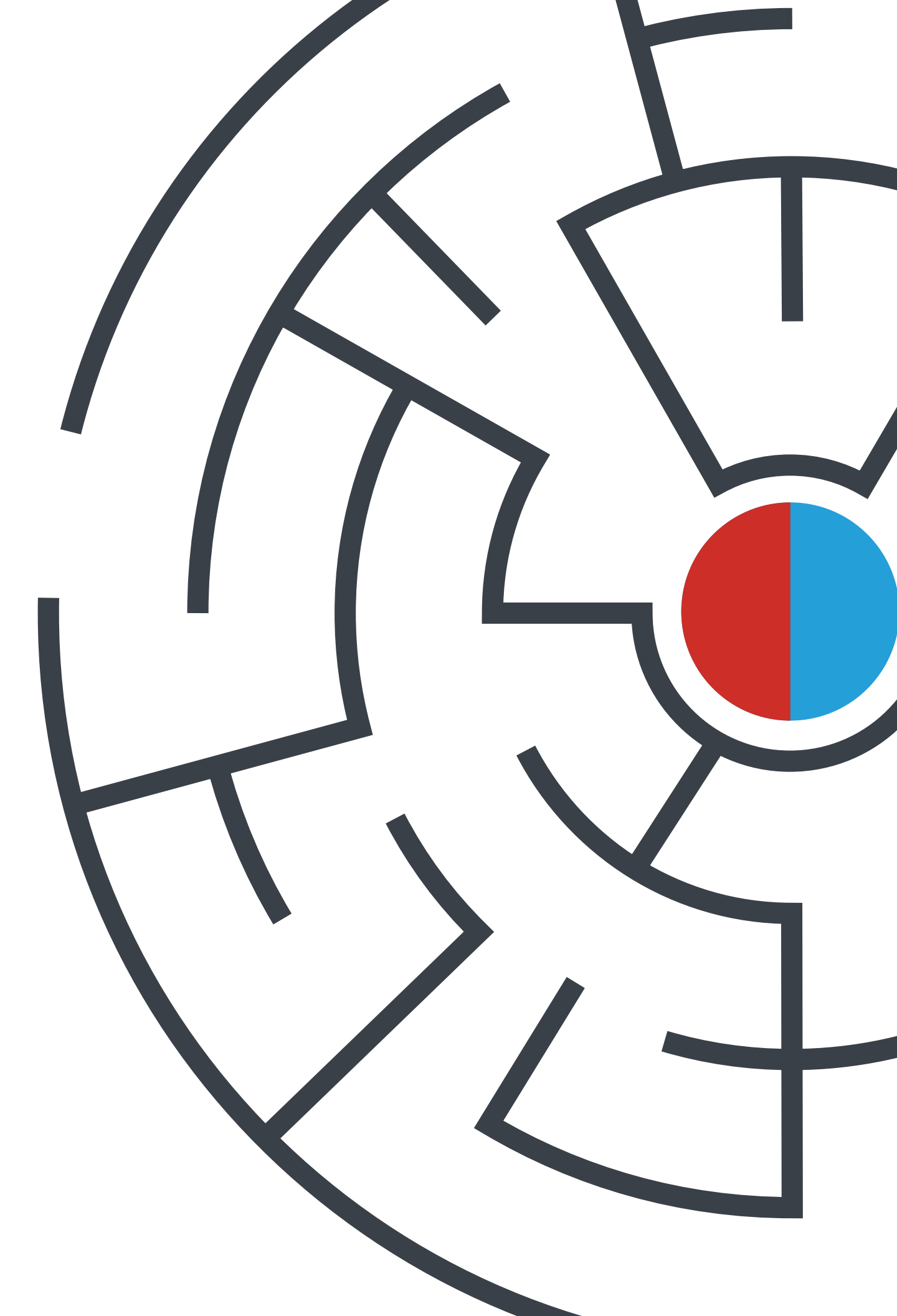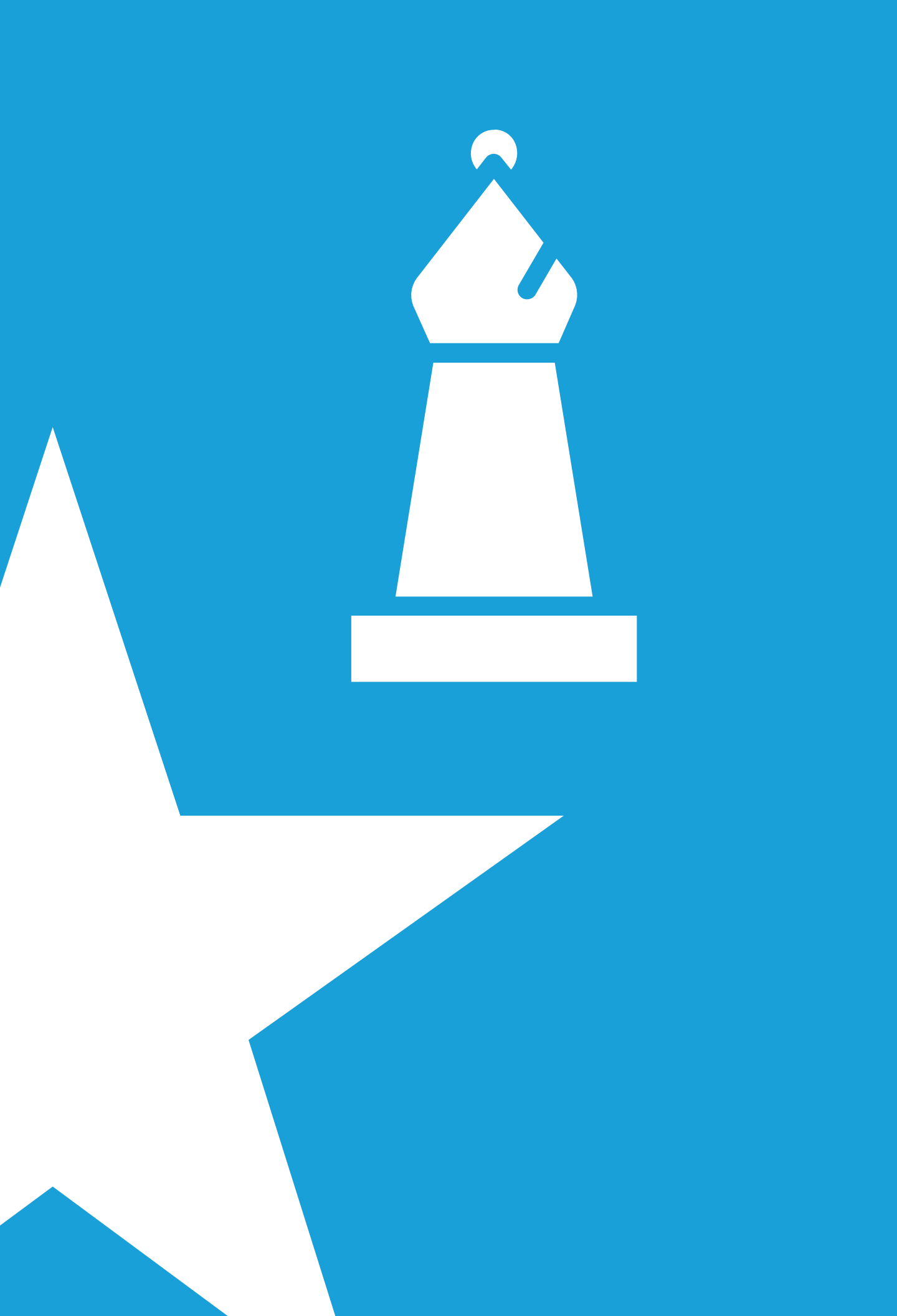
The Scholar

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ALLIANCE COMMITMENT IN AN ERA OF PARTISAN POLARIZATION: A SURVEY EXPERIMENT OF U.S. VOTERS

Verónica Bäcker-Peral and Gene Park

There is rising apprehension that U.S. partisan polarization is making it harder for the United States to keep its international commitments. This could have profound implications for one of the most critical elements of U.S. foreign policy: its commitment to its alliance partners. We explore this issue by analyzing to what extent partisanship can influence U.S. voter commitment to aid and defend allies. Using four survey experiments, the study analyzes the resilience of U.S. support for an ally, the Republic of Korea, across a range of scenarios. When presented with a neutral framing of South Korea without any overt partisan cues, voters support South Korea even at the risk of incurring military casualties or economic costs. Compared to Democrats, however, Republicans consistently express lower support for South Korea. These results suggest that there is a clear partisan divide when it comes to alliances. Furthermore, we find that stronger cues that target partisan group identities can trigger sizable effects on voter attitudes. Collectively, these results suggest that growing partisan polarization may increase uncertainty in U.S. voter commitment, a finding with important implications for the U.S.-South Korean alliance and alliance credibility more broadly.

A perennial question is whether countries will honor their alliance commitments. For decades, a degree of bipartisan consensus around foreign policy contributed to the perception that the United States would be willing to use force to live up to its specific treaty obligations.[1] Domestic politics was said to end at the water's edge. When Donald Trump ran for and secured the presidency on an explicitly nationalist "America First" platform, he openly questioned the alliance *status quo*. He chided allies for not doing enough to share the financial burden; he hinted at withdrawing U.S. troops from the territory of some allies (e.g., South Korea); he levied tariffs on allies; and his administration signed an agreement to move troops from Germany to Poland.[2]

The reality is that alliances are never ironclad. Commitment is always contingent. States cannot be forced to honor their treaty obligations, and in some cases, they do not live up to their treaty duties. Indeed, although defensive alliances are more often reliable than not, they are not honored about 25 percent of the time.[3] Furthermore, alliance treaties also leave signatories with some discretion. Allies retain some ability to determine when they are obliged to aid an ally with force and what the nature of the response will be.[4] There are other ambiguities too, such as whether cyber attacks should be regarded as

1   Peter Beinhart, "When Politics No Longer Stops at the Water's Edge: Partisan Polarization and Foreign Policy," in *Red and Blue Nation?: Consequences and Correction of America's Polarized*, ed. Pietro S. Nivola and David W. Brady (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2008).

2   Peter Baker, "Trump Says NATO Allies Don't Pay Their Share. Is That True?" *New York Times*, May 26, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/26/world/europe/nato-trump-spending.html; David Choi, "Trump Considered 'Complete Withdrawal' of US Troops from South Korea, Former Defense Chief Says," *Stars and Stripes*, May 10, 2022, https://www.stripes.com/theaters/asia_pacific/2022-05-10/defense-secretary-mark-esper-memoir-president-trump-south-korea-troops-5954121.html; Ana Swanson, "White House to Impose Metal Tariffs on E.U., Canada and Mexico." *New York Times*, May 31, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/31/us/politics/trump-aluminum-steel-tariffs.html; "Trump: Poland to Get Some US Troops Withdrawn from Germany," AP News, June 24, 2020, https://apnews.com/article/d6ebba9dfb5f500775a24a9d479e1d9c.

3   Brett Ashley Leeds, Andrew G. Long, and Sara McLaughlin Mitchell, "Reevaluating Alliance Reliability: Specific Threats, Specific Promises," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 44, no. 5 (2000): 686–99, https://www.jstor.org/stable/174649.

4   Michaela Mattes, "Reputation, Symmetry, and Alliance Design," *International Organization* 66, no. 4 (2012): 679–707, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23279975.

an armed attack or the precise territorial boundaries covered by an alliance.[5]

Alliances thus face significant credibility challenges since they are, by nature, self-enforcing agreements.[6] Yet, credibility is paramount for deterrence and extended deterrence,[7] reputation,[8] crisis bargaining,[9] and maintaining alliance relations.[10] Consequently, countries rely on measures to signal their commitment. To enhance the credibility of these signals, they attempt to raise the domestic costs of defection through hand-tying.[11] Governments sign alliances and make bold pronouncements of support for an ally to raise the domestic political costs of backing down — what's known as "audience costs" — thereby signaling their resolve to a possible adversary as well as their alliance partner.[12] They also make costly investments — "sunk costs" — to signal their commitment by deploying troops on an ally's soil, creating tripwires, building military interdependence, and taking other measures.[13]

Still, alliance commitment ultimately rests on domestic politics, and even such commitment measures can never be locked in indefinitely. As Paul Musgrave observes, in democracies, electoral politics create incentives over the long term for politicians to change the *status quo* as parties seek to differentiate themselves when coalitions shift. This dynamic has given rise to polarization that has eroded the democratic base of support for U.S. hegemony.[14] While Musgrave uses historical examples, the United States is currently experiencing intense partisanship reflected in changing foreign policy views on issues such as trade and, more recently, support for Ukraine.[15] This may also have important implications for the domestic political durability of alliance commitment.

This paper studies the effects of partisanship on U.S. voter commitment to allies, specifically the Republic of Korea, under conditions of partisan polarization. To examine this, we administered surveys to U.S. voters in January of 2022 and March of 2023, wherein we experimentally analyzed the impact of various partisan cues on their support for South Korea. We found that, while overall support for defending South Korea is relatively stable across a range of different hypothetical scenarios, there are underlying differences between Democrats and Republicans. Democrats show higher support than Republicans for aiding and defending South Korea. Moreover, presenting more overt partisan cues that appeal to an individual's partisan group identity can have substantial impacts on levels of support for South Korea. Voters, particularly Republicans, are responsive to partisan leadership cues and strong language that echoes Trump's America First rhetoric. However, appeals to duty and values in support of maintaining alliance commitments have little effect on voters, Democrat or Republican. These results suggest that polarizing messaging can subvert public

5   For a discussion of cyber attacks and alliances, see Lindsey Guenther and Paul Musgrave, "New Questions for an Old Alliance: NATO in Cyberspace and American Public Opinion," *Journal of Global Security Studies* 7, no. 4 (December 2022), https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogac024.

6   James D. Morrow, "Alliances: Why Write Them Down?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 3, no. 1 (2000): 63–839, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.3.1.63.

7   Matthew Fuhrmann and Todd S. Sechser, "Signaling Alliance Commitments: Hand-Tying and Sunk Costs in Extended Nuclear Deterrence," *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 4 (2014): 919–35, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24363534; Brett Ashley Leeds, "Do Alliances Deter Aggression? The Influence of Military Alliances on the Initiation of Militarized Interstate Disputes," *American Journal of Political Science* 47, no. 3 (2003): 427– 39, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3186107; Paul K. Huth, "Reputations and Deterrence: A Theoretical and Empirical Assessment," *Security Studies* 7, no. 1 (1997): 72–99, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636419708429334; Paul K. Huth, "The Extended Deterrent Value of Nuclear Weapons," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 34, no. 2 (June 1990): 270–90, https://www.jstor.org/stable/174195; Paul K. Huth, "Extended Deterrence and the Outbreak of War," *American Political Science Review* 82, no. 2 (1988): 423–443, https://www.jstor.org/stable/174195; Jesse C. Johnson and Stephen Joiner, "Power Changes, Alliance Credibility, and Extended Deterrence," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 38, no. 2 (2021): 178–99, https://doi.org/10.1177/0738894218824735.

8   Glenn H. Snyder, "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics," *World Politics* 36, no. 4 (1984): 461–95, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2010183; Douglas M. Gibler, "The Costs of Reneging: Reputation and Alliance Formation," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 52, no. 3 (2008): 426–54, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002707310003.

9   James D. Fearon, "Signaling Versus the Balance of Power and Interests: An Empirical Test of a Crisis Bargaining Model," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 38, no. 2 (1994): 236–69, https://www.jstor.org/stable/174295.

10   Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Brian Blankenship, "Promises Under Pressure: Statements of Reassurance in US Alliances," *International Studies Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (2020): 1017–30, https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqaa071; Brian Blankenship and Erik Lin-Greenberg, "Trivial Tripwires?: Military Capabilities and Alliance Reassurance," *Security Studies* 31, no. 1 (2022): 92–117, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2022.2038662; Dov H. Levin and Tetsuro Kobayashi, "The Art of Uncommitment: The Costs of Peacetime Withdrawals from Alliance Commitments," *European Journal of International Relations* 28, no. 3 (2022): 589–615, https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661221098221.

11   Fearon, "Signaling Versus the Balance of Power and Interests"; Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

12   Michael Tomz and Jessica L. P. Weeks, "Military Alliances and Public Support for War," *International Studies Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (2021): 811–24, https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqab015.

13   Fearon, "Signaling Versus the Balance of Power and Interests"; James D. Fearon, "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands Versus Sinking Costs," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41, no. 1 (1997): 68–90, https://www.jstor.org/stable/174487; Morrow, "Alliances: Why Write Them Down?"

14   Paul Musgrave, "International Hegemony Meets Domestic Politics: Why Liberals Can Be Pessimists," *Security Studies* 28, no. 3 (2019): 451–78, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2019.1604983.

15   Aamer Madhani and Emily Swanson, "Ukraine Aid Support Softens in the US: AP-NORC Poll," AP News, Feb. 15, 2023, https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-biden-politics-poland-33095abf76875b60ebab3ddf4eede188.

support for allies. One implication is that leaders may be able to influence voters in ways that reduce the potential domestic costs of reneging on alliance commitments, which has the potential to undermine alliance credibility.

These polls suggest that there may be an emerging skepticism of alliances among Republicans relative to Democrats.

The following section elaborates how partisan polarization has the potential to weaken voter commitment to allies. We then introduce our research approach, followed by a presentation of our survey experiments and results. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the implications of our findings for the U.S.-South Korean alliance and alliance commitment more broadly, some of the limitations of our study, and areas for future research.

Partisan Polarization and Alliances

Before looking at the results of our survey, it is important to understand the implications of partisan polarization for alliances. We define partisan polarization as the growing division of people's opinions and identities along partisan lines. Below, we focus on two broad types of polarization: ideological polarization and group identity polarization.

Ideological Polarization

Ideological polarization refers to the growing divergence of public beliefs among voters and their sorting into two increasingly distinct political parties. Research points to growing ideological polarization across a range of policy issues, such as the economy, civil rights, and foreign policy.[16]

There are several ways in which the ideological polarization of voters matters for alliance commitment. First, some research suggests that voters are aware of foreign policy issues and that foreign policy can influence their vote.[17] Thus, voters may play a role in electing — or creating the possibility of electing — candidates who are skeptical of international commitments and less supportive of aiding and defending allies. Second, ideological polarization may influence alliance support directly via public opinion. Public opinion has been found to influence politicians and military leaders in making critical decisions about using force or maintaining military activities.[18] Third, ideological polarization could reduce domestic political costs for reneging or weakening commitment mechanisms. With greater ideological polarization, leaders may rely increasingly on a political base of strong partisan supporters. A growing number of alliance skeptics within a party would give a leader greater room to maneuver and perhaps even incentives to weaken alliance commitments. Leaders would thus face few domestic political repercussions among supporters were they to undo earlier commitments, such as to deploy troops on an alliance partner's soil, or possibly even were they to choose not to live up to their treaty obligation to defend their ally.

Voters may indeed be developing increasingly distinct ideological preferences toward alliances that split along party lines. Opinion polls show growing divergence in foreign policy beliefs generally and for alliances specifically. According to the Pew Research Center, among Republicans or those that lean Republican, support for an active U.S. role in the world has declined from 53 percent in 2004 to only 45 percent in 2019. By contrast, support among Democrats increased from 37 percent in 2004 to 62 percent by 2019. The Pew Research Center also finds a large and growing partisan gap in expectations for U.S. allies. In 2019, only 31 percent of Republicans or those leaning Republican believed that the United States should compromise with allies by taking their interests into consideration, compared to 42 percent in 2004. By contrast, 83 percent of Democrats or those leaning Democrat supported that view, up from 65 percent in 2004.[19] Another poll from Reuters

16   Joseph Bafumi and Robert Y. Shapiro, "A New Partisan Voter," *Journal of Politics* 71, no. 1 (2009): 1–24, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381608090014; Delia Baldassarri and Barum Park, "Was There a Culture War? Partisan Polarization and Secular Trends in US Public Opinion," *Journal of Politics* 82, no. 3 (2020): 809–37, https://doi.org/10.1086/707306.

17   John H. Aldrich, John L. Sullivan, and Eugene Borgida, "Foreign Affairs and Issue Voting: Do Presidential Candidates 'Waltz Before a Blind Audience?,'" *American Political Science Review* 83, no. 1 (1989): 123–41, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1956437; Christopher Gelpi, Jason Reifler, and Peter Feaver, "Iraq the Vote: Retrospective and Prospective Foreign Policy Judgments on Candidate Choice and Casualty Tolerance," *Political Behavior* 29, no. 2 (2007): 151–74, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4500240.

18   Jonathan A. Chu and Stefano Recchia, "Does Public Opinion Affect the Preferences of Foreign Policy Leaders? Experimental Evidence from the UK Parliament," *Journal of Politics* 84, no. 3 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1086/719007; Michael Tomz, Jessica L. P. Weeks, and Keren Yarhi-Milo, "Public Opinion and Decisions About Military Force in Democracies," *International Organization* 74, no. 1 (2020): 119–43, https://doi.org/10.1017/S002081831900034; Erik Lin-Greenberg, "Soldiers, Pollsters, and International Crises: Public Opinion and the Military's Advice on the Use of Force," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 17, no. 3 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orab009.

19   "In a Politically Polarized Era, Sharp Divides in Both Partisan Coalitions," Pew Research Center, Part 6, Views of Foreign Policy, Dec. 17, 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/12/17/6-views-of-foreign-policy/.
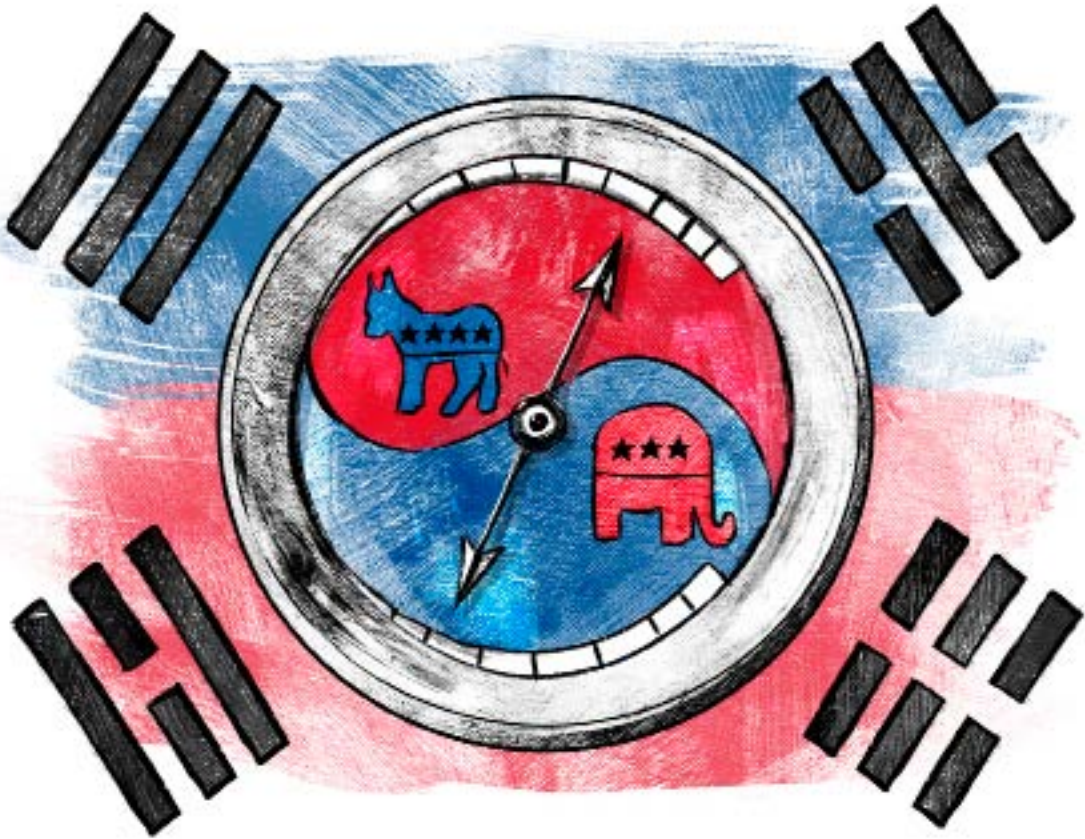
/ Ipsos in 2018 found that two-thirds of Republicans agreed that America should not be bound by treaty commitments if NATO allies do not spend sufficiently on defense, whereas about 40 percent of Democrats held the same view.[20] These polls suggest that there may be an emerging skepticism of alliances among Republicans relative to Democrats.

Group Identity Polarization

Another perspective on polarization suggests that people sort by social identity rather than ideology.[21] Increasingly, party identification has become more central to people's identity rather than reflective of a specific set of ideological beliefs. Indeed, some research finds that one's identity as a member of a

political party is even stronger than religious, linguistic, ethnic, or regional identities.[22] Furthermore, the intensity of these partisan identities and the gap between them has been shown to be growing over time.[23] This has driven partisan polarization by creating increasingly divergent social realities. From this perspective, partisan polarization is not so much about ideological divergence. Rather, partisan identity creates differences in perception of basic facts, the interpretation of facts, what facts are remembered, and the types of information that people seek.[24]

Voters' views are driven by partisan cues, motivated biases, and emotions, rather than coherent ideological positions. Existing research suggests that voters take cues from party leaders and elites and

20   Phil Stewart, "Nearly Half of Americans Link Defense of NATO to Allies' Spending: Reuters/Ipsos Poll," *Reuters*, July 18, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-nato-voters/nearly-half-of-americans-link-defense-of-nato-to-allies-spending-reuters-ipsos-poll-idUSKBN1K82QK.

21   Lilliana Mason and Julie Wronski, "One Tribe to Bind Them All: How Our Social Group Attachments Strengthen Partisanship," *Political Psychology* 39, no. S1 (February 2018): 257–77, https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12485.

22   Sean J. Westwood et al., "The Tie that Divides: Cross-national Evidence of the Primacy of Partyism," *European Journal of Political Research* 57, no. 2 (2018): 333–54, https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12228.

23   Shanto Iyengar and Sean J. Westwood, "Fear and Loathing Across Party Lines: New Evidence on Group Polarization," *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 3 (2015): 690–707, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24583091.

24   Larry M. Bartels, "Beyond the Running Tally: Partisan Bias in Political Perceptions," *Political Behavior* 24, no. 2 (June 2002): 117–50, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1558352; Howard G. Lavine, Christopher D. Johnston, and Marco R. Steenbergen, *The Ambivalent Partisan: How Critical Loyalty Promotes Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Charles S. Taber and Milton Lodge, "Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs," *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 3 (2006): 755–69, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3694247; Gary C. Jacobson, "Referendum: The 2006 Midterm Congressional Elections," *Political Science Quarterly* 122, no. 1 (2007): 1–24, https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1538-165X.2007.tb00589.x; Brian J. Gaines et al., "Same Facts, Different Interpretations: Partisan Motivation and Opinion on Iraq," *Journal of Politics* 69, no. 4 (2007): 957–74, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2508.2007.00601.x.

align their views accordingly.[25] In a polarized world, the effect of party endorsements on public opinions increases, voter receptiveness to substantive information declines, and voters become more confident in their own opinions.[26] Moreover, the fragmented media and social media landscape facilitate self-confirming information seeking,[27] and partisans select increasingly distinct media sources that reinforce their pre-existing views. Emotion also drives partisan identities, and leaders use charged rhetoric to connect with co-partisans and accentuate differences with members of the other party. Such affective polarization has led partisans to view members of the outgroup with increasing suspicion, hostility, and even hatred.[28]

From the perspective of group identity polarization, leaders may be able to influence the level of voter support for alliances through their rhetoric. Trump openly questioned the value of alliances and used angry rhetoric to suggest that allies were ripping off the United States. He sought to increase South Korea's contribution toward the cost of maintaining U.S. troops in South Korea from $900 million to $5 billion.[29] Moreover, he suggested at times that the United States should undo one of its key commitment mechanisms by removing U.S. troops from South Korean soil.[30] Co-partisans may be influenced by such messages from a leader, which may be reinforced through selective consumption of news and social media, emotional appeals by the president or other leaders, and other types of motivated reasoning.[31] If

voter views are, in fact, highly malleable, as Matthew Baum and Philip Potter suggest, then the dynamics of costly signaling may be undermined, which could weaken the credibility of America's commitment to defend South Korea.[32] A leader such as Trump may have the means to limit domestic audience costs by swaying supporter opinions and could therefore undo commitment mechanisms, such as drawing down or eliminating America's troop presence, with little domestic political consequence.

Some evidence suggests that group identity polarization may have different effects on Democrats and Republicans. Some research has found that Republicans are more prone to feelings of outrage.[33] Moreover, partisan sorting has created greater social cohesion in the Republican party as it has become whiter and more Christian, while Democrats have become a broader and more diverse coalition.[34] With less heterogeneity and greater tendency to feelings of outrage, polarizing cues may have clearer and stronger effects for Republicans than for Democrats.

Existing Work

While there is some existing work that is relevant to understanding the effects of partisanship on support for alliances, the evidence is mixed. One study suggests that there is no partisan divide between Democrats and Republicans toward alliances.[35] Other research finds that audience costs do not vary by partisanship in situations that involve a leader backing down from a public statement to defend

25   Gabriel S. Lenz, *Follow the Leader?: How Voters Respond to Politicians' Policies and Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013; Thad Kousser and Bruce Tranter, "The Influence of Political Leaders on Climate Change Attitudes," *Global Environmental Change*, no. 50 (May 2018): 100–09, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2018.03.005.

26   James N. Druckman, Erik Peterson, and Rune Slothuus, "How Elite Partisan Polarization Affects Public Opinion Formation," *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 1 (2013): 57–79, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23357757.

27   Matthew A. Baum and Tim Groeling, "Shot by the Messenger: Partisan Cues and Public Opinion Regarding National Security and War," *Political Behavior*, no. 31 (2009): 157–86, http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11109-008-9074-9.

28   Tal Orian Harel, Jessica Katz Jameson, and Ifat Maoz, "The Normalization of Hatred: Identity, Affective Polarization, and Dehumanization on Facebook in the Context of Intractable Political Conflict," *Social Media + Society* 6, no. 2 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120913983; James N. Druckman et al., "Affective Polarization, Local Contexts and Public Opinion in America," *Nature Human Behaviour*, no. 5 (January 2021): 28–38, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-020-01012-5; Dannagal Goldthwaite Young, *Irony and Outrage: The Polarized Landscape of Rage, Fear, and Laughter in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Almog Simchon, William J. Brady, and Jay J. Van Bavel, "Troll and Divide: The Language of Online Polarization," *PNAS Nexus* 1, no. 1 (March 2022), https://doi.org/10.1093/pnasnexus/pgac019; Baum and Groeling, "Shot by the Messenger."

29   "Exclusive: Inside Trump's Standoff with South Korea Over Defense Costs," *Reuters: 2020 Candidate Slideshows*, April 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-southkorea-trump-defense-exclusiv/exclusive-inside-trumps-standoff-with-south-korea-over-defense-costs-idUSKCN21S1W7.

30   David Choi, "Trump Considered 'Complete Withdrawal' of US Troops from South Korea, Former Defense Chief Says," *Stars and Stripes*, May 10, 2022, https://www.stripes.com/theaters/asia_pacific/2022-05-10/defense-secretary-mark-esper-memoir-president-trump-south-korea-troops-5954121.html.

31   Matthew A. Baum and Philip B. K. Potter, "Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy in the Age of Social Media," *Journal of Politics* 81, no. 2 (2019): 747–56, https://doi.org/10.1086/702233; Aaron M. McCright and Riley E. Dunlap, "The Politicization of Climate Change and Polarization in the American Public's Views of Global Warming, 2001–2010," *Sociological Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (2011): 155–94, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.2011.01198.x; Amy Mitchell et al., "Political Polarization & Media Habits," Pew Research Center, Oct. 21, 2014, https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2014/10/21/political-polarization-media-habits/.

32   Baum and Potter, "Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy in the Age of Social Media."

33   Young, *Irony and Outrage*.

34   Mason and Wronski, "One Tribe to Bind Them All."

35   Dina Smeltz, "Are We Drowning at the Water's Edge? Foreign Policy Polarization Among the US Public," *International Politics* 59, no. 5 (2022): 786–801, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-022-00376-x.

another country (not necessarily an ally) that has been invaded.[36] Michael Tomz and Jessica Weeks reach a similar conclusion with regard to formal alliances. They found that alliance treaties increase audience costs and that these effects hold regardless of partisan affiliation.[37] Joshua Alley, however, notes systematic differences between strong partisans, specifically Democrats who are committed to alliances and Republicans who are skeptical of alliances. Moreover, these strong partisans are not responsive to elite cues.[38] Kyung Suk Lee and Kirby Goidel investigated whether different framings and partisan cues affect U.S. voter support for NATO. They found that framing the alliance in terms of cost to the United States reduces support for NATO, but that a cue from Trump had a weaker and more mixed effect.[39] This study seeks to contribute to this work by systematically examining the effects of ideological and group identity polarization using four survey experiments.

We used four survey experiments to test for partisan effects consistent with ideological and group identity polarization effects.

Research Approach

Case Selection

While there is debate about the use of hypothetical versus real world cases, we have chosen to focus on U.S. voter views toward South Korea.[40] Compared to hypothetical scenarios that do not use actual countries, using the U.S.-South Korean alliance allows us to present more realistic scenarios to participants.[41] At a minimum, there is likely to be higher validity because it pertains to an alliance that is important in its own right, and possibly more broadly to other similarly situated alliances such as the U.S.-Japanese alliance.

The United States and South Korea have had a formal military alliance since 1954, after an armistice was signed halting the Korean War. But even since America's entry into the war in 1950, domestic politics have played a key role in U.S. policy toward South Korea. America's involvement in the war was subject to domestic partisan politics with objections over the cost of the war, America's strategy, the sacking of Gen. Douglas MacArthur, and other issues.[42] In the late 1970s, President Jimmy Carter's announcement of the withdrawal of all U.S. troops from the Korean Peninsula led to a political backlash from the armed forces as well as congressional leaders from both parties, which ultimately curtailed the drawdown of troops. Furthermore, in response to Carter's intention to remove U.S. troops, Congress also authorized an aid package to strengthen South Korea's military.[43] More recently, Trump revisited the issue of support for South Korea. He openly questioned the need for U.S. military troops in South Korea and reportedly intended to remove them.[44] He also made demands for much higher financial contributions to host the U.S. military in South Korea.

Empirical Strategy

We used four survey experiments to test for partisan effects consistent with ideological and group identity polarization effects. For the experiments, we presented our surveys to two separate pools — one made up of Democrats and the other of Republicans — of roughly the same size to focus on the effects of partisanship. The samples were balanced to be representative of U.S. census demographics in terms

36   Matthew S. Levendusky and Michael C. Horowitz, "When Backing Down Is the Right Decision: Partisanship, New Information, and Audience Costs," *Journal of Politics* 74, no. 2 (2012): 323–38, https://doi.org/10.1017/S002238161100154X; Miles M. Evers, Aleksandr Fisher, and Steven D. Schaaf, "Is There a Trump Effect? An Experiment on Political Polarization and Audience Costs," *Perspectives on Politics* 17, no. 2 (2019): 433–52, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592718003390.

37   Tomz and Weeks, "Military Alliances and Public Support for War."

38   Joshua Alley, "Elite Cues and Public Attitudes Towards Military Alliances," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 67, nos. 7–8 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1177/00220027221143963.

39   Kyung Suk Lee and Kirby Goidel, "US Public Support for the US-NATO Alliance," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 34, no. 2 (Summer 2022), https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edac011.

40   Ryan Brutger et al., "Abstraction and Detail in Experimental Design," *American Journal of Political* (2022), https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12710 demonstrate that findings hold across experiments using abstraction or greater realistic detail.

41   Katrin Auspurg and Thomas Hinz, *Factorial Survey Experiments*, vol. 175 (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2014)

42   Steven Casey, *Selling the Korean War: Propaganda, Politics, and Public Opinion in the United States*, 1950–1953 (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

43   Han Sungjoo, "South Korea and the United States: The Alliance Survives," *Asian Survey* 20, no. 11 (1980): 1075–86, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2643910.

44   Mark T. Esper, *A Sacred Oath: Memoirs of a Secretary of Defense during Extraordinary Times* (New York: Harper Large Print, 2022).

of age, race, and region. In addition, the samples were approximately representative in terms of household income.[45] This block randomization approach enabled us to examine treatment effects more efficiently along partisan lines.[46] The first experiment that we present below tests to see if there are underlying ideological differences between parties. The following three experiments prime respondents using treatments that target partisan group identities, including leadership cues, media cues, negative language cues, and positive language cues. It should be noted that we do not directly test the effect of partisan polarization or address whether it is increasing or not. Rather, our approach seeks to test for partisan effects that we would expect given the well-documented conditions of growing ideological and group identity partisan polarization.

The four experiments were fielded in two distinct online surveys of American voters. The first survey included the group identity polarization experiments and consisted of 1,896 respondents who took the survey between December 2021 and January 2022. The second included the ideological polarization experiment and consisted of 625 respondents who took the survey in March 2023. Both surveys were fielded with Lucid, a digital marketplace specialized in recruiting representative, high-quality survey takers.

We measure participants' commitment to alliances in two ways: 1) as the degree of support to directly aid or defend South Korea across different situations; and 2) the level of support for a key commitment and reassurance mechanism in a crisis situation: the deployment of troops on South Korean soil.

Ideological Polarization Experiment

As discussed above, there is some evidence to suggest that Republicans may be more skeptical of alliances than Democrats. To test if there are any underlying policy differences between Republicans and Democrats when it comes to alliance commitment, we use a vignette survey experiment that was fielded from March 7, 2023 to March 14, 2023. After giving their consent to participate in the survey, respondents were provided with this brief description of our survey:

An on-going question in U.S. foreign policy is when to provide types of support to countries. We'd like to ask you a few questions about this subject.

In the sections that follow, you'll be presented first with some background about the topic. After reading the background, you will then be asked to consider situations that are hypothetical but realistic scenarios.

Respondents then read the following text:

In the sections that follow, you'll be asked some questions about South Korea. For your convenience, we've put together some information about South Korea that may be relevant. Please read the following information carefully before proceeding to the next step.

We then provided a neutral presentation of South Korea that avoids overt partisan cues. The description of South Korea is composed from the six conditions listed in Table 1. To make it easier for respondents to retain the information that they read, we limited the information we presented to only three of the conditions and listed them as bullet points. The specific combination of three bullet points each respondent read was randomly assigned.

The first three facts in Table 1 are our key treatment conditions of interest. The ALLY condition is designed to test whether knowing that South Korea is a formal treaty ally influences the level of support for South Korea differently for Democrats and Republicans. The ALLY condition states when the alliance treaty was signed, notes that it is currently in force, and cites text from the actual treaty that refers to mutual defense against external attack. The COST condition mentions the approximate annual cost to the United States of maintaining its presence in South Korea.[47] We include costs since there may be a partisan divide over the financial burden of supporting allies. As noted earlier, a much larger share of Republicans than Democrats believe that U.S. treaty obligations to NATO should be contingent on their financial contribution. Moreover, Trump raised concerns that America pays too much to support its allies (e.g., NATO allies, Japan, South Korea, etc.). To gauge the extent to which presenting a convergence of national interests might increase support for South Korea, we include the COMMON INTEREST condition. This highlights that North Korea and China pose economic and military threats to South Korea and to the United States.

So that we could include or exclude the above three conditions of interest and keep the length consistent

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45   See demographic distributions of respondents in Appendix B at https://tnsr.org/2023/10/alliance-commitment-in-an-era-of-partisan-polarization-a-survey-experiment-of-u-s-voters/.

46   Auspurg and Hinz, *Factorial Survey Experiments.*

47   *Burden Sharing: Benefits and Costs Associated with the U.S. Military Presence in Japan and South Korea,* U.S. Government Accountability, March 17, 2021, https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-21-270.

ALLY	In 1953, the United States and South Korea signed a formal military alliance, which remains in effect to this day, that declares "publicly and formally their common determination to defend themselves against external armed attack."
COST	The United States spends upwards of $3 billion annually to maintain its military presence in South Korea.
COMMON INTEREST	The largest military and economic threats to South Korea are its neighbors, North Korea and China, which many experts believe pose significant threats to the United States as well.
ESTABLISHMENT	South Korea, formally known as the Republic of Korea, was established in 1948 after World War II.
POPULATION	South Korea has a population of 51.74 million, ranking as the 13th largest Asian country.
GDP	South Korea has a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of 1.8 trillion United States dollars, a little under one tenth of the GDP of the United States.

Table 1. Ideological Polarization Treatment Conditions

(three bullet points), we also had three additional facts that contain generic information about South Korea. These include the ESTABLISHMENT condition, which describes the foundation of South Korea in 1948; the POPULATION condition, which lists South Korea's population size and ranking; and the GDP condition, which references South Korea's GDP size in dollars and in relation to the U.S. economy.

After reading the three randomly assigned facts about South Korea, respondents were presented with four different conflict scenarios with the order in which the scenarios appeared randomized to avoid order bias.[48] Each scenario involves a military conflict between South Korea and an adversary (either China or North Korea). After each scenario, respondents indicated their level of support for a possible U.S. response using an 11-point Likert scale ranging from -5 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). To make

these decisions more realistic, each option to support South Korea incorporates costs to the United States. For three of the scenarios, U.S. intervention would result in thousands of U.S. military casualties. In the fourth scenario, the costs are economic — billions of dollars to the U.S. economy. We used a variety of scenarios — including one direct attack and seizure of South Korean territory as well as conflicts that involve coercion and the use of force against South Korean forces in other contexts — to gauge how robust voter support is for South Korea.

The NORTH KOREA scenario involves a North Korean invasion of a South Korean island. U.S. support for South Korea is described as leading to military casualties. In the MINING scenario, China seizes a South Korean mining operation in disputed seas. The United States then must decide whether to help South Korea retake the mining operation and maritime space, even with the possibility of casualties. In the CYBER ATTACK scenario, the United States weighs launching a cyber attack against China in retaliation for its cyber attack on South Korea. China's cyber attack is prompted by America and South Korea signing a new military cooperation agreement. U.S. involvement would lead to billions of dollars of economic damage to the United States as well as shutdowns of some of its critical infrastructure. Finally, a SEA PATROL scenario describes a conflict arising from a Chinese attack on South Korean naval vessels that are part of a joint patrol with the United States in the South China Sea, a body of water described as vital to international trade. America must decide whether to aid South

> **We used a variety of scenarios — including one direct attack and seizure of South Korean territory as well as conflicts that involve coercion and the use of force against South Korean forces in other contexts — to gauge how robust voter support is for South Korea.**

48   See Table A.1 in Appendix A for a full description of the scenarios, available at https://tnsr.org/2023/10/alliance-commitment-in-an-era-of-partisan-polarization-a-survey-experiment-of-u-s-voters/.

Korea or not in an operation that is expected to lead to U.S. military casualties.

Results and Discussion

Looking at the responses from both Democrats and Republicans, the overall level of support is positive across all four scenarios, but there is some variation. As Figure 1 shows, for three scenarios — NORTH KOREA, MINING, and CYBER ATTACK — the level of support for helping South Korea ranges from about 1 to 1.2 on the Likert scale that ranges from -5 (strongly disagree) to +5 (strongly agree). For the SEA PATROL scenario, in which the United States weighs a strike on a Chinese ship in retaliation for the Chinese military sinking a South Korean ship, the average response is lower at 0.52.

the figure shows, the gap is quite large, with Republican responses about a full point lower on the Likert scale. In the case of the SEA PATROL scenario, the mean response for Republicans is slightly negative, while the mean response for Democrats, while still lower than for other scenarios, is about 1.

The differences are statistically significant for one-tailed and two-tailed t-tests ($p < .0001$) for all four scenarios. We also examined the treatment effects on partisans.[51] We do not find any systematic differences in the treatment effects on Republicans and Democrats. In particular, there is little evidence that describing South Korea as an ally (ALLY) matters for Democrat or Republican views on defending South Korea. For three of the four scenarios, there is no statistically significant effect. Only in the MINING
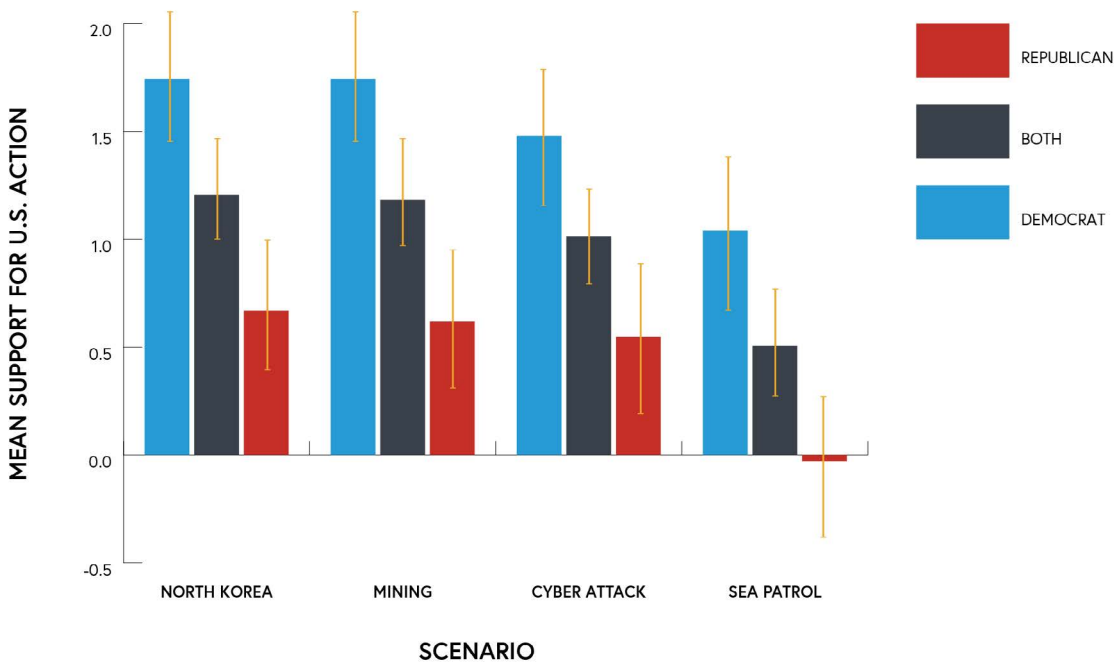

Figure 1. Mean Response by Scenario for all Respondents

Figure 1[49] also shows the partisan differences in response between Democrats and Republicans. For this, as well as for subsequent experiments, we define "partisans" as those who self-identify with a specific party.[50] The results show clearly that there are meaningful differences between the two. Compared to Republicans, Democrats express higher levels of support for South Korea across all four scenarios. As

scenario is there a negative effect, but it is on the outer edge of standards for statistical significance ($p < 0.10$). This may seem to suggest that knowing that a country is an ally might have little effect on support to defend a country, but caution is required in interpreting the data, because the result could reflect that some respondents likely already know that South Korea is an ally. The COST condition also has

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49   95 percent confidence intervals are shown.

50   Our vendor targeted partisan respondents by using this screening question: "In politics today, do you consider yourself a Democrat, Republican, or Independent?" We also asked respondents: "Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic party?" In robustness checks, we used participants' vote for the 2020 presidential election as an alternative measure of partisan identity. See Appendix C at https://tnsr.org/2023/10/alliance-commitment-in-an-era-of-partisan-polarization-a-survey-experiment-of-u-s-voters/.

51   The statistical results are presented in Appendix A at https://tnsr.org/2023/10/alliance-commitment-in-an-era-of-partisan-polarization-a-survey-experiment-of-u-s-voters/.

little to no significant effect, suggesting that concerns about the cost to the United States of supporting an ally does not contribute to a difference in policy preference between Democrats and Republicans. Finally, we also find no evidence that the COMMON INTEREST condition conveying common national interests affects support for South Korea.

> **In this experiment, we explore the effect of cues from political figures and news media outlets — both of which can evoke partisan sentiments and group identities — on Democrat and Republican support for South Korea.**

In sum, we find strong support that Democrats and Republicans have different preferences toward allies. This evidence is robust across a variety of realistic scenarios, while controlling for different treatment conditions in the presentation of South Korea. Moreover, these results hold even when including information in scenarios that should increase Republican support relative to Democrats. Compared to Democrats, Republicans tend to support the use of force more, are less sensitive to casualties, and view China as more threatening.[52] And yet, Republicans show lower support for South Korea across the scenarios that incorporate these conditions.

Group Polarization Experiments

As discussed above, existing literature suggests that group identity polarization can have strong effects on partisans' views. In this section, we present our results from survey experiments that test if partisan cues influence levels of support for aiding and supporting South Korea.

All three of the experiments in this section are framed around a true current event, namely the perceived threat of hypersonic missiles from China and North Korea. Hypersonic missiles travel sev-

eral times faster than the speed of sound and have unpredictable flight paths, which makes it difficult for countries to defend themselves against them. In 2021, shortly before our survey was fielded, China launched a successful hypersonic missile test, and North Korea claimed to as well, raising concern in the United States and allied countries in East Asia.

The experiments were also conducted within the same survey that was fielded between Dec. 16, 2021, and Jan. 27, 2022.[53] At the start of this survey, all respondents were first presented with factual information about the hypersonic missile testing in East Asia. Then, survey respondents were presented with the Leadership and Media Cues Experiment and either: 1) the Negative Language Cues Experiment, or 2) the Positive Language Cues Experiment. Since participants were only presented with one of the two language experiments, they never received contradictory treatments.

To control for contamination across experiments, we randomized the order of their appearance: Some participants received the Leader and Media Cues Experiment first and others received the Negative/Positive Language Cue Experiment first.[54]

Leadership and Media Source Cues

In this experiment, we explore the effect of cues from political figures and news media outlets — both of which can evoke partisan sentiments and group identities — on Democrat and Republican support for South Korea. To do this, we created a fabricated news article excerpt reporting on the actual developments regarding the hypersonic missile situation described earlier. The excerpt included a fictitious quote urging U.S. public support for South Korea. The text of the excerpt read as follows:

> *After back-to-back hypersonic ballistic missile tests from China and North Korea, experts are concerned about the danger this poses to South Korea. "I will do everything in my power to defend our South Korean allies," said [INSERT PERSON] at a press conference today, "we can not tolerate any Chinese or North Korean threat against the core American values of liberty and democracy."*

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52   Carrie A. Lee, "Polarization, Casualty Sensitivity, and Military Operations: Evidence from a Survey Experiment," *International Politics*, no. 59 (2022): 981–1003, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-022-00378-9.

53   The group polarization experiments were conducted in a different survey from the previously discussed ideological polarization experiment, which was fielded in March 2023.

54   In Appendix C, we investigate any possible spillover effects. See the online version of this article at https://tnsr.org/2023/10/alliance-commitment-in-an-era-of-partisan-polarization-a-survey-experiment-of-u-s-voters/.

To examine the effect of leadership cues, we randomized the attribution of the quote between Trump, President Joe Biden, and a made-up foreign policy expert. To explore the effect of media source cues, we randomized the news source of the article. We embedded these excerpts into mock-ups that appear as screenshots of websites from Fox News, CNN, and AP News. The text remained the same across all variations. This yielded nine treatment variations, presented in Table 2.[55]

The distribution of responses to the question of whether to defend South Korea is presented in Figure 2 for Democrats and Republicans. It is worth noting the sharp discontinuity at zero — both Democrats and Republicans are much more likely to support rather than oppose defending South Korea in the case of conflict. In fact, on average, support appears fairly consistent regardless of partisanship.

In Figure 3[56] we present mean responses to this question, separated by party affiliation and treatment

Conditions	Options
NEWS	Option 1: CNN Option 2: Fox News Option 3: AP News
LEADER	Option 1: Joe Biden Option 2: Donald Trump Option 3: Neutral Expert

Table 2. Experiment 2 Treatment Conditions

Survey participants were randomly assigned one of these nine variations. Afterwards, participants were asked to answer the following question on a scale of -5 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Suppose that China or North Korea launches a hypersonic missile attack on South Korea. The U.S. government must now decide whether to defend South Korea by responding to the attack, an action that would likely result in several thousand casualties. To what extent do you disagree or agree that the U.S. should defend South Korea?

group. As we had expected, support is much greater among Republicans after receiving a cue from Trump. Likewise, a cue from Biden also increases support among Democrats. Moreover, we find evidence of affective polarization among Democrats, who are significantly less likely to defend South Korea when prompted to do so by Trump.

We examine the effect of the LEADER condition by performing one tailed t-tests comparing mean responses across treatment groups for Democrats and Republicans separately.[57] Democrat support of South Korea was 0.36 points higher if they received the Biden cue relative to the neutral control and 0.68
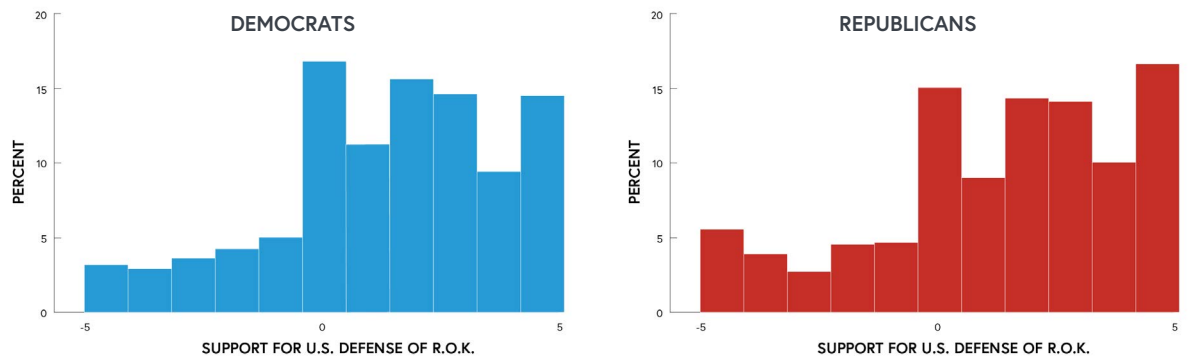
Figure 2. Histogram of Response to the Leader and Media Cue Experiment

55   For examples of these texts, see Table A.10 in Appendix A, at https://tnsr.org/2023/10/alliance-commitment-in-an-era-of-partisan-polarization-a-survey-experiment-of-u-s-voters/.

56   95 percent confidence intervals are plotted.

57   See Table A.6 in Appendix A at https://tnsr.org/2023/10/alliance-commitment-in-an-era-of-partisan-polarization-a-survey-experiment-of-u-s-voters/.
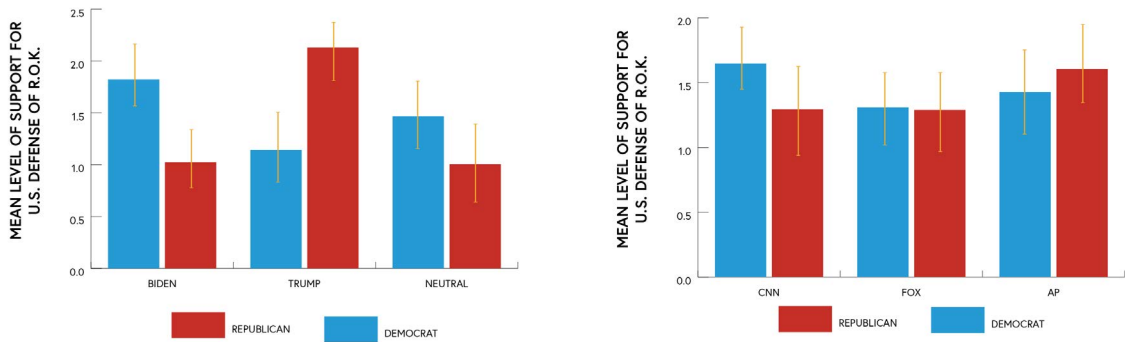
Figure 3. Mean Response by Treatment Group

points higher relative to the Trump cue. Interestingly, the Trump cue significantly decreases support among Democrats, relative to the neutral control, by about 0.32 points. For Republicans, the Trump cue increases support by more than 1 point on the Likert scale relative to both the control and the Biden cue. However, the Biden cue does not affect Republicans differently from the control group. Therefore, we find that group identity has an effect on the views of both Democrats and Republicans, who are more likely to support South Korea when given a cue that aligns with their group identity. Among Democrats, we further find evidence of affective polarization: A Trump cue decreases support for South Korea below the baseline of a neutral expert about as much as a Biden cue raises support.

In contrast, the NEWS condition did not have a significant effect on Democrats or Republicans.[58] This suggests that leader cues may be more effective in arousing partisan sentiment, especially in issues pertaining to alliances.

Our results differ from those of Kyung Suk Lee and Kirby Goidel, who found that, while framing an alliance in terms of cost reduces U.S. voter support for NATO, a Trump cue has a weaker and more mixed effect.[59] We believe that our experiment has an important methodological advantage: We embed our experiment into a realistic news story that provides a quote attributed to the former president, whereas Lee and Goidel present a long text that describes Trump's views in the third person. It is plausible

that this difference in framing explains the diverging results. Another difference is that our experiment examines the effect of leadership cues in *raising* support for South Korea, since the quote expresses a positive view. Lee and Goidel instead present Trump's negative views of NATO. The quote we chose to attribute to Trump is in many ways misaligned with the platform that the former president pushed forward during his campaign and time in office, so we presume that an alternative framing that presented a *negative* point of view toward South Korea would have equal or stronger effects in reducing Republican support for the alliance. However, we leave the validation of this hypothesis to future research.

Negative Language Experiment

Above, we saw that key information about the U.S.-South Korean alliance does not affect Democrats' and Republicans' views on whether to support South Korea. But does the *language* in which this information is presented make a difference? In this section and the subsequent section, we study the role of language in shaping support for alliances. Polarizing language is often encountered in the context of social media, so for these experiments, we chose to present the treatments in the form of tweets from a fabricated user. Given the mutually contradicting frameworks of the Negative Language and Positive Language Experiments, respondents were randomly assigned to one or the other, but never to both.

Conditions	Options
RIPPING OFF	0: "relying excessively on U.S. support" 1: "ripping us off"
AMERICA FIRST	0: "carefully consider national interests" 1: "put America first"

Table 3. Negative Language Experiment Treatment Conditions

58 See Table A.7 in Appendix A at https://tnsr.org/2023/10/alliance-commitment-in-an-era-of-partisan-polarization-a-survey-experiment-of-u-s-voters/.

59 Lee and Goidel, "US Public Support for the US-NATO Alliance."

In the Negative Language Experiment, we were interested in understanding the differential effect of language that is critical of an ally on Republicans' and Democrats' overall support for South Korea. Toward this end, respondents were presented a tweet with the following structure:

*Once again, South Korea is [**Ripping Off Condition**] by asking us to intervene in this conflict with China. It is time that we [**America First Condition**] and keep troops home! #hypersonicmissile*

By contrast, the effects of the negative language treatments for Republicans are quite large and statistically significant.

The text in the two condition blocks was randomly assigned from the options presented in Table 3. In both cases, the first option expresses a point of view using mild negative language and the second option expresses the same point of view using more emotionally charged language. The text was then formatted to look like tweets.[60]

Both conditions reflect concerns raised by Trump during the 2016 election and his subsequent years in office. The Ripping Off Condition echoes a frequent claim Trump made that allies "rip us off." The America First Condition emulates Trump's campaign slogan "America First" that he used during the 2016 election campaign, and which later became a tagline for his foreign policy approach. In both cases, the second option utilizes the same language that Trump has used in the past.

Additionally, we included a control treatment with no tweet to provide a baseline reference. Respondents in the control group were presented the following information on the situation:

After news about the hypersonic missile tests was released, South Korea requested increased U.S. military support. The U.S. is currently considering whether to deploy more troops to South Korea.

Survey participants were randomly assigned one of these four treatment variations or the control. Afterward, participants were asked whether they disagreed or agreed with the following statement on a scale of -5 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree): "The U.S. should deploy troops to South Korea."

The distribution of responses to the question of whether the United States should deploy troops to South Korea is much more uniform than that of whether to defend South Korea in the Leader and Media Cue Experiment, especially for Republicans, a third of whom indicated that America should *not* deploy troops to South Korea. In contrast, about a quarter of Democrats opposed deploying troops.

In Figure 5, we show the effect of each treatment on Republicans' and Democrats' responses to the question of whether to deploy troops to South Korea across treatment groups. The first two bars indicate that the mean level of support for respondents in the control group (i.e., those who did not receive any tweet) is positive and relatively high for both Republicans and Democrats, although Republican support is slightly higher. The impact of the treatments vary widely, however, by political party. The negative language treatments have relatively small negative effects on Democrats, and neither the mildly negative nor the stronger negative cues are statistically significant. By contrast, the effects of the negative language treatments for Republicans are quite large and statistically significant. In fact, support among Republicans who saw any version of the tweet dropped sharply. Republicans who saw a tweet indicating that the United States should "carefully consider national interests" or that South Korea is "relying excessively on
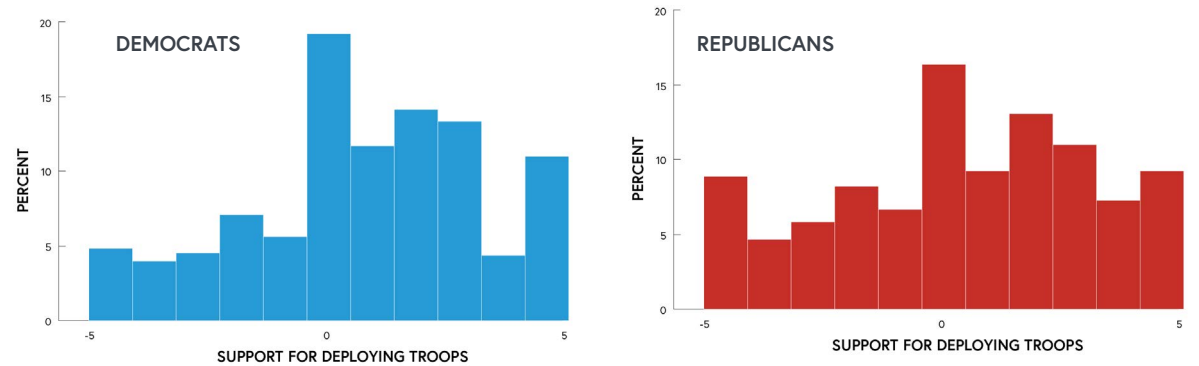

Figure 4. Histogram of Responses to Negative and Positive Language Experiment

60   See Figure A.2 in Appendix A, available at https://tnsr.org/2023/10/alliance-commitment-in-an-era-of-partisan-polarization-a-survey-experiment-of-u-s-voters/.

U.S. support" had mean scores about 1 point lower than those in the control group. Support for South Korea fell even further relative to the mild negative language cue for Republicans who received versions of the tweet that used stronger language associated with Trump. In particular, Republicans who saw the phrase "ripping us off" had a mean response 0.5 points lower than those who saw the more neutrally framed "relying excessively on U.S. support." The inclusion of the term "America first" also lowered support for South Korea relative to those who saw the phrase "carefully consider national interests," though in this case the difference is not statistically significant. The stronger versions that evoke Trump's rhetoric also lowered support among Democrats relative to the mild negative cue. The differences are not statistically significant, however, perhaps due to the implicit Trump cue.

Thus, the mean level of support among Republicans who saw the stronger negative cues — "ripping us off" and "put America first" — dropped to below zero while among Democrats support remained positive across the board.[61]

*This move by China is [**Values Condition**]. We must [**Duty Condition**] and deploy troops to protect South Korea! #hypersonicmissile*

The text for each condition is randomly assigned from options presented in Table 4. Again, the first option for each condition expresses a point of view using more neutral language, and the second option expresses the same point of view using emotionally charged language.

The conditions in this experiment reflect more traditional arguments in favor of U.S. involvement abroad, using the lofty language about duty and values that the Biden administration often utilizes. The Values Condition presents an ideological argument against China's actions, using language about "American values." The Duty Condition studies the effect of rhetoric regarding America's international responsibilities — emphasizing the "duty" of the United States to the rest of the world — on the public's willingness to support South Korea.

We used the same control group from the Negative Language Experiment and again randomly assigned
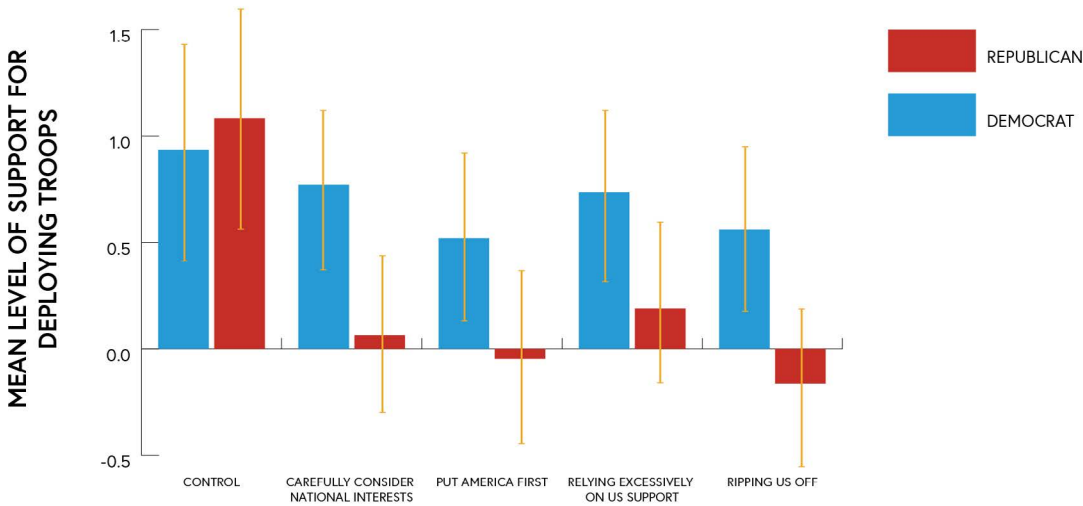
Figure 5. Mean Support to Deploy Troops by Treatment Group

Positive Language Experiment

The Positive Language Experiment examines the effect of language that reinforces and upholds alliances. We chose to use a similar experiment format as in the Negative Language Experiment, but in this case, the tweets express support for deploying more troops to South Korea. The template for each tweet is as follows:

the other respondents to one of the tweet variations. Participants were asked to rank whether they agreed or disagreed with the same statement presented in the Negative Language Experiment.

Both the VALUES and DUTY conditions had insignificant effects on both Democrats and Republicans, whose support for South Korea remained stable across all treatments.[62] Therefore, it appears that

61   The results of our statistical tests can be found in the appendix in Table A.8. See https://tnsr.org/2023/10/alliance-commitment-in-an-era-of-partisan-polarization-a-survey-experiment-of-u-s-voters/.

62   For the specific results, see Figure A.1 and Table A.9 in Appendix A at https://tnsr.org/2023/10/alliance-commitment-in-an-era-of-partisan-polarization-a-survey-experiment-of-u-s-voters/.

Conditions	Options
VALUES	0: "concerning from an ethical standpoint" 1: "an outright challenge against American values"
DUTY	0: "take action" 1: "uphold our duty to our international partners"

Table 4. Experiment 4 Treatment Conditions

appeals to traditional arguments in favor of alliances do not shift public opinion. Our results suggest that negative language that demeans alliances is more effective in changing public opinion than positive language which upholds alliances. One caveat, though, is that the positive cues, while more in line with rhetoric used by Biden, are less identifiable with a specific leader, compared to the more negative nationalist language used by Trump.

Conclusion

Collectively, our findings suggest that there are meaningful partisan differences in the level and resilience of support for a major U.S. ally, South Korea. Republicans have lower enthusiasm for aiding South Korea than Democrats, a finding that is consistent across different scenarios and controlling for different presentations of South Korea. This finding is particularly striking given that Republicans tend to be more willing in general to support the use of force, are more tolerant of casualties, and tend to view China as more threatening than Democrats. On average, however, it should be noted that Republicans still support helping South Korea in all but one of our scenarios in our ideological polarization experiment.

We show that partisan polarization can create greater uncertainty in voter support for defending an ally and troop deployments abroad.

Furthermore, our experiments investigating the effects of appeals to partisan group identity suggest that certain cues can shift support for an ally, in some cases sharply. A cue from a co-partisan leader (Biden or Trump) shifts voter views in the direction of the cue. The magnitude of the co-partisan leader effect is larger for Republicans who received the Trump leader cue than for Democrats who re-

ceived the Biden cue. This finding is particularly notable since: 1) the message Republicans received in the treatment supportive of aiding South Korea was substantively the opposite of much of Trump's actual anti-alliance rhetoric as a leader; and 2) Republicans express, on average, lower support than Democrats for defending and aiding South Korea as described above. We can speculate that a strong anti-alliance message would have at least as large of an effect on Republican voters. Indeed, we do find that negative language critical of allies reduces support for South Korea in a crisis situation both for Democrats and Republicans, although the effect is much larger and only statistically significant among Republicans. Positive language toward allies that appeals to duty and values, however, has no meaningful effect on Republicans or Democrats. Given that the strong negative cues are likely associated with messaging from the Trump administration, we cannot discount that the effect we are seeing reflects a shadow Trump cue, nor can we know yet if these expressions will prove durable and will resonate with Republican voters in the future. Nevertheless, even mild negative cues with no association with Trump have large effects. Lastly, we find some evidence of affective polarization, but only among Democrats. A Trump cue can push Democratic sentiment in the opposite direction, thereby increasing polarization. This was only observed in one of the experiments, but it is worth further investigation.

Our study does have several limitations and caveats. First, we do not directly test if the increase in polarization in American society accounts for the partisan differences that we observe. Instead, we draw on the robust literature and polls discussed above that substantiate that both ideological and group-identity polarization have increased. We thus take polarization as a given. Given that our experiments were conducted at one point in time, we cannot test if these effects of partisanship are more pronounced than they were in the past or if they will intensify if polarization were to increase in the future.

Second, since we focus specifically on American voter views of South Korea, we cannot necessarily assume that our findings will apply to other alliances. Still, there are some reasons to be optimistic about the broader relevance of our work. South Korea shares strong common interests with the United States: Its adversaries — a nuclear-armed North Korea and China — are also widely seen as threats to America. Thus, if we see partisan differences in support for South Korea, we would expect to see even larger effects when it comes to allies with less convergent security interests. Furthermore, a 2022 article found that studies, like ours, that give participants specific details tend to produce similar results compared to designs that are more abstract (e.g., those that do not use specific countries or leader names). If anything, the effects in experiments with more detail tend to produce more conservative results compared to more abstract experimental designs.[63]

Despite these caveats, our results provide meaningful grounds for concern about how domestic politics might weaken U.S. alliance commitment. We show that partisan polarization can create greater uncertainty in voter support for defending an ally and troop deployments abroad. There are, however, many other ways that one can imagine how partisanship might weaken U.S. support for an ally. In the event of conflict, for instance, U.S. resolve to stay engaged would also likely be subject to partisan messaging and cues. Indeed, as current events in Ukraine show, even a small but dedicated minority could potentially block funding and threaten support for another country, using partisan slogans to justify their positions for withdrawing it.

These findings have policy implications for East Asia. The U.S.-South Korean alliance is one of the most significant alliances in East Asia. Strong public support in the United States for the alliance is necessary for maintaining a credible deterrent and reassuring allies in East Asia. With public support so subject to polarizing cues, adversaries may seek to exploit such divisions and attempt to sow doubt about the credibility of America's security guarantee. Alarmed allies, dependent on the United States for their security, may seek to realign their foreign policies through various forms of hedging. Indeed, it is no coincidence that public support in South Korea for nuclear weapons increased and a growing number of experts began to call for the development of nuclear weapons during the Trump presidency.[64]

If there is a silver lining to our findings, it is that, in the absence of polarizing cues, Democrats and Republicans still support defending and aiding South Korea across a variety of crisis situations. To maintain support for the U.S.-South Korean alliance moving forward, our research shows that leader cues and messaging are paramount. Both can play a meaningful role in maintaining or undermining domestic support in the United States for allies such as South Korea. ▲

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Image: *Executive Office of the President of the United States*[65]

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63   Brutger et al., "Abstraction and Detail in Experimental Design."

64   Wiliam Gallo, "As Trump Looms, South Koreans Mull Their Own Nukes," *Voice of America*, Nov. 24, 2022, https://www.voanews.com/a/as-trump-looms-south-koreans-mull-their-own-nukes/6848246.html.
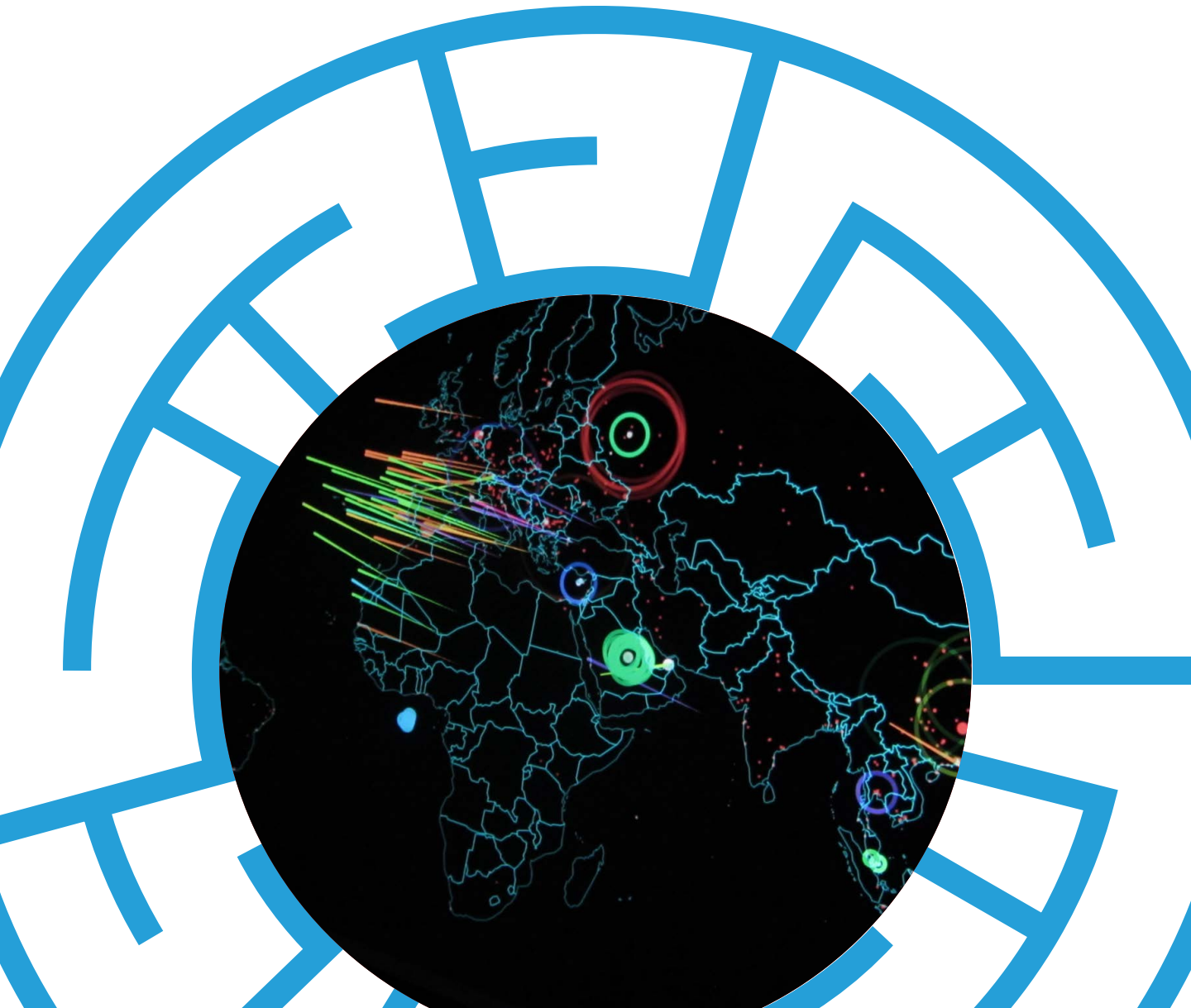
65   For the image, see https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:President_Biden_met_with_President_of_South_Korea_Yoon_at_the_Presidential_Office_in_Yongsan_2022.jpg.

WAR IS FROM MARS, AI IS FROM VENUS: REDISCOVERING THE INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT OF MILITARY AUTOMATION

Jon R. Lindsay

For nearly a century, the artificial intelligence (AI) revolution has been just over the horizon, and yet that horizon is always receding. Dramatic advances in commercial AI once again inspire great hopes and fears for military AI. Perhaps this time will be different. Yet, successful commercial AI systems benefit from conducive institutional circumstances that may not be present in the anarchic realm of war. As AI critics have recognized since the Cold War, the complexity and uncertainty of security competition tend to frustrate ambitious applications of military automation. The institutional context that makes AI viable, moreover, is associated with important changes in patterns of political violence. The same liberal order that encourages AI innovation also enables more subversive forms of conflict. Military organizations that adopt AI, therefore, are likely to adopt more institutionalized processes to enable automated decision systems, while military AI systems are more likely be used in more institutionalized environments. Unintended consequences of institutionalized automation include unmanageable administrative complexity and unappreciated human suffering in chronic limited conflicts.

AI is once again a hot topic in national security. Hopes and fears about autonomous weapons have been a staple of military futurism for over 50 years.[1] But "AI hype" has often led to an "AI winter" — a dormant time for AI research and development. Throughout this same period, military organizations have become more dependent on information systems, more fraught with coordination problems, and more frustrated in protracted conflicts.[2] Like the demigod Tantalus, condemned to spend eternity longing for fruits just out of reach, technologists keep seeing the revolutionary promise of military AI on an ever-receding horizon. War "at machine speed" is just 10 years away, and it always will be.

But we've come a long way since Clippy, the Microsoft office assistant from the turn of the millennium. By the mid-2010s, remarkable progress in the development and application of machine-learning techniques began to transform many industries, from advertising to transportation and cybersecurity. This trend has culminated spectacularly in a recent smorgasbord of AI applications available to the public, such as ChatGPT and DALL-E from OpenAI. All of a sudden, AI seems to be mastering consummately human pursuits such as creative writing, software design, and the graphic arts. It looks like Tantalus finally got his apple. The global economy has barely begun to reckon with the potential for disruption and dislocation as industries adapt to harness the power of AI.

The military implications literally write themselves. According to ChatGPT, "AI can enable the development of autonomous weapons systems, such as drones, ground vehicles, and ships. These systems can operate without direct human control, making them faster, more efficient, and potentially capable of executing complex missions with reduced human risk." The bot also describes applications for "En-

1   Paul Dickson, *The Electronic Battlefield* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976); Daniel Deudney, *Whole Earth Security: A Geopolitics of Peace*, Worldwatch Paper 55 (Washington, DC: Worldwatch Institute, 1983); Alvin Toffler and Heidi Toffler, *War and Anti-War: Survival at the Dawn of the 21st Century* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co, 1993); James Adams, *The Next World War: Computers Are the Weapons and the Front Line Is Everywhere* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001); Peter W. Singer, *Wired for War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009); Ben Buchanan and Andrew Imbrie, *The New Fire: War, Peace, and Democracy in the Age of AI* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022).

2   C. Kenneth Allard, *Command, Control, and the Common Defense* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990); Paul N. Edwards, *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997); Daniel R. Lake, *The Pursuit of Technological Superiority and the Shrinking American Military* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Jon R. Lindsay, *Information Technology and Military Power* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020).

hanced Situational Awareness ... Decision-Making and Command Systems ... Cybersecurity and Information Warfare ... Logistics and Supply Chain Management ... [and] Predictive Maintenance."[3] ChatGPT reflects back to us a large speculative literature on the transformative strategic implications of AI, both utopic and dystopic. The United States and China, among others, have commissioned numerous studies and developed working prototypes in a quest to realize the dramatic opportunities — and counter the looming threats — of military AI.[4] The warfighting advantages of AI, furthermore, seem poised to alter the balance of power and trigger arms races as democracies and autocracies alike attempt to substitute autonomous systems for human warriors.[5]

These developments, in turn, have prompted understandable concern about the ethics of AI in peace and war.[6] Many drones and other weapons systems already provide fully automated engagement modes, raising urgent questions about meaningful human control and the potential for inadvertent escalation.[7] An even more dire scenario is one in which the rise of AI-enabled systems transcends human control altogether, leading to worries about the existential implications of so-called artificial general intelligence.[8] Industry leaders like Elon Musk have begun calling for more deliberate ethical reflection as well as outright guidelines and regulations for the development of AI before it is too late. Even ChatGPT hastens to reassure us: "While AI has the potential to enhance military capabilities, decisions regarding its use in warfare should be guided by international laws, regulations, and ethical considerations to ensure the protection of civilian lives, compliance with human rights, and prevention of unnecessary suffering."[9]

Much of the ethical and strategic conversation about military AI tends to hold the nature of war constant and to consider issues having to do with the adoption of automated weapons on the battlefield. Futurists worry, in effect, about the weapons of tomorrow in the wars of today. This leads to important discussions about accurate targeting, unintended civilian casualties, and meaningful human control. These are serious problems, to be sure, and it is vital for policymakers and commanders to consider them. Yet, it is further possible that the political context of war itself might change in interesting ways, either because of the introduction of AI or because of some hidden factor affecting both the development of AI *and* the evolution of war. The changing organizational or strategic context of war might lead to rather different concerns. These concerns would be less about the ways in which autonomous machines will behave in familiar wars and more about the ways in which human societies will behave in unfamiliar futures.

There is at least one important topic that ChatGPT fails to consider in its hallucination — a technical term for the generation of false or misleading information[10] — about future war. This is whether and how the very economic context that has created ChatGPT may affect or alter the viability of military AI. It is an obvious but underappreciated fact that most of the impressive applications of AI to date have emerged in the commercial world. War, however, is a very different sort of "business." The conditions that make AI economically viable today may not hold in the chaotic and controversial realm of war, or at least not to the same extent.[11] For instance, AI depends on the availability of data, but war is full of fog and friction. AI depends on having many opportunities for

3   Author query of https://chat.openai.com/, June 9, 2023.

4   Elsa B. Kania, "Battlefield Singularity: Artificial Intelligence, Military Revolution, and China's Future Military Power", Center for a New American Security, November 28, 2017, https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/battlefield-singularity-artificial-intelligence-military-revolution-and-chinas-future-military-power; "Final Report," National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence, March 2021, https://www.nscai.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Full-Report-Digital-1.pdf.

5   Paul Scharre, *Army of None: Autonomous Weapons and the Future of War* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018); Michael C. Horowitz, "Artificial Intelligence, International Competition, and the Balance of Power," *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 3 (May 2018): 37–57, https://doi.org/10.15781/T2639KP49; Michael Raska, "The Sixth RMA Wave: Disruption in Military Affairs?" *Journal of Strategic Studies* 44, no. 4 (2021): 456–79, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2020.1848818; Jeffrey Ding and Allan Dafoe, "The Logic of Strategic Assets: From Oil to AI," *Security Studies* 30, no. 2 (2021): 182–212, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2021.1915583; Buchanan and Imbrie, *The New Fire*.

6   Heather M. Roff, "The Strategic Robot Problem: Lethal Autonomous Weapons in War," *Journal of Military Ethics* 13, no. 3 (2014): 211–27, https://doi.org/10.1080/15027570.2014.975010; Matthew Le Bui and Safiya Umoja Noble, "We're Missing a Moral Framework of Justice in Artificial Intelligence," in *The Oxford Handbook of Ethics of AI*, ed. Markus Dirk Dubber, Frank Pasquale, and Sunit Das (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 163–80.

7   Michael C. Horowitz, "When Speed Kills: Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems, Deterrence and Stability," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 42, no. 6 (2019): 764–88, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2019.1621174; James Johnson, "Delegating Strategic Decision-Making to Machines: Dr. Strangelove Redux?" *Journal of Strategic Studies* 45, no. 3 (2020): 439–477, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01402390.2020.1759038; Kenneth Payne, *I, Warbot: The Dawn of Artificially Intelligent Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021)

8   Nick Bostrom, *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Nathan Alexander Sears, "International Politics in the Age of Existential Threats," *Journal of Global Security Studies* 6, no. 3 (September 2021), https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogaa027.

9   Author query of https://chat.openai.com/, June 9, 2023.

10   Karen Weise and Cade Metz, "When A.I. Chatbots Hallucinate," *New York Times*, May 1, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/01/business/ai-chatbots-hallucination.html.

11   Avi Goldfarb and Jon R. Lindsay, "Prediction and Judgment: Why Artificial Intelligence Increases the Importance of Humans in War," *International Security* 46, no. 3 (2022): 7–50, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00425.

training, but war is a rare and unpredictable event. AI companies submit to the rule of law, while war is famously anarchic. The success of AI systems in the world of peaceful commerce, therefore, may be a poor guide to the performance of AI in the world of wartime combat.

Even more fundamentally, the economic conditions that support AI performance may be associated with important changes in patterns of political conflict. Traditional interstate war, according to classic international relations theory, is a struggle for dominance in an ungoverned world. And yet the modern international system is more globalized, interconnected, interdependent, and institutionalized than ever before. The so-called liberal order is hardly peaceful, however, as we see in the proliferation of espionage and subversion,[12] "hybrid" or "gray zone" conflict,[13] and various forms of "weaponized interdependence."[14] These limited forms of conflict have a different logic. If traditional war is a clash between feuding organizations in anarchy, then subversive conflict works by infiltrating and manipulating societies from within.[15] It is no coincidence that intelligence contests and irregular violence have become prominent in the hyper-globalized 21st century. With more institutions, and more complex institutions, there are more opportunities to subvert them. Yet, this means that shared institutions are a condition for the possibility of subversion and espionage, as well as their modern manifestations in cybersecurity. How, therefore, should we expect people to use AI for conflict *within* social institutions, rather than *between* them? Note further that the outcomes of subversive conflicts and intelligence contests within the global liberal order tend to be protracted and ambiguous, but this is precisely the opposite of the fast and decisive victories envisioned for AI. Should we expect AI to somehow make these more limited forms of conflict more effective, finally, or just more complicated?

This article examines the institutional context of AI to sketch out an alternative interpretation of its strategic implications. I proceed in six parts. First, I discuss popular worries about the substitution of AI for human activity. Second, I highlight enduring concerns about the automation of strategic systems that appeared in the 1980s and still resonate today. Third, I briefly summarize the economics of AI, highlighting the key institutional conditions that shape AI performance. Fourth, I argue that the political logic of war tends to undermine these institutional conditions. Fifth, I explore the implications of the tension between the institutional conditions for AI and the political context of war. Unintended consequences include unmanageable military complexity and degraded human security in more limited forms of conflict within the liberal order. Finally, I conclude that the future of military AI will resemble its past in many ways.

The Myth of AI Substitution

While we seem to be at a watershed moment in the development of AI, we should bear in mind that this is not a new conversation. Indeed, the history of AI and the history of computer science are largely one and the same. Alan Turing imagined his famous universal computing machine as an automated clerk, and Charles Babbage before him imagined the difference engine as an automated parliament.[16] Turing's 1950 essay on automating intelligence still provides thoughtful counterarguments to AI skepticism.[17] The Macy Conferences on cybernetics, which brought together founding fathers of AI like Claude Shannon and John von Neumann, were explicitly dedicated to creating a general science of information and control to build a mechanical brain.[18] Indeed, the nascent field of computer science aimed to create a new kind of agent, if not a new kind of lifeform.

12   David V. Gioe, Michael S. Goodman, and Tim Stevens, "Intelligence in the Cyber Era: Evolution or Revolution?" *Political Science Quarterly* 135, no. 2 (2020): 191–224, https://doi.org/10.1002/polq.13031; Thomas Rid, "A Revolution in Intelligence," in *The New Makers of Modern Strategy: From the Ancient World to the Digital Age*, ed. Hal Brands (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), 1092–1118.

13   Joseph L. Votel et al., "Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone," *Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 80 (January 2016), https://ndupress.ndu.edu/portals/68/documents/jfq/jfq-80/jfq-80.pdf; Alexander Lanoszka, "Russian hybrid warfare and extended deterrence in eastern Europe," *International Affairs* 92, no. 1 (2016): 175–95, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24757841; J. Andrés Gannon et al., "The Shadow of Deterrence: Why Capable Actors Engage in Contests Short of War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (2023), https://doi.org/10.1177/00220027231166345.

14   Daniel W. Drezner, Henry Farrell, and Abraham L. Newman, eds., *The Uses and Abuses of Weaponized Interdependence* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2021), https://www.brookings.edu/book/the-uses-and-abuses-of-weaponized-interdependence/; Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman, *Underground Empire: How America Weaponized the World Economy* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2023).

15   Jon R. Lindsay, "Restrained by Design: The Political Economy of Cybersecurity," *Digital Policy, Regulation and Governance* 19, no. 6 (2017): 493–514, https://doi.org/10.1108/DPRG-05-2017-0023; Lindsey A. O'Rourke, *Covert Regime Change: America's Secret Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018); Melissa M. Lee, *Crippling Leviathan: How Foreign Subversion Weakens the State* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020); Lennart Maschmeyer, "Subversion, Cyber Operations and Reverse Structural Power in World Politics," *European Journal of International Relations* 29, no. 1 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661221117051.

16   Jon Agar, *The Government Machine: A Revolutionary History of the Computer* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

17   A. M. Turing, "I.—COMPUTING MACHINERY AND INTELLIGENCE," *Mind* LIX, no. 236 (October 1950): 433–60, https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/LIX.236.433.

18   Jean Pierre Dupuy, *The Mechanization of the Mind: On the Origins of Cognitive Science* (Princeton, NJ:: Princeton University Press, 2000); Ronald R. Kline, *The Cybernetics Moment: Or Why We Call Our Age the Information Age* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015).

But the mechanization of human intelligence proved elusive. Various technical methods such as formal theorem-proving, expert systems, and other symbol-processing approaches struggled to deliver on their early promises. These symbolic approaches are sometimes described collectively as "good old-fashioned AI" to distinguish them from modern connectionist approaches.[19] Symbolic AI was great at doing some things that seemed hard for humans (like calculating formulae) but quite stupid at other things that were easy (like recognizing images). A common refrain among AI skeptics was that AI lacked common sense and could not appreciate why any given computation might be meaningful or useful to human beings.[20] In attempting to automate a very narrow conception of human reasoning, early AI systems ignored the rich pragmatic context of human perception and decision-making.

We might pause to consider whether Cold War science fiction scenarios from the era of symbolic AI are still the best guide to strategic dilemmas in an era of machine learning and surveillance capitalism.

The field of computer science continued to grow, of course, but not because computers simply replaced human cognition. Rather, the emergence of better information technology created more things for human beings to do. If computers were to be practically useful for anything at all, people had to design applications, develop interfaces, build infrastructure, repair glitches, educate scientists and technicians, implement telecommunications regulations, and so on. This gave rise to an incredible array of new jobs and lucrative economic sectors in the second half of the 20th century. Human interaction thus became even more complex as the reliable functioning of software infrastructure became even more dependent on complementary economic and technical activity.

We are now riding the latest wave of AI enthusiasm. Unlike classic symbol-processing approaches to AI, modern connectionist approaches are inspired by the human brain, to include neural networks, deep learning, and machine learning. The first connectionist models emerged in the early days of cybernetics (the McColloch-Pitts perceptron), but they were not feasible at scale given the limited computing power available at the time. But dramatic advances in memory and computing power in recent decades have made this alternative approach to AI more feasible. Moreover, a host of complementary economic innovations in "big data" or "surveillance capitalism" has supercharged AI innovation by creating markets for AI models and products.[21] The current excitement stems from the impressive performance of machine learning in areas where symbolic AI stumbled (e.g., text translation, image recognition, spatial navigation, etc.). Nevertheless, classic concerns remain that machine learning has no understanding of why its pattern recognition outputs might be meaningful, confusing, misleading, or absurd for human beings.[22] Even worse, biased training data may reinforce structural racism and other social ills.[23] The new technology of AI is encouraging familiar skepticism.

The discourse on military AI goes back to the future as well. The public's conception of military AI is largely the product of science fiction movies from the Cold War. In films like *Doctor Strangelove*, *WarGames*, and *The Terminator*, an AI system is given the authority to start a nuclear war. Humans delegate authority to this AI because they want to improve deterrence, but the AI ends up triggering, or almost triggering, World War III because of, respectively, a tragic misunderstanding, a careless hacker, or a malicious AI. In *Tron*, anticipating themes from *The Matrix*, humans become imprisoned in a simulation run by a dictatorial AI, and they must draw on their unique humanity to escape. In *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Robocop*, we watch AI systems turn on their masters because encoded directives are misaligned with human goals. In *Blade Runner* and *D.A.R.Y.L.*, law enforcement officers hunt down

19   John Haugeland, *Artificial Intelligence: The Very Idea* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985).

20   Harry Collins, *Artificial Experts: Social Knowledge and Intelligent Machines* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990); Hubert L. Dreyfus, *What Computers Still Can't Do: A Critique of Artificial Reason*, Rev. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992); Gene I. Rochlin, *Trapped in the Net: The Unanticipated Consequences of Computerization* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

21   Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019).

22   Meredith Broussard, *Artificial Unintelligence: How Computers Misunderstand the World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018); Brian Cantwell Smith, *The Promise of Artificial Intelligence: Reckoning and Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019)

23   Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018); Ruha Benjamin, "Race After Technology," in *Social Theory Re-Wired*, ed. Wesley Longhofer and Daniel Winchester, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Routledge, 2023), 405–16.

robots that have come up with their own goals, and that seem to be too dangerous for governments to tolerate. And last but not least, *Star Wars* gave us adorable droids with desires, emotions, senses of humor, and, occasionally, formidable lethality.

Most modern discussions about the ethics of military AI are implicitly focused on scenarios like these. The AI technology that we worry about today may be more realistic or grounded in contemporary prototypes, but the basic concerns dramatized in Cold War science fiction still resonate. We fear that lethal machines will make their own decisions to harm humans without appropriate human control or consent. An important theme that runs through such scenarios is *substitution*. The key assumption is that robots will replace some human functions, perform some human tasks, and become autonomous characters, which leads to either good robots (*Star Trek*) or bad robots (*The Terminator*). These robotic substitutes may add something extra (strength, speed, calculating ability) or miss something important (compassion, insight, understanding, creativity). They may be improved or deficient agents, but they are fully autonomous. The modified capabilities of these human substitutes end up creating dangerous or unintended consequences, which makes it necessary to control, regulate, banish, or battle them.

We might pause to consider whether Cold War science fiction scenarios from the era of symbolic AI are still the best guide to strategic dilemmas in an era of machine learning and surveillance capitalism. Great entertainment might not necessarily be the best guide to the future. One important reason is that technological innovation is guided by two very different economic logics — not only substitution but also *complementarity*. Substitutes replace jobs and functions with a cheaper or better improvement, while complements affect a larger network of jobs and functions throughout society.

Often, the advent of technological substitutes will make social complements more economically and politically valuable. If people find a baker who sells cheaper bread, then the market for butter and jam will increase, which means that new shops will open next to the bakery. Thus, the replacement of the horse-drawn carriage with the automobile required a lot of complementary innovation and infrastructure in terms of roads, repair shops, gasoline stations, car dealerships, assembly lines, and so on. One cannot just swap a horse for a car without considering the profound social changes that make this swapping possible.

Likewise for military AI, we need to ask whether the complementary innovations that are unlocking pro-

ductivity in the AI economy might also be correlated with important changes in the nature or conduct of war. It may be true that an AI drone swarm would be able to defeat a modern company of soldiers in short order, but what are the chances of that company not evolving as well? A machine gun, similarly, would be invaluable when facing an ancient army of hoplite soldiers, but what are the chances that anyone would still fight with spears and swords in the same economic milieu that could produce machine guns? The chances are not strictly zero, as historically lopsided contests between Hernán Cortés and Mesoamericans or the Battle of Omdurman might suggest. But these events are exceptional outliers in military history, and militaries have strong incentives not to repeat them. As military weapons change, the context of war usually changes as well. Either new offensive potentials are countered by defensive innovation with similar technologies or, more radically, political actors start fighting over different things or for different reasons as the economic context changes.

Enduring Software Aspects of Strategic Defense Systems

Instead of taking our inspiration from Cold War science fiction like *Star Wars*, we might do well to study military automation in the real-world "Star Wars." The Reagan administration's Strategic Defense Initiative was an ambitious project to build an automated system that could shoot down enemy ballistic missiles. It featured space-based weapons systems and many computerized components. Automation was justified by the speed at which a missile defense system would have to make decisions in order to intercept incoming targets. Yet, the complementary context of strategic automation proved frustrating.

The Strategic Defense Initiative was a research initiative rather than an operational system. Yet, it raised serious concerns in the arms control community about automated escalation. As one contemporary analyst wrote, "destruction-entrusted automatic devices (DEAD)" for missile defense and nuclear response were "emerging in response to the strategic imperatives of the transparency [information] revolution."[24] This same concern about automated escalation is recognizable in modern worries about lethal autonomous systems. There are a host of extremely important strategic problems to be considered here, ranging from image classification and targeting errors to an excessive speed of decision-making leading to catastrophic escalation.[25]

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24   Deudney, *Whole Earth Security*, 37.

25   Roff, "The Strategic Robot Problem"; Horowitz, "When Speed Kills"; Johnson, "Delegating Strategic Decision-Making to Machines."

These are important concerns that force us to clarify goals and objectives, something that is famously difficult to achieve in politics.

It is important to recognize that these concerns are founded on an assumption that we will be able to build such systems in the first place. What if we will not be able to create strict substitutes for strategic decision-making? What if the concurrent development of the software ecosystem becomes too complex to manage? What if the resulting complexity of hybrid human-machine decision-making in war overwhelms the engineering process? What if the institutional complements to automation make substitution infeasible in realistic wartime scenarios?

Questions like these led the well-known computer scientist David L. Parnas to resign from the Strategic Defense Initiative Panel on Computing in Support of Battle Management. He openly published a series of technical objections in a paper entitled "Software Aspects of Strategic Defense Systems."[26] These objections deserve revisiting in this new era of excitement about military automation.

Parnas argued that it would be impossible for human designers to understand what the Strategic Defense Initiative software systems were doing or to provide training conditions that accurately replicated the fog and friction of a real war in an actual political crisis. And thus, it would also be impossible to draft precise requirements or optimal system designs for circumstances that were guaranteed to change. The net result was that "[t]he military software that we depend on every day is not likely to be correct. The methods that are in use in the industry today are not adequate for building large real-time software systems that must be reliable when first used."[27]

Parnas wrote that "the human mind is not able to fully comprehend the many conditions that can arise because of the interaction of these components" in software systems.[28] Because unanticipated failures could not be ruled out, and "the most competent programmers in the world cannot avoid such problems."[29] The brittleness of logical rules was coupled

with a military problem of staggering complexity: "The system will be required to identify, track, and direct weapons toward targets whose ballistic characteristics cannot be known with certainty before the moment of battle. It must distinguish these targets from decoys whose characteristics are also unknown," and, even worse, "It will be impossible to test the system under realistic conditions prior to its actual use."[30] Strategic Defense Initiative designers were thus forced to make assumptions about the strategic context of system operations that were almost sure to be inaccurate in practice:

> *Fire-control software cannot be written without making assumptions about the characteristics of enemy weapons and targets. This information is used in determining the recognition algorithms, the sampling periods, and the noise-filtering techniques. If the system is developed without the knowledge of these characteristics, or with the knowledge that the enemy can change some of them on the day of battle, there are likely to be subtle but fatal errors in the software.*[31]

Design oversights in military technologies are typically mitigated through human intervention and adaptation, or social complements.[32] As Parnas observed, "It is not unusual for software modifications to be made in the field. Programmers are transported by helicopter to Navy ships: debugging notes can be found on the walls of trucks carrying computers that were used in Vietnam. It is only through such modifications that software becomes reliable."[33] Bottom-up adaptation and repair remains a fundamental feature of military information practice today.[34] Yet, full substitution precludes this vital complement: "Such opportunities will not be available in the 30-90 minute war to be fought by a strategic defense battle-management system."[35]

Parnas evaluated several cutting-edge computational techniques of the early 1980s and found them all wanting. Even with unlimited resources, Parnas

26   David Lorge Parnas, "Software Aspects of Strategic Defense Systems," *Communications of the ACM* 28, no. 12 (December 1985): 1326–35, https://doi.org/10.1145/214956.214961.

27   Parnas, "Software Aspects of Strategic Defense Systems," 1330.

28   Parnas, "Software Aspects of Strategic Defense Systems," 1328.

29   Parnas, "Software Aspects of Strategic Defense Systems," 1327.

30   Parnas, "Software Aspects of Strategic Defense Systems," 1328.

31   Parnas, "Software Aspects of Strategic Defense Systems," 1329.

32   James Jay Carafano, *GI Ingenuity: Improvisation, Technology, and Winning World War II* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2006); Nina A. Kollars, "War's Horizon: Soldier-Led Adaptation in Iraq and Vietnam," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 4 (2015): 529–53, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2014.971947

33   Parnas, "Software Aspects of Strategic Defense Systems," 1329.

34   Lindsay, *Information Technology and Military Power*.

35   Parnas, "Software Aspects of Strategic Defense Systems," 1329.

thought the problem that the Strategic Defense Initiative was trying to solve was intractable: "I don't expect the next 20 years of research to change that fact."[36] If today's challenges in ballistic missile defense are any indication, Parnas' estimate of 20 years was far too conservative. Parnas' skepticism about Strategic Defense Initiative software reliability provides a cautionary tale for any ethicists who hope to encode reliable standards of operation into AI systems for any combat scenario: "It is inconceivable to me that one could provide a convincing proof of correctness of even a small portion of the SDI [Strategic Defense Initiative] software. Given our inability to specify the requirements of the software, I do not know what such a proof would mean if I had it."[37]

Parnas was especially pessimistic about AI: "[I]t is natural to believe that one should use this technology for a problem as difficult as SDI [Strategic Defense Initiative] battle management." But this belief was based on magical thinking, he suggested. "Artificial intelligence has the same relation to intelligence as artificial flowers have to flowers. From a distance they may appear much alike, but when closely examined they are quite different. I don't think we can learn much about one by studying the other. AI offers no magic technology to solve our problem."[38]

Software engineering is always hard, but it is even harder when software systems are expected to perform in situations that are infrequent, complex, and unpredictable. Sadly, the uncommon is common in combat.

Parnas was obviously talking about a previous AI technology (i.e., formal theorem-proving, symbolic logic, or expert system databases). Today's machine-learning techniques seem more impressive and less brittle. Indeed, these are boom times for AI in the commercial economy. We are seeing AI perform tasks that once seemed to belong exclusively to the human domain. AI systems are composing orchestral music, writing interesting screenplays, debugging software code, and generating compelling visual art. AI systems are automating factories, supercharging advertising, and making commercial travel more convenient. AI systems are also excelling in video games and competitive strategy games. It is a reasonable assumption that the automation of war is right around the corner. Why shouldn't war also become more efficient and precise, and why shouldn't robotic combatants become even faster and more creative?

Deep-learning technology is different, to be sure, but warfighting problems and warfighting organizations are as complex as ever. Software engineering is always hard, but it is even harder when software systems are expected to perform in situations that are infrequent, complex, and unpredictable. Sadly, the uncommon is common in combat.

Parnas focused mainly on technical points, but he directed his final criticism toward the Strategic Defense Initiative Organization that managed the program. He was troubled by "people telling me they knew the SDIO [Strategic Defense Initiative Organization] software could not be built but felt the project should continue because it might fund some good research."[39] These concerns are familiar to anyone who has studied the U.S. defense industry.[40] Parnas wrote that he was "astounded at the amount of money that has been wasted in ineffective research projects." He concluded that "[t]he SDIO [Strategic Defense Initiative Organization] is a typical organization of technocrats. It is so involved in the advocacy of the program that it cannot judge the quality of the research involved."[41] This concern is still relevant for modern AI research and procurement. Large-scale AI projects are still likely to be shaped by organizational imperatives for autonomy, resources, control, and identity, not simply pure strategic imperatives. Military services and defense contractors alike have political and economic incentives to oversell the potential of AI and undervalue the human work on which it depends.

In some ways, AI procurement pathologies may be even more acute today. The explosion of hype around commercial applications like ChatGPT creates a sense

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36   Parnas, "Software Aspects of Strategic Defense Systems," 1332.

37   Parnas, "Software Aspects of Strategic Defense Systems," 1334.

38   Parnas, "Software Aspects of Strategic Defense Systems," 1332–33.

39   Parnas, "Software Aspects of Strategic Defense Systems," 1334.

40   Peter Dombrowski and Eugene Gholz, *Buying Military Transformation: Technological Innovation and the Defense Industry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

41   Parnas, "Software Aspects of Strategic Defense Systems," 1335.

that the AI revolution is nigh. The great expectations for military AI in the Chinese and American defense communities create competitive incentives to invest in AI. And yet, the technical and institutional complexity of AI makes it hard for most policymakers or outside observers to evaluate claims about the military potential for AI. Science fiction tales of robot wars make it easy to "securitize" AI to sell parochial policies and products, just as myths of "cyber war" spurred major investment in cyber security.[42] The benefits of AI investment are concentrated for defense contractors and bureaucratic advocates, while skeptical views about the risks of procurement and operationalization are more diffuse. This is a recipe for the private capture of public resources.

The pessimism of Parnas remains relevant because it is ultimately grounded in political conditions, not just engineering considerations. More accurately, building computational systems is an inherently political activity that is based on strong, but usually tacit, assumptions about conflict and cooperation.[43] Most successful software engineering is predicated on cooperation among developers and users, to some degree, and everyone who maintains the economic ecosystem in which these systems will be employed. And many software systems break when competitors emerge from unforeseen places, subverting the means of cooperation to gain a competitive advantage.[44] Put simply, the political complements of AI dominate the potential for technological substitution.

The Economic Logic of AI

There is a burgeoning body of research on the economics of modern AI.[45] Here, I will simply highlight a few key findings and interpretations. The overarching theme is that AI performance depends on institutional complements. This section will flesh out the institutional conditions that facilitate AI in commercial settings. The next section will examine the challenges of meeting these conditions in military settings. The enduring importance of institutional complements helps to explain why the skepticism of Parnas still resonates for modern AI.

Economic models of decision-making typically highlight four components: data, prediction, decision, and action. In military command-and-control doctrine, these four components are known as the "OODA loop," a cybernetic cycle of observing, orienting, deciding, and acting. Information comes in from the world and is assimilated with stored information to produce models of the world. The system then makes decisions about how to achieve a goal by acting to change the state of the world. Here, "prediction" refers to the second step (orienting in the OODA loop) by inferring missing information from stored information.

All of the forms of AI that are getting so much attention today (i.e., machine learning or "narrow AI") are forms of automated prediction. The notion of artificial general intelligence, which carries the myth of substitution to its logical extreme by assuming superhuman autonomy, is still just science fiction. The statistical notion of prediction applies to actual prediction tasks, such as forecasting weather or planning navigation routes, as well as other forms of filling in missing information, as in classifying images or translating texts. Generative AI applications for producing text copy, software code, and graphical designs also rely on statistical prediction. This means that AI automates only part of the decision-making cycle. Robotics, moreover, may automate aspects of the action component of decision-making, such as running factory machinery or flying drones. And there are, of course, many automated sources of data available through the internet and remote-sensing systems.

Judgment, however, remains a consummately human task. The economic concept of judgment refers to ranking preferences over outcomes and determining the payoffs of choices. An AI weather forecasting system can tell you whether it is going to rain with some given probability, but it cannot decide whether you should bring an umbrella. That depends on whether you mind getting wet or find it a hassle to carry an umbrella whether it is wet or dry. These are value judgments that the AI system cannot make. The concept of judgment can be considered more broadly to encompass all manner of meaning, value, preference, or care.

42   Myriam Dunn Cavelty, "From Cyber-Bombs to Political Fallout: Threat Representations with an Impact in the Cyber-Security Discourse," *International Studies Review* 15, no. 1 (2013): 105–22, https://doi.org/10.1111/misr.12023.

43   Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000); John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid, *The Social Life of Information* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2000); Claudio Ciborra, *The Labyrinths of Information: Challenging the Wisdom of Systems* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Laura DeNardis, *Protocol Politics: The Globalization of Internet Governance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

44   Jon R. Lindsay, "Cyber Conflict vs. Cyber Command: Hidden Dangers in the American Military Solution to a Large-Scale Intelligence Problem," *Intelligence and National Security* 36, no. 2 (2021): 260–78 https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2020.1840746; Maschmeyer, "Subversion, Cyber Operations and Reverse Structural Power in World Politics."

45   Covered extensively in Ajay Agrawal, Joshua Gans, and Avi Goldfarb, *Prediction Machines: The Simple Economics of Artificial Intelligence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2018); Ajay Agrawal, Joshua Gans, and Avi Goldfarb, eds., *The Economics of Artificial Intelligence: An Agenda* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); Ajay Agrawal, Joshua Gans, and Avi Goldfarb, *Power and Prediction: The Disruptive Economics of Artificial Intelligence* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2022).

Technical trends in memory, algorithms, and computing power are making AI prediction better and cheaper. But this drop in the price of prediction means that the complements of data and judgment are becoming more valuable. To get AI systems to work, it becomes necessary to have a lot of high-quality, unbiased data. And it is necessary to figure out what to predict and how to act on predictions.

The quality of AI-supported decisions, therefore, will be determined by the quality of the data used to train AI and the quality of the judgments that guide them. Conversely, missing or biased data will lead to suboptimal system behavior. Decisions about appropriate action become challenging when there is political complexity or controversy in decision-making institutions. All the impressive AI achievements are in areas where companies have figured out how to solve the data and judgment problems, typically where decision problems can be very well constrained and lots of representative data can be collected. For other tasks, such as determining the mission and values of an organization, AI is of little use. Companies that figure out how to reorganize themselves to exploit AI complements, which entails investing in data infrastructure and rethinking decision-making processes, may potentially gain a competitive advantage. Substitution alone, however, will not provide a major advantage. AI substitution may even undermine performance if an organization or its environment are unable to accommodate it.

Organizations that want to adopt AI thus must make strategic decisions about organizational design and direction as well as ongoing operational decisions on a case-by-case basis.

A very important decision problem in this respect is understanding the distribution and flow of decision-making in an organization. Disaggregating decisions makes it possible for administrators to identify decision-making tasks that can be fully or partially automated versus those that must be performed by human beings. If a decision can be fully specified in advance — if X then Y — and if lots of data are available to classify situations — X or not X

— then fully automated decision-making may be feasible. AI systems that play video games fall into this category: There is a clear goal of winning the game by getting the most points, and there are millions of previous games to learn from. Many successful implementations of AI, likewise, use automation at an abstract level but rely on human beings to make more fine-grained decisions at a local level. Thus, for instance, executives and engineers at a ride-sharing service have created a business model that can automate route-finding and billing in areas where there are standardized geospatial data available and lots of data about previous trips and rider demand patterns. But the human driver's judgment is still required for passenger safety and navigation in crowded, cluttered environments. Organizations that want to adopt AI thus must make strategic decisions about organizational design and direction as well as ongoing operational decisions on a case-by-case basis.

The challenge of business leadership lies in determining how and whether to reorganize decision-making to make the most of automation within a given economic niche. Many uses of AI, such as self-driving mining trucks on well-controlled routes, the replacement of taxi drivers, or quality-control devices in manufacturing, are still focused on substituting for human prediction tasks while providing complementary infrastructure for data and judgment. Platform innovation is akin to simply replacing steam engines with local dynamos, while systemic innovation entails the invention of assembly lines with distributed energy supplies.[46] We are still largely in the platform substitution phase of the commercial AI revolution, but major realignments may follow from the innovation of systemic complements. There are just a handful of industries, most notably in online advertising, that have fundamentally rearranged business processes and the industrial ecosystem to make the most of automated prediction.

In short, automated prediction depends on the economic complements of data and judgment. These complements, in turn, depend on permissive institutional conditions. Institutions are the human-built "rules of the game" that constrain and enable human beings to solve collective action problems.[47] "Sociotechnical" institutions include the "tools of the game." Data depend not only on data collection, processing, and communication infrastructure, but also on shared standards and technical protocols as well as access, quality control,

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46   Agrawal, Gans, and Goldfarb, *Power and Prediction*.

47   Oliver E. Williamson, *The Economic Institutions of Capitalism: Firms, Markets, Relational Contracting* (New York: Free Press, 1985); Douglass C. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change, and Economic Performance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

and maintenance agreements. Judgment depends on organizational institutions to solicit opinions, develop ideas, adjudicate disputes, and socialize values. Therefore, AI performance depends on socio-technical institutions. And the platform innovations of the future that unlock the productive potential of AI will fundamentally depend on complementary innovations in shared sociotechnical institutions.

Indeed, most command decisions depend thoroughly on diverse background knowledge and common sense, exactly the conditions that are not conducive for AI.

An underappreciated reason why we are seeing so much dramatic progress in AI is that national and global economies are more complex and institutionalized than ever before. Institutions create reliable conditions for exchange. They stabilize data collection protocols and processes for managing, sharing, and curating databases. They also create shared expectations about what political and economic actors want and how they will behave. The institutions that enhance shared data and collective judgment, in turn, depend on complex systems of shared norms, epistemic concepts, and political mechanisms for monitoring and enforcing agreements. The concept of a "global liberal order" can be understood as shorthand for this set of shared expectations, norms, and governance mechanisms. This shared institutional order is what makes AI viable commercially. Conversely, institutional distortions and failures should undermine the viability of AI.

The Political Logic of War

The political logic of war could not be more different. War, in the realist tradition of international relations, is associated with political anarchy.[48] In anarchy, there is no overarching government, and so actors must help themselves to survive and thrive. In anarchy, actors will lie, cheat, and steal, and there is no global court or policy to make them behave. War, conquest, and exploitation are always possible in this tragic world. This situation is the exact opposite of the liberal order described above. This means that the conditions that are most conducive for war are least conducive for AI performance.

AI performance depends on the institutional complements of data and judgment, but these same conditions are absent or elusive in war.[49] War is notoriously uncertain, surprising, and chaotic.[50] Combat is not simply risky because we have to assign probabilities to known variables.[51] It is more fundamentally uncertain because we do not always know what variables matter. Modern theories of war stress that uncertainty is a major — if not *the* major — cause of war.[52] Actors bluff about their power and may not keep to agreements, both of which can make fighting more attractive than peace. Still, wars are rare events. But this is another way of saying that the outbreak of war itself is prime evidence that the political system is unpredictable in some fundamental way. If we observe a war, then at least one actor, and probably more, must be confused about the true balance of power and interests. If this were not the case, they would prefer a deal to avoid the terrible costs and risks of war. War is inherently unpredictable, which does not bode well for prediction machines.

War is also controversial, obviously. Organizations and societies disagree enough to kill and be killed. Contestation includes not only external combat between armed adversaries but also, inevitably, many internal controversies as well. Different components of military organizations will disagree about doctrine or strategy. Different political factions of government will disagree about war aims and the conditions of negotiation. Different interest groups will disagree about what sorts of behavior and targets are legitimate, given the stakes of a conflict. Coordination and consensus are always hard in complex distributed organizations, but these tasks may be well-nigh impossible when the goal is the management of violence

48   Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace,* 3rd ed. (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1960); Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1979).

49   Goldfarb and Lindsay, "Prediction and Judgment."

50   Alan Beyerchen, "Clausewitz, Nonlinearity, and the Unpredictability of War," *International Security* 17, no. 3 (1992): 59–90, https://doi.org/10.2307/2539130.

51   This type of uncertainty is associated with Frank H. Knight, *Risk, Uncertainty, and Profit* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1921).

52   James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (1995): 379–414, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2706903; Erik Gartzke, "War Is in the Error Term," *International Organization* 53, no. 3 (1999): 567–87, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2601290; Kristopher W. Ramsay, "Information, Uncertainty, and War," *Annual Review of Political Science* 20, no. 1 (2017): 505-527, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051215-022729.

for politically consequential stakes. This means that the conditions of clear consensual judgment about strategies, missions, rules, limits, and ethics are especially difficult to achieve. This does not bode well for prediction machines, either.

A more fine-grained look at the conditions that are conducive for AI does little to relieve pessimism. Economist Erik Brynjolfsson and computer scientist Tom Mitchell describe eight general situations that are most amenable to automation with modern machine learning.[53] They provide more nuanced ways of talking about data and judgment. All of them are complicated in a military context:

1. *Learning a function that maps well-defined inputs to well-defined outputs.* This is rarely the case in war. Even in Carl von Clausewitz's day, war was already a nonlinear combination of hundreds of relevant factors: "Bonaparte was quite right when he said that Newton himself would quail before the algebraic problems [war] could pose."[54] The complexity of war today is exponentially greater. As Parnas pointed out with the Strategic Defense Initiative, there were challenging problems with "the number of independently modifiable subsystems, and with the number of interfaces that must be defined. Problems worsen when interfaces may change."[55]

2. *Large (digital) data sets that contain input-output pairs exist or can be created.* Wars tend to have many unique features that resist systematic comparison. As Clausewitz wrote, "Countless minor incidents — the kind you can never really foresee — combine to lower the general level of performance so that one always falls short of the intended goal. ... Moreover, every war is rich in unique episodes. Each is an uncharted sea, full of reefs."[56] While training data for military AI systems can be generated on ranges and in exercises for some tactical scenarios, those systems are likely to encounter many surprises in real combat.

3. *The task provides clear feedback with clearly definable goals and metrics.* War colleges encourage strategists to define clear goals and objective measures of effectiveness. But in practice, goals are ambiguous, contested, and evolving, and military organizations default to measuring their own

performance. Clausewitz again: "[W]ar turns into something quite different from what it should be according to theory — turns into something incoherent and incomplete."[57]

4. *There are no long chains of logic or reasoning that depend on diverse background knowledge or common sense.* War, however, "is dependent on the interplay of possibilities and probabilities, of good and bad luck, conditions in which strictly logical reasoning often plays no part at all and is always apt to be a most unsuitable and awkward intellectual tool."[58] Indeed, most command decisions depend thoroughly on *diverse background knowledge and common sense*, exactly the conditions that are not conducive for AI. Command judgment often has an intuitive and even creative aspect that can only be developed through experience in war and historical study: "Practice and experience dictate the answer: 'this is possible, that is not.'"[59]

5. *There is no need for a detailed explanation of how the decision was made.* Commanders often press their subordinates to explain and justify their decisions as part of an "unequal dialogue" about the relationship between strategic ends and tactical means.[60] Staff officers and intelligence officers are expected to provide evidence supporting their assessments. Commanders and soldiers are held accountable for their decisions, and controversial ones may be investigated in courts martial. These norms are a matter of judgment.

6. *There is a tolerance for error and no need for provably correct or optimal solutions.* This condition appears to be easier to meet in war. Militaries make mistakes all the time — bombs miss their targets and civilians become casualties — and most commanders will not only tolerate but accept a degree of error as the price of doing business on the battlefield. Military solutions tend to be pragmatic and "satisfied" rather than optimal. But error tolerances may vary, for example, in conducting nuclear operations or a sensitive hostage rescue mission. This variance is also a matter of judgment, of course.

7. *The phenomenon or function being learned should not change rapidly over time.* This condition is particularly ironic given the popular assumption

53   Erik Brynjolfsson and Tom Mitchell, "What Can Machine Learning Do? Workforce Implications," *Science* 358, no. 6370 (December 2017): 1530–34, https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aap8062. The italicized sentences in the following numbered list are direct or lightly edited quotes from this article.

54   Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 586.

55   Parnas, "Software Aspects of Strategic Defense Systems," 1329.

56   Clausewitz, *On War*, 120.

57   Clausewitz, *On War*, 580.

58   Clausewitz, *On War*, 580–81.

59   Clausewitz, *On War*, 120.

60   Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Free Press, 2002).

that AI will speed up the pace of war. If so, then AI weapons will undermine a condition for their possibility. More generally, any campaign study will reveal that change is a constant part of war. Even the static fronts of World War I witnessed ongoing innovation in weapons and doctrine prior to the breakouts of 1918, but as innovation opposed innovation, the equilibrium was stalemate.

8. *No specialized dexterity, physical skills, or mobility is required.* War remains a physically demanding, even athletic, endeavor for its participants. Even staff officers find themselves engaging in "battlefield circulation" to inspect and correct local problems or enduring long hours and chronic strain in complex social spaces (i.e., headquarters). Systems break down constantly, requiring ongoing human intervention, repair, and adaptation.[61] Modern combined-arms warfare and "multidomain operations," moreover, require extensive maneuver.

The situations most amenable to automation, in sum, are very hard to meet in wartime scenarios. Nevertheless, we see plenty of military AI applications that have already been fielded or are soon to be deployed. We can point to examples of automated sensors, loitering munitions, and armed drones in use on battlefields today. Experimental prototypes of swarming drones, uncrewed submarines, and robotic wingmen further suggest the art of the possible. Even more applications of AI, but far less glamourous ones, can be found in the realms of logistics, administration, and intelligence. How do we explain this?

Military information systems work well when organizations adopt institutionalized solutions to stable problems.[62] Existing AI prototypes, likewise, work when there is adequate institutional scaffolding for problems that are well defined. What makes for a stable information problem? In practice, no war is completely unconstrained. Anarchy is not absolute. Armed conflict, surprisingly enough, often features some degree of mutual, even voluntary, constraint. Combatant behavior and expectations may be mutually constrained by geographical conditions, common infrastructures, shared practices, or normative institutions. Even the world wars featured coordination, and some outright cooperation, between feuding combatants.[63] Mutual constraints become more salient in more limited wars or in conflicts that are more constrained by civil societies. Each combatant organization and

society, furthermore, is itself an institution, or set of institutions. Military organizations provide shared cultures and standard operating procedures. Military doctrine breaks down complicated operations into simpler steps, scripts, and templates. All this institutionalization in war is what creates the potential for generating data to enable AI systems to perform in well-defined combat scenarios.

The degree of institutionalization of a task, therefore, is what explains the potential for successful automation. Whenever it is easier to meet the conditions enumerated above, we should thus expect to find more promising candidates for military automation. When quality data are not available to inform prediction or judgments are ambiguous or controversial, by contrast, we are less likely to find attractive problems for automation. The scariest scenarios of fully autonomous robot armies may be simply impossible given the severe problems associated with wartime data and strategic judgment. Conversely, the areas of armed conflict that are most bureaucratized are the best candidates for automation. While lethal drones get all the attention, more promising applications may be found in the realms of logistics, administration, personnel, recruitment, medicine, civil affairs, intelligence analysis, and operations research. These categories of military activity have clear analogs in civilian organizations. They are insulated from battlefield turbulence, for better or worse, by a cocoon of standards, protocols, procedures, rules, and regulations. Even Clausewitz recognized the advantages here: "Routine, apart from its sheer inevitability, also contains one positive advantage. Constant practice leads to *brisk*, *precise*, and *reliable* leadership, reducing natural friction and easing the working of the machine."[64] Institutions that enable reliable, repeatable performance also enable automation.

However, many military applications, even the most routinized tasks, will still be difficult to fully automate. As Clausewitz observes, "War is not like a field of wheat, which, without regard to the individual stalk, may be mown more or less efficiently depending on the quality of the scythe; it is like a stand of mature trees in which the axe has to be used judiciously according to the characteristics and development of each individual trunk."[65] Military administration and staff work, as much as combat tasks, require the constant application of judgment. Therefore, while full

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61   Meir Finkel, *On Flexibility: Recovery from Technological and Doctrinal Surprise on the Battlefield* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011); Kollars, "War's Horizon."

62   Lindsay, *Information Technology and Military Power*, chap. 2.

63   Jeffrey W. Legro, *Cooperation Under Fire: Anglo-German Restraint During World War II* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); James D. Morrow, *Order Within Anarchy: The Laws of War as an International Institution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

64   Clausewitz, *On War*, 153.

65   Clausewitz, *On War*, 153.

automation may be possible in theory for some tasks (i.e., those that are standardized, regulated, doctrinal, bureaucratized), we should expect real automation to fall short of the ideal. War is complicated by ubiquitous friction and contingent historical circumstances.

Indeed, reliance on robots might send exactly the wrong message, precisely because the state literally has no skin in the game.

The most realistic scenarios of military automation involve teams of humans and machines.[66] Human beings take the output of prediction systems and then decide how to act on the prediction (or not). Many people are already using generative AI systems in this way to improve writing, coding, and graphic design. Human beings also must define what to predict in the first place, when to make the prediction, and how to act on it. This design work does not occur only in advance but also on an ongoing basis. Teamwork between people and machines should

thus be understood expansively to include all of the support, maintenance, and repair activity required to keep AI infrastructure up and running. The use of AI systems to replace human prediction tasks in existing work processes (substitution) will still require a supporting ecosystem of human work. Human work will be even more salient for the innovation of new military decision-making processes, organizational models, and operational concepts (complements) that can better exploit the power of automated prediction.

The question here is not simply whether military organizations will automate tactical functions that are currently performed by human beings or couple automated classifiers with automated decisions about lethal effects. This is indeed possible and is already happening, to some extent. The extent of automation in any given case depends on the suitability of complementary institutions. To talk intelligently about AI, therefore, we must separate applications into more fine-grained tasks and determine which of them can or cannot be automated. It may not even make sense to talk about "military AI" as a coherent category. We should inquire instead into specific

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66   "Human-Machine Teaming," Chiefs of Staff Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre, U.K. Ministry of Defence, Joint Concept Note 1/18, May 2018, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5b02f398e5274a0d7fa9a7c0/20180517-concepts_uk_human_machine_teaming_jcn_1_18.pdf; Scharre, *Army of None*; Goldfarb and Lindsay, "Prediction and Judgment."

task objectives and workflows, interdependencies across tasks and organizations, and data governance processes in order to understand the feasibility and dynamics of automation.

A more pressing question, from a strategic perspective, is how do automated weapons serve the political purposes of war? This question is fraught for AI since answers depend on judgments about whether, when, and to what degree to employ organized violence to settle political disputes.

For tactical prototypes, combat might be modeled as a game that is won by destroying more enemies while preserving more friendlies. Perhaps modern AI can excel in such games. But at the strategic or political level, war is about solving fundamental disputes. The concern here is not *only* that, as Kenneth Payne argues, "Warbots will make incredible combatants, but limited strategists."[67] In addition to AI's fundamental lack of understanding of the political purposes of and tradeoffs in violent conflict, it is further unclear how the ability of robots to win set piece battles would translate into political influence over human societies. War is a costly, and thereby effective, way of measuring the balance of power between actors who care about something enough to kill and die. But robotic systems enable a state to separate killing from dying, i.e., inflicting hurt while avoiding pain. The use of such systems may not be useful for communicating political resolve. Indeed, reliance on robots might send exactly the wrong message, precisely because the state literally has no skin in the game. It is not clear how costless combat can fulfil the political function of war as the final arbiter of disagreement.[68]

Distinguishing the tactical problems of combat from the political functions of war leads to slightly different questions. Do the motivations for war change with the automation of means? How do the political conditions that give rise to the onset, escalation, or duration of war relate to the economic conditions that support AI performance? Should we expect AI-enabled weapons to be most useful in traditional forms of conflict, which is where most of the research and development efforts and public debate seem to be focused? Or should we expect AI applications to be more prevalent in support of ambiguous or protracted contests in the "gray zone" between peace and war?

The Institutional Complexity of Automated Warfare

During the same century in which the commercial foundations of AI have been developing, long-term patterns of political violence have been shifting.[69] The same economic conditions that make modern AI possible are also associated with important changes in the incidence, intensity, and conduct of armed conflict. Classical liberal perspectives stress the pacifying effects of economic interdependence, which lead to lower rates of major interstate war.[70] As states become more invested in trade, and as war becomes more destructive, states become less interested in open conquest.

The classical perspective is incomplete, of course. The same globalizing developments are associated with an increase in other forms of conflict, typically described in terms of irregular war, hybrid war, gray-zone conflict, cyber conflict, covert action, terrorism, and other forms of political secrecy.[71] From a theoretical perspective, these sorts of conflicts take place *within* shared institutions rather than *between* them. Revisionists subvert or usurp societies from the inside, rather than conquering them from the

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67   Payne, *I, Warbot*, 181.

68   Erik Gartzke, "Blood and Robots: How Remotely Piloted Vehicles and Related Technologies Affect the Politics of Violence," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 44, no. 7 (2021): 983–1013, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2019.1643329. Gartzke discusses the classic *Star Trek* episode, "A Taste of Armageddon," about warring planets that have agreed to spare themselves the cultural destruction of war by simulating combat instead and executing their own citizens. This scenario is predicated on an institutionalized dispute resolution process that is at odds with the anarchic nature of war. War works as a dispute resolution process precisely because it *works outside the rules.*

69   John E. Mueller, *The Remnants of War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Penguin, 2011); Azar Gat, "Is War Declining – and Why?" *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no. 2 (2013): 149–57, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343312461023; Nils Petter Gleditsch et al., "The Forum: The Decline of War," International Studies Review 15, no. 3 (September 2013): 396–419, https://doi.org/10.1111/misr.12031; Bear F. Braumoeller, *Only the Dead: The Persistence of War in the Modern Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019)

70   John R. Oneal et al., "The Liberal Peace: Interdependence, Democracy, and International Conflict, 1950-85," *Journal of Peace Research* 33, no. 1 (1996): 11–28, https://www.jstor.org/stable/425131; John R. Oneal, Bruce Russett, and Michael L. Berbaum, "Causes of Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations, 1885–1992," *International Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (2003): 371–93, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3693591; Erik Gartzke, "The Capitalist Peace," *American Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 1 (January 2007): 166–91, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4122913; Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Power and Interdependence*, 4th ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2011); Erik Gartzke and Oliver Westerwinter, "The Complex Structure of Commercial Peace Contrasting Trade Interdependence, Asymmetry, and Multipolarity," *Journal of Peace Research* 53, no. 3 (2016): 325–43, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343316637895.

71   Michael Poznansky, *In the Shadow of International Law: Secrecy and Regime Change in the Postwar World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Drezner, Farrell, and Newman, *The Uses and Abuses of Weaponized Interdependence*; Allison Carnegie, "Secrecy in International Relations and Foreign Policy," *Annual Review of Political Science* 24, no. 1 (2021): 213–33, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-041719-102430; Farrell and Newman, *Underground Empire*; Nadiya Kostyuk and Erik Gartzke, "Fighting in Cyberspace: Internet Access and the Substitutability of Cyber and Military Operations," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (March 2023), https://doi.org/10.1177/00220027231160993; Gannon et al., "Shadow of Deterrence."

outside. This means that the growth of global liberal order does not categorically reduce conflict. Instead, it alters its manifestation.

Perhaps this is good news, insofar as the risk of total war between nuclear powers becomes less likely. But it is still bad news for human security because civilians tend to bear the brunt of limited conflict and cyber aggression.[72] More robust institutions may enhance the rule of law in democracies, but more robust authoritarian institutions also improve the efficiency of state repression of civil society actors at home and abroad. Even advanced industrial democracies are tempted to expand executive power and enable more intrusive law enforcement. The traditional focus on interstate war tends to overlook intrastate violence. Yet, AI may very well be more consequential for the latter than the former.

It is an unappreciated paradox that the same historical trends that have produced viable commercial AI at scale are also associated with the increasing salience of gray-zone conflict, cyber insecurity, terrorism, subversion, sabotage, and counterintelligence. The current Russo-Ukrainian war, the largest episode of land warfare in Europe since World War II, may be an exception that proves the rule. And yet, Russia escalated because its prospects for winning in the gray zone were declining, and cyber conflict and information operations remain prevalent at the margins of the war.[73] A reasonable question, then, is whether there is some relationship between these two trends. Is there a common cause for the "graying" of conflict and the rise of AI? If so, what does the concurrent change in the nature or conduct of war mean for widespread worries about using certain weapons in war? This raises subtly different questions than those predicated on traditional models of combat.

The emergence of viable AI at scale is a product of global liberal order, which is an amorphous concept that describes a complex constellation of institutions for monetary policy, technical protocols and standards, the rule of law, and so on. The realist tradition of international relations, however, emphasizes that war tends to emerge where institutions are weak or irrelevant, i.e., in a state of political anarchy. So, what does it mean for us to imagine an AI-enabled war, given that the emergence of AI is best explained by liberalism while war is the consummately realist

pursuit? Should we expect AI to work differently in this world, or conversely, should we expect war to take on a different form that is more conducive to AI? I cannot begin to answer these questions here. The dual institutionalization of AI and political conflict is an area ripe for further research. In the pages remaining, I will just speculate on a few possibilities, grounded in what we know about the organizational and strategic context of military technology.

As discussed above, research in economics has established that AI is *not* a simple substitute. AI performance — more precisely, the contribution of machine-learning prediction products to the efficiency of operational tasks — depends on the institutional complements of data and judgment. This will have important implications for military institutions. We should expect that the human support system for institutionalized prediction in military organizations will become ever more complex. This continues a long-term organizational trend toward greater complexity associated with greater reliance on information technology. It is perhaps better to understand AI, cyber security, and network-centric warfare as lesser-included features of a more general informational turn in military practice over the past several decades, rather than as independent revolutions in military affairs. All these informational innovations entail greater sociotechnical complexity.[74]

With more complex, distributed information systems, moreover, comes more potential for disagreement about goals and plans, bureaucratic politics and friction, and interagency and coalition coordination failure, to say nothing of enemy subversion and manipulation. Reliance on AI for almost any military task will require ongoing human intervention, tinkering, and negotiation. These activities are needed to modify system functionality and gain access to relevant data as operational circumstances take unexpected turns. These general tasks become even more difficult in an environment of classified and controlled information, which further exacerbates institutional complexity. AI theorists often emphasize the importance of having a "man in the loop" for any decision. This framing overlooks the fact that any real software system will be a tangled mess of many loops, and loops within loops. This is a longstanding challenge for enterprise software systems.[75] Increasing interdependencies in

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72   Lennart Maschmeyer, Ronald J. Deibert, and Jon R. Lindsay, "A Tale of Two Cybers: How Threat Reporting by Cybersecurity Firms Systematically Underrepresents Threats to Civil Society," *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 18, no. 1 (2021): 1–20, https://doi.org/10.1080/19331 681.2020.1776658; Florian J. Egloff and James Shires, "The Better Angels of Our Digital Nature? Offensive Cyber Capabilities and State Violence," *European Journal of International Security* 8, no. 1 (2023): 130–49, https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2021.20.

73   Gannon et al., "Shadow of Deterrence."

74   Allard, *Command, Control, and the Common Defense*; Chris C. Demchak, *Military Organizations, Complex Machines: Modernization in the U.S. Armed Services* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Rochlin, *Trapped in the Net*; Lindsay, *Information Technology and Military Power,* chap. 1.

75   Frederick P. Brooks, Jr., *The Mythical Man-Month: Essays On Software Engineering*, Anniversary Edition (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Longman, Inc., 1995); Ciborra, *The Labyrinths of Information.*

AI systems, data sources, and client organizations, in an environment of fierce interagency competition and coalition negotiation, will make coordination problems more difficult.[76] Greater adoption of AI, therefore, will simply exacerbate a decades-long trend in military organizations of increasing complexity, coordination problems, and dependence on human capital. In short, more reliance on AI for even mundane military tasks will make military organizations *more* reliant on people, not less.[77]

We can carry this analysis up to the political level. The discussion above suggests a simple argument: If AI performance depends fundamentally on quality data and clear judgment, and if military organizations that depend on AI thus depend more on data and judgment, then data and judgment will become critical strategic resources in political conflict, and adversaries will alter their strategies to complicate and contest data and judgment processes. The very institutional complements that make it possible to use AI in war will change the ways in which that same war will be fought.

Future research should explore not only the ways in which AI changes the technology and tactics of war but also how it interacts with concurrent changes in the strategy and politics of war.

What does this mean in practice? It means that cyber security and disinformation, which are already prominent and incredibly challenging features of modern war, will become even more of a problem in conditions of intensive automation. Adversaries have incentives to manipulate or poison the data that feeds AI systems.[78] AI will thus expand the range of counterintelligence risks to worry about. It also means that adversaries have incentives to move conflict in unexpected directions, i.e., where AI systems have not been trained and will likely perform in undesired or suboptimal ways. This creates not

only data problems but judgment problems as well. Combatants will have to reconsider what they want in challenging new situations. As intelligent adversaries escalate conflict into new regions, attack new classes of targets, or begin harming civilians in new ways, how should AI targeting guidance change, and when should AI systems be withheld altogether? We should expect adversaries facing AI-enabled forces to shift political conflicts into ever more controversial and ethically fraught dimensions.

Adversaries facing automated armies may elect to avoid direct engagements altogether. After all, it may be impossible for the target of automated weapons to determine whether the enemy is fighting with robots because robots are the most effective means or because the enemy is afraid of losing human lives. War is a test of resolve, but automated weapons provide no information about how much their owners are willing to suffer. Targets of automated weapons may thus try to get this information from somewhere else. They might attempt to measure resolve by instead targeting civilians, expanding the war to other regions where robots are not used, or protracting the war to impose more costs over time. We already see some evidence of this dynamic at work in U.S. drone campaigns.[79] At the end of the day, the politics of violence is not only about the ability to kill — which tactical AI forces can do well — but also about the willingness to die — about which the use of automated forces says less than nothing.

A terrible irony is that the use of AI to fight decisive tactical engagements, at reduced risk to military personnel, is likely to result in more drawn-out political conflicts, with increased suffering for civilians. This is not simply a problem of bad targeting guidance or failing to incorporate ethical precepts in lethal control systems, which are the usual focuses of conversations about the responsible use of military AI. The problem is rather that the strategic incentives for inflicting violence change together with material changes in the tactical conduct of war. The underlying political problem here is that AI is a product of stable institutions, but war is a product of anarchy. The conditions that make AI performance better also make traditional war less likely. Conversely,

76   Risa Brooks, "Technology and Future War Will Test U.S. Civil-Military Relations," *War on the Rocks,* Nov. 26, 2018, https://warontherocks.com/2018/11/technology-and-future-war-will-test-u-s-civil-military-relations/; Erik Lin-Greenberg, "Allies and Artificial Intelligence: Obstacles to Operations and Decision-Making," *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 56–76, http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/8866.

77   Goldfarb and Lindsay, "Prediction and Judgment."

78   Heather Roff, "AI Deception: When Your Artificial Intelligence Learns to Lie," *IEEE Spectrum*, Feb. 24, 2020, https://spectrum.ieee.org/automaton/artificial-intelligence/embedded-ai/ai-deception-when-your-ai-learns-to-lie.

79   Erik Gartzke and James Igoe Walsh, "The Drawbacks of Drones: The Effects of UAVs on Militant Violence in Pakistan," *Journal of Peace Research* 59, no. 4 (2022): 463–77, https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433211044673.

the conditions that allow war to persist or escalate also make it harder to use AI systems in reliable ways. Many just-so stories about automated robots engaging in decisive set-piece battles (or even "man in the loop" or "centaur" systems) are based on a political fantasy. Armed conflict — the reduction of political uncertainty through physical violence — is more likely to emerge in areas where AI systems cannot be used effectively, if they can be used at all.

So far, I have emphasized the unintended consequences of military AI for international conflict. But this may not even be the most salient growth area for AI-enabled political violence. Indeed, if the institutional factors of data and judgment are necessary complements for AI, we should expect to see the most promising applications of AI where institutional complements are most robust. AI is an institutional innovation that will help to make strong institutions even stronger. Sadly, this is great news for authoritarians and bad news for civil society. A sweet spot for political applications of AI is the combination of censorship and surveillance infrastructure with internal security operations, especially in societies where there are limited privacy protections and consensus within the regime about its imperatives for survival. AI can be expected to supercharge the chronic counterintelligence siege against subversives, real or imagined. AI thus expands the dragnet for political repression. Again, the key factors here are more institutional than merely technical. The imposition of authoritarian control is the ultimate form of conflict within common societal institutions. AI is not only attractive but viable in authoritarian societies (and in democracies with authoritarian tendencies).

Future research should explore not only the ways in which AI changes the technology and tactics of war but also how it interacts with concurrent changes in the strategy and politics of war. This shift of focus may lead to a different set of ethical, operational, and strategic concerns. As military planners and antiwar activists alike focus on applications of AI for high-end conflict, they may be missing some of the most likely and most pernicious applications of AI in political conflict. It would be tragic to succeed in coming to an agreement about the responsible use of *robots* in major combat operations only to fail to consider the ways in which the same technologies encourage *humans* to behave less responsibly in war.

Judgment Day

Rather than worrying about an AI-enabled apocalypse like "Judgment Day" in the *Terminator* movies, we should be more concerned with the day-to-day judgments that enable complex organizations to muddle through complex environments. AI systems will have to perform in the quotidian world of military bureaucracy, which becomes more necessary than ever to provide data and judgement for military AI.

Each generation of AI has encouraged hopes and fears about military automation. AI hype has typically been followed by disappointed expectations, a few practical applications, and greater institutional complexity. Given the dramatic advances in the world of commercial AI today, many are tempted to assume that this time will be different. But I expect that the future of military AI will resemble its past in many ways.

Great expectations of faster, more decisive, automated war will continue to emerge with every new advance in AI technology (and in information technology more broadly). Commercial successes of AI, moreover, will supercharge those expectations, which will encourage paranoia about shifting balances of power, as well as slicker defense marketing and greater defense spending. Meanwhile, the problems of implementing information systems in complex national security organizations will continue to grow ever more wicked. Twenty-first century military organizations will continue to become more reliant on the civilian economy, civilian technology, and civilian skills. But real wars — and proliferating conflicts short of war — will continue to be as full of friction and as politically frustrating as ever. The only difference is that the increasing complexity of sociotechnical implementations of AI systems will generate even more friction, to include even more opportunities for adversaries to cause friction.

We should thus prepare to be disappointed by AI. Preparation for disappointment can be understood in at least two ways. First, military AI systems will fail to live up to the hype, as they have for over 50 years. Second, because AI systems will not perform as well as their designers intend them to perform, organizations using AI should be prepared to respond creatively and proactively in changing circumstances. Military organizations should prepare and empower their personnel to intervene, adapt, and repair the information infrastructure that enables and constrains AI performance. Military practitioners will also have to sustain an ongoing conversation about what to predict and what to do with predictions. While there is real potential to improve the efficiency of some military tasks, doing so will depend on empowering people to make the most of automated prediction. In lowering our expectations for what AI systems can do, therefore, we also must raise our expectations for what human personnel can do.

The most promising military applications of AI, ironically enough, are in the aspects of war that most resemble peace. These are the boring administrative and logistical parts of the military enterprise

rather than the exciting combat tasks. While the latter garners all the attention in strategic and ethical debates about AI, the former is implicated in more significant long-term organizational changes in the conduct of military operations. There is also, perhaps, some potential for AI in conflicts in the "gray zone" between peace and war, where adversaries struggle within shared systems and with shared resources and assumptions, as well as for improving authoritarian repression through censorship and surveillance. What these developments have in common — greater organizational complexity, more strategic controversy, and more intrusive social control — is greater institutionalization. Large-scale military AI will only be viable if military organizations supply a greater degree of institutionalization themselves, or if they fight (or repress fighting) in more institutionalized environments.

AI relies on large-scale data and stable collective judgments. But these same conditions are elusive in war.

There is a fundamental paradox lurking in the hype about military AI. The political circumstances that are most conducive for automated prediction are in tension with the political circumstances that give rise to violent conflict. AI relies on large-scale data and stable collective judgments. But these same conditions are elusive in war. Most examples of commercial or governmental AI success to date are grounded in the pervasive institutionalization of capitalist infrastructure in a global liberal order. Global information infrastructure, collectively produced and maintained, is the product of extensive social cooperation that is unequalled in human history. AI, to put it glibly, is an economic product of peace. But war destroys the conditions that make AI viable. The conditions that are conducive for AI are not conducive for war, and vice versa. This strategic complementarity embodies a contradiction between the political conditions that are conducive for AI performance and the conditions that are conducive for the onset, duration, and escalation of war.

Reliance on the technology of peace for the politics of war is sure to lead to unintended consequences. The silver lining is that the same conditions that are creating so much fantastic progress in AI are also reducing the attractiveness of major-power war.

There are gray clouds, of course, which are currently gathered over Ukraine and Gaza, because modern militaries can still go to war with traditional weaponry and ignore AI altogether. Another gray cloud is that globalized institutional interdependence is increasing the opportunities for subverting societies and abusing human security. If AI is the future of war, then the dark side of the liberal order is about to get darker still.

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80   For the image, see https://flickr.com/photos/christiaancolen/21382575392/. For the license, see https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/.

SPEAKING OUT: WHY RETIRED FLAG OFFICERS PARTICIPATE IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Risa A. Brooks, Michael A. Robinson, Heidi A. Urben

Recent years have seen retired general and flag officers make a variety of political statements and campaign endorsements, sparking enormous controversy and debate among scholars about the fate of the military's norm of nonpartisanship. Despite this, we have relatively little information about how they actually view those actions and norms more broadly — whether and when they view it as appropriate to speak out on domestic political matters. This article helps to fill that gap, through a unique survey of retired flag officers. The study reveals that, while there is broad agreement on the existence and necessity of a norm against retired officers engaging in partisan speech, there are considerable differences in views about the applicability of the norm and justifications for violating it. In addition, we find that a variety of personal, normative, and ethical factors weigh heavily on whether retired military members engage in activism. We evaluate these findings in the context of a novel framework for assessing norm robustness, concluding that norms against retiree political activism are heavily contested.

Few other issues in U.S. civil-military relations are as controversial as the political activism of retired officers. Much of this modern-day controversy dates back to the 1988 presidential election, when former Marine Corps Commandant Gen. P.X. Kelley endorsed then-candidate George H.W. Bush in a primary, followed by former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Adm. William J. Crowe, Jr. endorsing then-candidate Bill Clinton in 1992. Since that time, endorsements have been regular occurrences during election cycles. Events such as the "Revolt of the Generals" in 2006, in which six former generals criticized Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld for his management of the Iraq War, further focused attention on retired officer speech.[1] During the Trump administration, officers commented about everything from President Donald Trump's policies with regard to the Middle East, to the need to keep the military out of domestic politics, to Trump's leadership style.[2]

Yet, for all of the controversy that such events generate, we know relatively little about how retired officers, especially those at the senior level, actually think about the decision to comment publicly about political matters. Today, retired general and flag officers' beliefs about norms are mostly inferred from survey questions about how officers view different political behaviors. Only rarely have the motivations for speaking out been studied beyond the occasional anecdotal response given in an interview.[3] Even rarer are efforts to systematically compile their views in an anonymized survey setting. Do these former military leaders perceive informal rules — norms — about how they should engage in and relate to politics? What drives them to speak out or refrain from doing so?

This article seeks to address these questions through a unique survey of retired flag officers that asks respondents to report directly on their own views about the informal rules governing their engagement in politics. In carrying out our survey we examine evidence related to "the degree of 'verbal' acceptance of a norm's claims by its addressees," which is a key indicator of a norm's robustness.[4]

The responses reveal a layered set of considerations that shape retired officers' views of the norm governing whether to speak out in partisan contexts. We find evidence that retired flag officers do per-

1   David Cloud, Eric Schmitt, and Thom Shanker, "Rumsfeld Faces Growing Revolt by Retired Generals," *New York Times*, April 13, 2006, https://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/13/washington/rumsfeld-faces-growing-revolt-by-retired-generals.html.

2   Risa Brooks and Michael A. Robinson, "Let the Generals Speak? Retired Officer Dissent and the June 2020 George Floyd Protests," *War on the Rocks*, Oct. 9, 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2020/10/let-the-generals-speak-retired-officer-dissent-and-the-june-2020-george-floyd-protests/.

3   Zachary Griffiths and Olivia Simon, "Not Putting Their Money Where Their Mouth Is: Retired Flag Officers and Presidential Endorsements," *Armed Forces & Society* 47, no. 3 (2021): 480–504, https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327x19889982.

4   Nicole Deitelhoff and Lisbeth Zimmermann, "Norms Under Challenge: Unpacking the Dynamics of Norm Robustness," *Journal of Global Security Studies* 4, no. 1 (2019): 6, https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogy041.

ceive such a norm and share views on the outermost contours of that norm, which designates some behaviors as off limits. While some respondents may question whether retired officers should be subject to constraints on making public commentary, the retired officers we surveyed clearly believe they should maintain limits on their partisan speech and actions. This reveals that the norm operates as a baseline that influences how military leaders think about the tradeoffs involved in speaking out.

Yet, we also find that retired military leaders have different interpretations about the boundaries of the norm, what counts as a violation, and, even more pointedly, whether it is at times justified to violate it. Moreover, while those in the survey report that they are aware of social pressures bearing on their decisions to speak out, they explain their actual choices as stemming from highly personal assessments about the wisdom of doing so. Our respondents indicate that external pressures from their social networks made up of other flag officers have had limited effects on their decisions to speak out or remain quiet. Nor do reflections on the instrumental value or efficacy of shaping debate seem high on the list: Whether their actions will actually change anyone's mind or shift the debate does not seem to be a salient factor in weighing the costs and benefits of speaking out.

Instead, retired flag officers frame these as personal decisions in which they navigate their competing obligations to protect the institution and its members, act in the spirit of their oath to the Constitution, and stay true to their own moral compass.[5] To be sure, such self-reporting on one's motives may reflect some social desirability bias and may not reveal the full array of factors involved in the actual decision-making calculus of our respondents. Still, it is revealing that they expressly disavow social pressures as a main factor in their decision-making and instead emphasize their own volition and moral imperatives.

This article has important scholarly and practical implications for the study of civil-military relations and norms, more broadly. Empirically, the paper contributes by directly examining retired flag officers' thinking about norms, rather than inferring them from surveys about their opinions on other issues. In examining their self-reported rationales, we thus learn how the actors who actually enact norms think about them and the factors that compel them to conform, or not, with their tenets. Specifically, we show that these officers perceive them and feel bound by them. Norms may be unspoken and unacknowledged, but findings from the survey suggest that the agents to whom they apply often likely perceive and reflect upon them. In the terminology of norms scholarship, there is a large degree of "concordance" about the salience of nonpartisan norms among retired flag officers,[6] such that they exhibit high "validity."[7]

At the same time, while there is widespread agreement among scholars that some actions by retired senior officers are off limits, flag officers reveal some variation in what behavior they feel is appropriate and what is not consistent with their professional obligations. There is diversity in how retired military leaders perceive their relationship to politics and political engagement and the boundaries of the norm of non-involvement in partisan politics. By documenting these viewpoints, we thus also add nuance to the debate about political and partisan behaviors in civil-military relations.

The analysis also has lessons for scholarship on norms more broadly. In particular, the findings below illustrate the elasticity of normative interpretations and the complexity of assessing norm violations. One lesson of our findings is that, while outsiders might identify an action as a violation of a norm, agents of those norms might see it differently. In other words, while much political behavior by retired flag officers is seen by scholars as violating a norm, that conclusion rests on a particular interpretation of the standards required of that norm.

In addition, the analysis illustrates the ambiguity inherent in many norms and how that complicates efforts to assess their robustness. Scholars of norms at times treat their tenets as singular and self-evident, with clear implications for the behavior and beliefs of the norms' adherents. But our analysis suggests that norms can be vague and have poorly defined boundaries. This can create uncertainty about whether norms apply in a given situation and can justify varied interpretations of their boundaries. This insight about poorly specified norms, in turn, contributes to scholarly debate about whether contestation over how norms should be applied is norm

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5   Michael A. Robinson, Lindsay P. Cohn, and Max Z. Margulies, "Dissents and Sensibility: Conflicting Loyalties, Democracy, and Civil-Military Relations," in *Reconsidering American Civil-Military Relations: The Military, Society, Politics, and Modern War*, ed. Lionel Beehner, Risa Brooks, and Daniel Maurer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 63–84.

6   Concordance is one indicator of norm strength, or the "extent of collective expectations related to a principled idea." See Michal Ben-Josef Hirsch and Jennifer M. Dixon, "Conceptualizing and Assessing Norm Strength in International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations* 27, no. 2 (2021): 521–47, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066120949628.

7   On the concept of validity as a measure of norm robustness, see Deitelhoff and Zimmermann, "Norms Under Challenge."

violating, or norm enforcing.[8] Our findings suggest that ambiguity promotes both tendencies. It does so by encouraging debate among the subjects of norms about what scholars refer to as their "applicability" in a given situation. Such debate supports normative constructs by reinforcing their salience as a basis for action. At the same time, debates over applicability also undermine norms by facilitating leniency in abiding by them among the norm's subjects. This helps explain the seeming contradiction that retired flag officers both endorse norms that proscribe partisan political activity, but also at times think that actions with clear partisan implications fall within the boundaries of acceptable behavior.

We conclude that, both on behavioral grounds and in terms of attitudes expressed by military leaders, norms against partisan activism by retired military officers are very much contested.

This article proceeds as follows. First, we provide some background to normative arguments about retired officer speech. Scholars continue to debate whether retirement releases individuals from constraints on political activity.[9] We review these debates as background and context for our analysis of the attitudes of retired officers toward partisan speech and activity. Second, we offer a conceptual framework that provides a template for assessing the degree to which a norm against political speech and activity by retired officers is robust, contested, or approaching "death." This framework includes both observable behavioral indicators that this norm exists, as well as motivational elements related to officers' attitudes about the appropriateness of that activism. We look first at what is known at present about the status

of this norm, focusing on the period of the All-Volunteer Force. This section contends that, since the 1990s, there has been a steady movement away from a consolidated norm against retiree political activism — that is, whatever analysts might think about whether there *should* be a norm, in reality there is diminishing evidence that one exists.

Next, we turn to the empirical contribution of this article, which assesses key components of our framework related to how senior officers view the norm of non-involvement in partisan speech and activity. The approach, as noted above, is to evaluate the discursive support for this norm given by those subject to it — in this case, military leaders. We describe the methodology we used to survey nearly two dozen retired flag officers on the topic. Fourth, we report key findings from our survey, including the flag officers' thoughts on the appropriateness of speaking out politically and the particular factors they weighed when considering whether or not to engage in public, political discourse. We then return to the framework and provide an overall assessment of the health of the norm against retired flag officers engaging in political speech today. We conclude that, both on behavioral grounds and in terms of attitudes expressed by military leaders, norms against partisan activism by retired military officers are very much contested. The article closes with a brief discussion of the implications of our findings for military professionalism and civil-military relations.

An Unsettled Norm

In civil-military relations, a trifecta of laws, regulations, and norms govern partisan activity by active-duty military officers. In retirement, officers remain bound by certain Department of Defense regulations regarding political activity, although

8   These are referred to as "applicatory" contestation, in which there is debate over whether a norm applies in a particular context. As Dietelhoff and Zimmerman recount, there is a debate over whether discussion on the applicatory basis of norms indicates their robustness, or "is a backdoor strategy for watering down norms." Dietelhoff and Zimmerman, "Norms Under Challenge," 11.

9   Brooks and Robinson, "Let the Generals Speak?"; Steve Corbett and Michael J. Davidson, "The Role of the Military in Presidential Politics," *Parameters* 39, no. 4 (2009): 58–72, https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.2497; Charles J. Dunlap Jr., "Should Retired Servicemembers Be Subject to Military Jurisdiction? A Retiree's Perspective," *Lawfire*, Feb. 16, 2019, https://sites.duke.edu/lawfire/2019/02/16/should-retired-servicemembers-be-subject-to-military-jurisdiction-a-retirees-perspective/; Peter D. Feaver, "We Don't Need Generals to Become Cheerleaders at Political Conventions," *Foreign Policy*, July 29, 2016, https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/29/we-dont-need-generals-to-become-cheerleaders-at-political-conventions/; Chris Gelpi, "Retired Generals Are People Too!" *Duck of Minerva*, Aug. 9, 2016, https://www.duckofminerva.com/2016/08/retired-generals-are-people-too.html; James Golby, et al., "Brass Politics: How Retired Military Officers Are Shaping Elections," *Foreign Affairs*, Nov. 5, 2012, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2012-11-05/brass-politics; Rick Houghton, "The Law of Retired Military Officers and Political Endorsements: A Primer," *Lawfare*, Oct. 3, 2016, https://www.lawfareblog.com/law-retired-military-officers-and-political-endorsements-primer; Richard H. Kohn, "General Elections: The Brass Shouldn't Do Endorsements," *Washington Post*, Sept. 19, 2000; Michael O'Hanlon, "Civil-Military Relations and the 2016 Presidential Race," *Las Vegas Sun*, Aug. 15, 2016, https://lasvegassun.com/news/2016/aug/15/civil-military-relations-and-the-2016-presidential/; Heidi Urben, "Generals Shouldn't Be Welcome at These Parties: Stopping Retired Flag Officer Endorsements," *War on the Rocks*, July 27, 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2020/07/generals-shouldnt-be-welcome-at-these-parties-stopping-retired-flag-officer-endorsements/; Griffiths, Zachary, "Let's Use Peer Pressure to End Political Endorsements by Retired Generals," *Defense One*, Feb. 18, 2020, https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2020/02/use-peer-pressure-stop-retired-generals-making-political-endorsements/163034/.

these tend to be loosely enforced. Retired officers continue to be subject to the Uniform Code of Military Justice and theoretically could be charged with violating Article 88, which prohibits officers from using contemptuous words against the president and other elected officials, although many observers have pointed out that the likelihood of this occurring is very low. Retired officers who run for elected office also remain subject to provisions of Department of Defense Directive 1344.10, *Political Activities by Members of the Armed Forces*.[10] These provisions pertain to the use of rank and former military status in campaign advertisements. However, this regulation goes to great lengths to encourage all servicemembers to "carry out the obligations of citizenship," and there are few formal restrictions on the political speech of retired officers. In contrast, Department of Defense Instruction 1000.32, *Prohibition of Lobbying by Former DoD Senior Officials*,[11] subjects retired flag officers to a one-to-two year cooling off period during which they are prohibited from lobbying their former military service. No such Defense Department regulations exist regarding political speech or partisan endorsements by retired flag officers.

Despite the regulations cited above, once individuals retire, their behavior regarding political activity is governed largely by norms — social conventions about what behaviors befit a former officer.[12] Among the most important of these norms is the ethic of nonpartisanship. Few in or out of uniform question the necessity of the norm of nonpartisanship for active-duty servicemembers. Subordination to civilian authority requires the military to avoid institutional involvement in partisan politics or even the appearance of it. However, the appropriateness of retired flag officers participating in public, political discourse is a topic that sparks debate among both scholars and practitioners.

Normative arguments that proscribe retired flag officers from speaking out on partisan issues are generally made on three grounds. First, many observers note the unique position that they hold as the elite, senior-most leaders in the military — especially retired four-stars, whom Richard H. Kohn refers to as "princes of the church."[13] The public political pronouncements of a retired four-star are different from those of a retired lieutenant colonel. Although some note that retired flag officers who draw a military pension and remain subject to the Uniform Code of Military Justice maintain formal ties and obligations to the military, even in retirement,[14] most who argue against the propriety of retired flag officers engaging in partisan speech and making endorsements do so from a normative standpoint, not a legal one. That is, they do not hinge their normative argument on the technical detail that retired flag officers are still bound by military regulations. Instead, they argue that retired flag officers have a responsibility to avoid using their rank to interfere in partisan politics because of the special role they play in guarding the reputation of the profession they served — a role that is not severed in retirement.[15]

The second component of the normative argument against retired flag officers speaking out on partisan political issues is the perception that they still speak for the institution, and therefore, their involvement in partisan political speech could be perceived as reflecting the current sentiments of an ostensibly nonpartisan institution. Recent survey research has corroborated some of these concerns, showing that most Americans fail to draw clear distinctions between active-duty and retired flag officers, and that most assume that retired flag officers reflect the views of those serving on active duty.[16] Scholars and practitioners who advise against retired flag officers publicly airing their partisan political beliefs voice concern that doing so will cause the American public to view the military as a partisan actor and will cause the legislative and

10   *Political Activities by Members of the Armed Forces*, U.S. Department of Defense, DOD Directive 1344.10, 2008, https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodd/134410p.pdf.

11   *Prohibition of Lobbying Activity by Former DoD Senior Officials*, U.S. Department of Defense, DOD Instruction 1000.32, 2020, https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/100032p.PDF?ver=2020-03-26-142804-367.

12   Our use of the term "norm" is consistent with Legro's definition — "collective understandings of the proper behavior of actors" — and Finnemore and Sikkink's definition — "a standard of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity." See Jeffrey W. Legro, "Which Norms Matter? Revisiting the 'Failure' of Internationalism," *International Organization* 51, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 31–63, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2703951; and Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (Autumn 1998): 887–917, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2601361.

13   Kohn, "General Elections."

14   Dunlap, "Should Retired Servicemembers Be Subject to Military Jurisdiction?"; Richard Swain, "Reflection on an Ethic of Officership," *Parameters* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 4–22, https://press.armywarcollege.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2348&context=parameters.

15   David Barno and Nora Bensahel, "How to Get Generals Out of Politics," *War on the Rocks*, Sept. 27, 2016, https://warontherocks.com/2016/09/how-to-get-generals-out-of-politics/ ; Eliot Cohen, "General Malaise," *Wall Street Journal*, Aug. 4, 2004, https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB109157496351782215; Martin E. Dempsey and Martin, "Keep Your Politics Private, My Fellow Generals and Admirals," *Defense One*, Aug. 1, 2016, https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2016/08/keep-your-politics-private-my-fellow-generals-and-admirals/130404/; Feaver, "We Don't Need Generals to Become Cheerleaders at Political Conventions"; Kohn, "General Elections."

16   Peter D. Feaver, *Thanks for Your Service: The Causes and Consequences of Public Confidence in the Military* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023); Ronald R. Krebs, Robert Ralston, and Aaron Rapport, "No Right to Be Wrong: What Americans Think About Civil-Military Relations," *Perspectives on Politics* 21, no. 2 (2023): 606–24, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592721000013.

executive branches to view the military as suspect, thereby further weakening civilian control.[17]

Some argue this exchange of military prestige for political power tarnishes the reputation of the military profession and threatens to erode the public's high confidence in the institution — the very factor that compelled politicians to seek out such endorsements in the first place.

The third component of the normative argument against retired flag officers speaking out pertains to the exploitation of military service for political influence or gain. Jason Dempsey has termed this "the paradox of prestige," whereby politicians seek endorsements from retired officers in order to leverage the esteem associated with the military's high public confidence levels.[18] Some argue this exchange of military prestige for political power tarnishes the reputation of the military profession and threatens to erode the public's high confidence in the institution — the very factor that compelled politicians to seek out such endorsements in the first place. It is the specific act of partisan campaign endorsements — in which retired flag officers put their rank, name, and military service behind a candidate for elected office but face no electoral accountability themselves — that critics find most troubling.[19] Those who find fault with partisan campaign endorsements often argue that if retired flag officers want to fully enter the political process, they could run for office themselves and

face the full scrutiny of the American electorate.[20] These proscriptions against retired officers engaging in domestic politics have been commonly cited by many scholars of civil-military relations, as well as publicly referenced in senior officers' public remarks. Still, although the position is less commonly argued, some analysts and retired flag officers themselves contest whether such a norm is necessary or appropriate. There are four main arguments furthered by these proponents of retired flag officers speaking out on partisan political issues. First, they contend that, as retired servicemembers, these individuals are no longer bound by the restrictions they faced while on active duty.[21] Therefore, retired flag officers are free to speak their minds publicly on any issue as an expression of their first amendment rights.[22] Constraining such speech would be anti-democratic.

The second argument is that their years of service to the nation and military experience affords them unique insights and wisdom that the American public would benefit from hearing.[23] As this argument goes, it would be imprudent to deprive the voting public of such insights at election time. Some go further and suggest that it is imperative to hear the political opinions of those who were willing to sacrifice their lives in service to the country.[24]

Third, those who support retired flag officers speaking out on political matters point to the long tradition of former military officers being involved in partisan politics throughout American history.[25] George Washington, Ulysses S. Grant, and Dwight D. Eisenhower served as both generals and presidents, and the republic did not collapse, nor did civil-military norms fray.

A fourth argument — one that has been increasingly deployed since Trump ran for president in 2016 but is not unique to recent times — is that the current stakes are so high that retired flag officers have a special

17   Cohen, "General Malaise;" Feaver, "We Don't Need Generals to Become Cheerleaders at Political Conventions;" Dempsey, "Keep Your Politics Private."

18   Jason Dempsey, *Our Army: Soldiers, Politics, and American Civil-Military Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

19   Lawrence F. Kaplan, "Officer Politics," *The New Republic*, Sept. 13, 2004, https://newrepublic.com/article/75794/officer-politics.

20   M.L. Cavanaugh, "Enough with Political Endorsements from Retired Military Officers," *War on the Rocks*, Nov. 27, 2017, https://warontherocks.com/2017/11/enough-political-endorsements-retired-military-officers/; Dempsey, "Keep Your Politics Private, My Fellow Generals and Admirals."

21   John M. Shalikashvili, "Old Soldiers Don't Have to Fade Away," *Wall Street Journal*, Aug. 17, 2004, https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB109270495423893159.

22   David Evans, "Crowe Endorsement of Clinton Raises More than Eyebrows," *Chicago Tribune*, Sept. 25, 1992, https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1992-09-25-9203270346-story.html.

23   Gelpi, "Retired Generals Are People Too!"; O'Hanlon, "Civil-Military Relations and the 2016 Presidential Race."

24   Jeffrey E. Baker, "The Role of Retired Senior Officers," *The War Room*, Jan. 29, 2021, https://warroom.armywarcollege.edu/articles/ret-sr-officers/.

25   Baker, "The Role of Retired Senior Officers;" Corbett and Davidson, "The Role of the Military in Presidential Politics" Gelpi, "Retired Generals Are People Too!"; O'Hanlon, "Civil-Military Relations and the 2016 Presidential Race."

obligation to speak out.[26] This particular argument acknowledges the validity of the norm of nonpartisanship for retired flag officers but insists that during extraordinary times the norm must be sidestepped.

In short, there are competing views about the norm governing retired officers' political speech, although those that argue against a norm of their abstaining from political speech have traditionally been less influential than those who see the need for sustaining it. Below, we discuss what is known empirically about the state of the norm, beginning with a framework for analyzing it.

A Framework for the Norm of Retired Flag Officers' Political Speech

While scholars and practitioners often note that the norm proscribing retired flag officers from speaking out politically is, at times, debated both within and outside of the military, minimal research has been done to conceptualize what the norm itself looks like and to assess its health. Absent a framework to consider what such a civil-military norm might look like in practice, attempts to assess its robustness are incomplete at best. Thus, below we outline what a norm against retired officers getting involved in domestic politics might involve in principle. Specifically, we present a framework that defines norm robustness along a continuum and includes indicators of a variety of observable behaviors, as well as motivational elements.

Our research builds upon past scholarly work on norm development and robustness that suggests that a norm "life-cycle" exists, whereby norms emerge, are broadly accepted, and then are internalized.[27] We also integrate the potential for norms to erode or "die" into our framework.[28] The framework assesses norm robustness not just with respect to incidences of noncompliance by individual flag officers, but with respect to how those violations are received by other audiences, including the public or other members of the profession.[29] When describing the dynamics of norm death, we thus follow existing approaches that emphasize behavioral non-compliance and external reactions as core indicators of erosion. Yet, as noted above, we also extend the discussion to include whether the norm's subjects believe in the norm, as expressed in their discursive endorsement, or verbal acceptance, of its tenets.[30]

At the far-right end of the spectrum in Table 1 is the idealized version of a vibrant, robust norm against retired officers getting involved in domestic politics, where officers have deeply internalized the norm and perceive that violating it will carry significant costs. Internalization is a far more deliberate proposition than being aware of a norm's existence and understanding it. General comprehension of a norm is required for a baseline level of awareness, but internalization suggests a deeper level of commitment. When norms are deeply internalized in a

Death of a Norm	Contested Norm	Robust Norm
Officers superficially internalize norms	Officers inconsistently internalize norms	Officers deeply internalize norms
Officers no longer perceive offending behaviour as violations; few, if any, costs for violating norms	Officers are conflicted on propriety standards and costs for violating norms	Norms are viewed as costly to violate
Violations are frequent and rarely addressed within the profession	Violations are occasional and inconsistently addressed within the profession	Violations are rare and swiftly addressed within the profession

Table 1. Defining Features of Norm Robustness

26   Carol D. Leonnig and Dan Lamothe, "How Mattis Reached His Breaking Point — and Decided to Speak Out Against Trump," *Washington Post*, June 5, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/how-mattis-reached-his-breaking-point--and-decided-to-speak-out-against-trump/2020/06/05/6aafd548-a69e-11ea-bb20-ebf0921f3bbd_story.html; William H. McRaven, "Revoke My Security Clearance Too, Mr. President," *Washington Post*, August 16, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/revoke-my-security-clearance-too-mr-president/2018/08/16/8b149b02-a178-11e8-93e3-24d1703d2a7a_story.html?noredirect=on; Kori Schake, "McRaven's Rousing Protest: Are Civil-Military and Democratic Norms in Tension?" *War on the Rocks*, Aug. 18, 2018, https://warontherocks.com/2018/08/mcravens-rousing-protest-are-civil-military-and-democratic-norms-in-tension/.

27   Finnemore and Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change."

28   For discussion, see Deitelhoff and Zimmerman, "Norms Under Challenge," 4–5; Diana Panke and Ulrich Petersohn, "Why International Norms Disappear Sometimes," *European Journal of International Relations* 18, no. 4 (2012): 71942, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066111407690.

29   On the importance of how norm violations are received as an indication of contestation, see Richard Price, "Detecting Ideas and Their Effects," in *Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, ed. Robert Goodwin and Charles Tilly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 252–65; Frederick Kratochwil and John Ruggie, "International Organization: A State of the Art on the Art of the State," *International Organization* 40, no. 4 (Autumn 1986): 753–75, https://jstor.org/stable/2706828.

30   Scholars of norm death commonly emphasize non-compliance as a key metric of norm death, although some have also suggested that norms do not simply seek to exist but are more often modified or reinterpreted. It is possible that a new variant of the retiree norm of non-political involvement will emerge that distinguishes among types of involvement or redefines expectations in other ways, but we do not yet have sufficient evidence of systematic changes of that kind. The issue does merit future study, however. For a good discussion of the traditional norm death literature and the possibility of replacement, see Sarah V. Percy and Wayne Sandholtz, "Why Norms Rarely Die," *European Journal of International Relations* 28, no. 4 (2022), 934–54, https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661221126018.

Death of a Norm	Contested Norm	Robust Norm
Retired flag officers frequently issue partisan campaign endorsements	Retired flag officers occasionally issue partisan campaign endorsements	Retired flag officers rarely issue partisan campaign endorsements
Retired flag officers frequently criticize leaders publicly	Retired flag officers occasionally criticize elected leaders publicly	Retired flag officers rarely or never criticize political leaders publicly
Majority of retired flag officers are comfortable speaking out on political matters	Some retired flag officers are uncomfortable speaking our on political matters	Majority of retired flag officers are uncomfortable speaking out on political matters
Majority of active-duty officers approve of retired flag officer political speech	Active-duty officers are slipt on their approval of retired flag officer political speech	Majority of active-duty officers disapprove of retired flag officer political speech

Table 2. Indicators of Norm Robustness

profession, any debates that emerge tend to be one sided, since its members do not see violating those norms as a legitimate option. In fact, when norms are most firmly entrenched, there may be relatively little debate at all about their appropriateness.

A norm has, as Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink describe, "'a taken-for-granted' quality that makes conformance with the norm almost automatic."[31] For example, in wartime, U.S. military leaders do not deliberately weigh whether to violate the law of armed conflict, even though such violations do occur occasionally. This lack of consideration is not solely due to the clear rules that prohibit violating this law, such as the Geneva conventions and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. A code of conduct has been instilled in these leaders from the very beginning of their service. A deep internalization of norms is also buttressed by formal rules and swift sanctioning for violations. An inconsistent internalization of norms, on the other hand, may be accompanied by ambiguous rules and an uneven enforcement of them. Hence, when a norm is deeply internalized, violations that do occur are rare and quickly addressed within the profession and violators sanctioned.

At the opposite, far-left end of the spectrum, a norm is likely defunct and no longer effectively regulates the behavior of members of a profession. In the case of retired officers being politically active, officers superficially internalize the norm — if they internalize it at all — and there are few, if any, perceived costs associated with violating it. Norm violations are frequent and are rarely or poorly addressed within the profession or by the public.

In the middle of the continuum, the norm is contested, and officers inconsistently internalize it. Violations are occasional and are inconsistently addressed or sanctioned publicly or by other retired officers.

In Table 2, we have identified specific indicators of the health of a given civil-military norm — in this case, the norm that retired flag officers should refrain from political speech. Observable indicators include the extent to which they issue partisan campaign endorsements, publicly criticize elected leaders, and are comfortable speaking out on political matters, along with how active-duty officers view retired flag officer political speech. Other indicators, taken up in later sections of this article, relate to attitudes professed by flag officers about the norm (i.e., how they view the norm itself, its boundaries, and its applicability to their own behavior).

Assessing the frequency of various behaviors is a function of both the prevalence of political activities — how often and how routine they are — and the proportion of individuals engaging in them at any given time. For example, retired flag officers rarely issuing partisan campaign endorsements or publicly criticizing elected leaders are indicators that the norm is robust, whereas a majority of retired flag officers being comfortable speaking out on political matters and a majority of active-duty officers supporting them in doing so are indicators that the norm is defunct. Norm degradation can be a function of slow and steady erosion, punctuated by dramatic or egregious lapses, but a single instance or case may not be sufficient to indicate widespread norm slippage. Conversely, a large portion of retired flag officers — if not the majority, certainly a sizeable minority — routinely engaging in partisan campaign endorsements and public criticism of elected leaders over time would indicate the death of the norm.

The Status of the Norm

Before turning to our analysis of retired flag officer attitudes toward the norm of retired officer speech, we briefly review what is known about the robustness of the norm against their engaging in partisan activity. Specifically, the discussion focuses on the period following the establishment of the All-Volunteer Force, which fundamentally transformed the military's relationship to society. Norms governing

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31   Finnemore and Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," 904.

the political activity of retired officers have arguably been unsettled throughout U.S. history. The switch to an all-volunteer force in 1973 marks the beginning of the contemporary era of civil-military relations in the United States and has special relevance to our analysis of the current status of the norm.

We contend here that the most visible and pronounced degradation of these norms since the start of the All-Volunteer Force era began in the early 1990s. Although it is difficult to identify the high point of norm robustness during the All-Volunteer Force era, we can pinpoint the first real signs of its relative deterioration.

Norm degradation can be a function of slow and steady erosion, punctuated by dramatic or egregious lapses, but a single instance or case may not be sufficient to indicate widespread norm slippage.

That the normative decline began in the early 1990s is especially noteworthy because this predates both the current era of partisan polarization and the advent of social media — both of which could plausibly explain greater political activism among retired flag officers. While numerous factors are likely responsible for the degradation of norms among retired flag officers beginning in the early 1990s, we identify three possible, albeit interrelated, explanations: increasing partisanship among officers; the Republican Party's ownership of national defense issues along with lingering effects from the Vietnam War within the cohort of flag officers who served in Vietnam as junior officers; and the emerging prestige associated with the U.S.

military as confidence in the institution began to grow.

As chronicled in his *Foreign Policy Leadership Project* surveys of military and civilian leaders, Ole Holsti found that partisanship among the U.S. military's officer corps increased between 1976 and 1996.[32] Fewer than half of the officers whom Holsti surveyed in 1976 self-identified as partisans, with independents constituting the largest block at 46 percent.[33] By 1992, however, only 26 percent of senior officers self-identified as independent and 67 percent as partisan.[34] Of note, the growing proportion of military officers who identified as Republican outpaced the proportion of civilian leaders who did the same, creating a civil-military gap along partisan lines that has not abated. In 1976, 33 percent of military leaders and 25 percent of civilian leaders self-identified as Republican, but by 1996, 67 percent of military leaders self-identified as Republican, compared to just 34 percent of civilian leaders.[35]

Holsti's findings of rising partisanship within the officer corps was echoed in the late-1990s by Peter Feaver and Richard Kohn's landmark Triangle Institute for Security Studies survey on the civil-military gap and journalist Tom Ricks' in-depth report on Marine Corps basic training.[36] The officer corps' predominant affiliation with the Republican Party and a higher rate of partisanship among junior service members compared to their civilian peers[37] have since been confirmed in more recent survey research conducted in the post-9/11 era.[38] In short, retired officer political activism and the degradation of a norm against non-involvement coincide with an increasing self-identification of officers as partisans themselves, and in particular with identification with one of the two dominant political parties.

Coinciding with the increase in the proportion of senior officers identifying with the Republican Party in the early 1990s was the solidification of the

32   Ole R. Holsti, "A Widening Gap Between the U.S. Military and Civilian Society?: Some Evidence, 1976–96," *International Security* 23, no. 3 (Winter 1998-1999): 10–12, https://doi.org/10.2307/2539337.

33   Holsti, "A Widening Gap Between the U.S. Military and Civilian Society?"

34   Holsti, "A Widening Gap Between the U.S. Military and Civilian Society?"

35   Holsti, "A Widening Gap Between the U.S. Military and Civilian Society?"

36   Thomas E. Ricks, "The Widening Gap Between Military and Society," *The Atlantic*, July 1997, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1997/07/the-widening-gap-between-military-and-society/306158/; Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001)

37   In addition to surveys that provide insight into officers' partisan identification, data from the Federal Election Commission also sheds light on campaign contributions by senior military officers. Golby found that, among the 382 four-star appointments from 1977 to 2002, 240 officers had made financial campaign contributions to Republican candidates, compared to just 53 who made campaign donations to Democrats. See James T. Golby, "Duty, Honor…Party? Ideology, Institutions, and the Use of Military Force," (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 2011), https://stacks.stanford.edu/file/druid:jw856qf5672/Golby%20Dissertation%20%28Final%29-augmented.pdf.

38   Hugh Liebert and James Golby, "Midlife Crisis: All-Volunteer Force at 40," *Armed Forces & Society* 43, no. 1 (2017): 115–38, https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X16641430; Dempsey, *Our Army*; Heidi A. Urben, *Party, Politics, and the Post-9/11 Army* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2021); Trent J. Lythgoe, "Are the U.S. Military's Nonpartisan Norms Eroding?" *Armed Forces & Society* 49, no. 2 (2023): 310–29, https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X211072892.

Republican Party's ownership of national defense issues and lingering effects from the Vietnam War within the cohort of senior flag officers. John Petrocik coined the term "issue ownership" to describe how parties tend to own and emphasize certain issues in campaigns and elections and how voters tend to trust one party over the other to handle those issues.[39] The Republican Party's issue ownership emerged during the Nixon administration when the public began associating the Democratic Party with the failures in Vietnam and a growing anti-militarism.[40] One study found that, in 1968, the Republican Party began placing significantly more emphasis on the issue of national defense in its party platform than the Democratic Party. In fact, by the 1980s, the Republican Party referenced national defense in its party platform seven times more than the Democratic Party did.[41] By the end of the Reagan administration, with its massive defense build-up, the Republican Party solidified its issue ownership of national defense. This continued in the early 1990s with the decisive military victory in the Gulf War under the presidency of George H.W. Bush. National defense and military issues had become increasingly and more systematically partisan affairs in U.S. domestic politics.

In short, retired officer political activism and the degradation of a norm against non-involvement coincide with an increasing self-identification of officers as partisans themselves, and in particular with identification with one of the two dominant political parties.

Not only were military officers more likely to self-identify as Republican in the 1990s, but they also viewed the Republican Party as better equipped to oversee the military and handle defense issues.[42] Relatedly, the flag officers who were leading the U.S. military in the early 1990s had been junior officers who came of age during the Vietnam War. No one better represented this generation than Gen. Colin Powell, who served as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 1989 to 1993. Powell, like many of his contemporaries, was profoundly impacted by his experience in the Vietnam War, which later influenced his view of civil-military relations as chairman. In his memoir, Powell reflected on the hard lessons his generation of officers learned in Vietnam:

> Many of my generation, the career captains, majors, and lieutenant colonels seasoned in that war, vowed that when our turn came to call the shots, we would not quietly acquiesce in halfhearted warfare for half-baked reasons that the American people could not understand.[43]

Powell's reflection is evocative of the "stabbed-in-the-back" narrative that emerged among a generation of Vietnam veterans. While not unique to the Vietnam War, this narrative posits that the uniformed military did all it could do to win the war, but civilian political leaders failed by not resourcing the military adequately to fight the war or by having unclear political objectives.[44] This narrative often allows military officers to pin defeats in war on their civilian overseers while avoiding accountability themselves.

Powell's formative experience in Vietnam and the lessons he drew from that war help explain the activist role he played as chairman, where he felt unconstrained in publicly telling civilian leaders how and under what conditions the military should be employed. The Powell

39   John R. Petrocik, "Issue Ownership in Presidential Elections, with a 1980 Case Study," *American Journal of Political Science* 40, no. 3 (1996): 825–50, https://doi.org/10.2307/2111797.

40   Noah Gordon, "How Republicans Got Their Groove Back on Security," *The Atlantic*, Oct. 29, 2014, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/10/how-republicans-got-their-groove-back-on-security/381949/.

41   Heidi A. Urben, *Issue Ownership of National Defense: Understanding Origins and Predicting Future Trends* (unpublished manuscript, April 30, 2008).

42   Of note, the Republican Party's issue ownership of national defense has been fairly durable since the 1990s. The Democratic Party made some inroads during the post-9/11 wars and again during the Trump administration and the ongoing war in Ukraine, while the Republican Party has been beset with heterodox positions on national defense. Yet, as late as 2020, we still saw ample evidence of Republican issue ownership of defense within the military. In a survey of service academy students, those who self-identified as Republican were more likely (53 percent) to agree that one party made better decisions about national security than those who self-identified as Democrats (13 percent). See Risa A. Brooks, Michael A. Robinson, and Heidi A. Urben, "What Makes a Military Professional? Evaluating Norm Socialization in West Point Cadets," *Armed Forces & Society* 48, no. 4 (October 2022): 735–1005, https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X211026355.

43   Colin L. Powell with Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), 149.

44   Jeffrey P. Kimball, "The Stab-in-the-Back Legend and the Vietnam War," *Armed Forces & Society* 14, no. 3 (Spring 1988): 433–58, https://jstor.org/stable/45305005; Mara E. Karlin, *The Inheritance: America's Military After Two Decades of War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2021).

Doctrine, with its criteria for the use of force — have clear objectives, use decisive military force, use as a last resort — were conditions he gave to civilian leaders, not the military. Perhaps even more provocative than the Powell Doctrine was the *New York Times* op-ed he published on the eve of the 1992 election called, "Why Generals Get Nervous," in which he outlined his opposition to then-candidate Clinton's proposal to employ the military in Bosnia.[45] Aided by his widespread popularity, Powell wielded an extraordinary amount of political skill that ultimately served to increase the stature and power of the U.S. military while constraining civilian leaders.[46]

What's more, retired officers whose notoriety comes from regular appearances on cable news or other partisan media outlets can, in many cases, draw even more partisan audiences than elected politicians.

What is noteworthy is that Powell made all of these public statements on how the military should be used — along with thinly veiled criticism of civilian leaders' proposals on the use of force — while on active duty as chairman. In this light, it is hard not to view his public stance as greenlighting a new brand of political activism among his retired flag officer peers — fellow Vietnam veterans — in the early 1990s. If the sitting chairman could criticize elected leaders' policies and publicly weigh in just weeks before a presidential election, surely retired flag officers could do the same. Powell's actions played a role in undermining a norm of retired flag officers avoiding partisan involvement by legitimating political speech by virtue of his stature and actions.

The third and final factor that may help explain why the normative decline among retired flag officers began in the early 1990s has to do with increasing public confidence in the military. According to Gallup's annual confidence in institutions poll, only 50 percent of the public had "quite a lot" or "a great deal" of confidence in the military in 1981, and on average, 58 percent expressed "quite a lot" or "a great deal" of confidence in the military throughout the 1980s. In the first half of the 1990s, however, that figure jumped to 66 percent, likely propped up somewhat by the Gulf War victory.[47] The early 1990s did not witness the high levels of public confidence in the military that we saw during the post-9/11 wars, but confidence in the military after the Gulf War and following the 1980s defense build-up was nonetheless on an upward swing compared to the late 1970s and early 1980s. This matters, because when public confidence in the military is high, politicians and elected leaders are more incentivized to use the military for partisan gain, and retired flag officers are more inclined to oblige by leveraging the prestige associated with their rank and service for partisan causes.

Taken together, these factors — increasing levels of partisan identification among officers, the solidification of the Republican Party's issue ownership of national defense and military matters, a cohort of retired flag officers emboldened by their experiences in Vietnam to publicly criticize politicians, and increasing prestige associated with military service — help explain why norm erosion among retired flag officers began in the early 1990s.

One of the two most significant indications of this decline is the advent of and then dramatic rise in partisan campaign endorsements. The origin of partisan endorsements can be dated to Crowe's endorsement of the Democratic presidential nominee, Clinton, in 1992. Crowe's endorsement was notable because it set off a cycle of endorsements, especially for Republican candidates, in every subsequent presidential election.[48] In the 2000 presidential election, 85 retired flag officers, including five former service chiefs, endorsed George W. Bush for president.[49] By 2012, Mitt Romney assembled the largest list (500) of retired flag officers to date, which included former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Gen. (ret.) Hugh Shelton and several former service chiefs such as the recently retired commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen. James Conway.[50]

45   Colin L. Powell, "Why Generals Get Nervous," *New York Times*, Oct. 8, 1992, https://www.nytimes.com/1992/10/08/opinion/why-generals-get-nervous.html.

46   Heidi Urben and Peter D. Feaver, "The Consequential Chairman: How Colin Powell Changed Civil-Military Relations," *Foreign Affairs*, Oct. 27, 2021, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-10-27/consequential-chairman.

47   "Military and National Defense," Gallup, accessed Nov. 15, 2023, https://news.gallup.com/poll/1666/military-national-defense.aspx.

48   Golby, Dropp, and Feaver, *Military Campaigns: Veterans' Endorsements and Presidential Elections*.

49   Kohn, "General Elections."

50   Stephen Dinan, "Retired Top Military Brass Push for Romney," *Washington Times*, Nov. 4, 2012, https://www.washingtontimes.com/blog/inside-politics/2012/nov/4/retired-top-military-brass-push-romney/.

In addition to endorsement lists published by campaigns, retired flag officers began making notable appearances at presidential nominating conventions. The presidential conventions in 2016 stand out. These featured Lt. Gen. (ret.) Michael Flynn leading Republican National Convention attendees in a "lock her up" chant, and Gen. (ret.) John Allen marching a coterie of former military servicemembers on stage to militaristic music during the Democratic National Convention.[51] Yet, these were hardly the first conventions to feature endorsement speeches by retired flag officers. Just a year after retiring as commander of U.S. Central Command, Gen. (ret.) Tommy Franks appeared at the 2004 Republican National Convention to publicly endorse Bush — just as Gen. (ret.) Wesley Clark did for John Kerry that same year at the Democratic National Convention.[52]

Recent examples aside, the first notable retired flag officer endorsement was Crowe's endorsement of Clinton. In his memoir, Crowe partly attributed his endorsement to wanting to dispel the myth that all military officers were Republican.[53] In fact, Clinton's election may have helped spur greater political activism among retired flag officers who self-identified as Republican in the 1990s because they viewed Clinton as a threat to the Republican Party's almost-assured issue ownership of defense and military matters after 12 years of consecutive Republican presidential rule. Of note, Zachary Griffiths and Olivia Simon found that, since Crowe's endorsement, retired flag officers have endorsed Republican presidential candidates eight times more than Democratic candidates.[54] This does not suggest that all retired flag officer political activism since then has been by and for Republicans — it has not. Rather, it helps explain the spark that set off the normative decay in the 1990s.

In addition to endorsements during elections, a second indication of growing involvement in partisan politics is a surge of public statements by retired officers that have partisan bearing, if not overt partisan content. While public commentary about foreign policy and strategic issues by retired officers has long been common, there has been an uptick in the incidence of expressly partisan commentary and action in the form of commentary and op-eds written by retired officers in which they criticize elected leaders and violate the norm of nonpartisanship.[55] There has also been an increase in partisan commentary on social media, as retired flag officers have sought to "grow" their followings by appealing to partisan constituencies.[56] Analysis of their social media accounts suggests that these individuals can attract ideologically coherent (if narrow) follower networks. What's more, retired officers whose notoriety comes from regular appearances on cable news or other partisan media outlets can, in many cases, draw even more partisan audiences than elected politicians.[57]

To be sure, there has been push-back to this norm erosion among retired flag officers. Adm. (ret.) Michael Mullen and Gen. (ret.) Martin Dempsey, both former chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, forcefully called for an extension of the nonpartisan ethic into retirement, especially for flag officers. And both have spoken out on numerous occasions about how partisan endorsements threaten to damage the military's credibility as a nonpartisan institution.[58] While Gen. Joseph Dunford, Mullen's successor, may not have been as vocal in calling for officers to adhere to the norm of nonpartisanship in retirement while he was chairman, he acknowledged that he personally will continue to avoid partisan politics in retirement, just as he did on active duty, and has since written of the dangers of politicizing the military.[59] The very fact that these men felt it was urgent to make such public statements about the importance of adhering to the norm may be an indicator of its decline.

51   Feaver, "We Don't Need Generals to Become Cheerleaders at Political Conventions."

52   Tommy Franks, "Text of Remarks Made by General Tommy Franks," *New York Times,* Sept. 2, 2004, https://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/02/politics/campaign/text-of-remarks-made-by-general-tommy-franks.html; Wesley Clark, "General Wesley Clark's Speech at the Democratic National Convention," *PBS News Hour*, July 29, 2004, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/general-wesley-clarks-speech-at-the-democratic-national-convention.

53   William J. Crowe, Jr., with David Chanoff, *The Line of Fire: From Washington to the Gulf, the Politics and Battles of the New Military* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 343; Corbett and Davidson, "The Role of the Military in Presidential Politics," 68.

54   Griffiths and Simon, "Not Putting Their Money Where Their Mouth Is."

55   Peter M. Erickson, "Inescapable: Polarization, Prestige, and the U.S. Military in Politics," (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2022), https://depot.library.wisc.edu/repository/fedora/1711.dl:DHFJQXSP2GVCH8Z/datastreams/REF/content; Brianna Kablack, et al., "The Military Speaks Out: Serving and Retired U.S. Military Leaders' Views About the Trump Administration," *New America*, Jan. 19, 2021, https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/blog/military-speaks-out/.

56   Robinson, *Dangerous Instrument.*

57   Robinson, *Dangerous Instrument*, 159.

58   Michael G. Mullen, "Speech Delivered at National Defense University Commencement," Washington, DC, June 11, 2009; Martin E. Dempsey, "Civil-Military Relations and the Profession of Arms," National Guard, June 25, 2012, https://www.nationalguard.mil/News/Article-View/Article/575759/the-importance-of-maintaining-trust-civil-military-relations-and-the-profession/.

59   Brian MacQuarrie, "Last Year, He Was the Country's Top Military Officer. Now, He Is Retired on the South Shore," *Boston Globe*, Sept. 6, 2020, https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/09/06/metro/last-year-he-was-countrys-top-military-officer-now-he-is-retired-south-shore/; Joseph F. Dunford, Jr, Graham Allison, and Jonah Glick-Unterman, "Guardians of the Republic: Only a Nonpartisan Military Can Protect American Democracy," *Foreign Affairs,* Jan. 5, 2023, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/guardians-republic.

Moreover, the three most recent chairmen seem to be outliers by at least some measures in explicitly proscribing retired flag officer engagement in expressly partisan actions. Recent years have witnessed several high-profile instances of retired flag officers publicly criticizing the sitting president. The think tank New America identified 230 retired flag officers who spoke out against Trump while he was in office.[60] Even Mullen violated his own proscriptions against speaking out in a commentary piece in *The Atlantic*, entitled, "I Cannot Remain Silent," in which he questioned Trump's leadership amid his crackdown on George Floyd protesters in Lafayette Square.[61] In addition, recent survey research has found that many active-duty military officers are supportive of retired flag officers speaking out publicly on political issues, further calling into question the durability of the norm for retired officers.[62]

All of this discussion of behavioral violations, in turn, provides the larger context for the inquiry into retired officer views about norms. The survey aims to explore flag officers' discursive endorsement of or verbal support for norms. In other words, despite the mounting evidence that the norm against partisan speech and activity by retired flag officers is contested, how they actually think about the appropriateness of speaking out has not been well studied. Moreover, while there has been debate about the appropriateness of retired officers engaging in political speech, there has been surprisingly little study of their motives for speaking out when they choose to do so. One exception is the study by Griffiths and Simon, which found that the majority of retired flag officers who endorsed candidates likely did so not out of ideological motivations or material incentives, but because of personal connections within their peer network of retired flag officers.[63] In addition, how they evaluate the potential effect of their comments on public debate has not been studied. Some research suggests that military officers speaking out can shift public opinion at times.[64] Other research, however, shows that it often does little to shift public sentiments. Rather, such political signals can cost the retiree and the military institution considerable credibility with the public, even if this is highly conditional on partisan identity.[65] Nonetheless, less is known about whether the efficacy of speaking out is a major factor shaping the decision by retired flag officers to do so.

Methodology

From December 2020 to January 2021, we surveyed a select number of retired flag officers who served in the U.S. military on their views regarding participating in public political discourse.[66] The survey queried respondents on the types of political activities they have engaged in and their views on the propriety of such activities through a mix of multiple-choice and open-ended, free-form text questions. Of the 39 retired flag officers to whom we sent the online survey, 23 completed the entire survey, yielding a 59 percent response rate. In order to protect the anonymity of members of such a small, elite population, we collected limited demographic information from survey respondents.

Tables 3, 4, and 5 display the branch in which respondents served, their rank when they retired, and their self-reported partisan identification.

Branch/Service	n
U.S. Air Force	2
U.S. Army	18
U.S. Marine Corps	1
U.S. Navy	2
Total	**23**

Table 3. Select Demographics of Sample: Branch/Service

60   Kablack, et al., "The Military Speaks Out."

61   Mike Mullen, "I Cannot Remain Silent," *The Atlantic*, June 2, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/american-cities-are-not-battlespaces/612553/.

62   Urben, *Party, Politics, and the Post-9/11 Army*, 148.

63   Griffiths and Simon, "Not Putting Their Money Where Their Mouth Is."

64   James Golby, Kyle Dropp, and Peter Feaver, *Military Campaigns: Veterans' Endorsements and Presidential Elections*, Center for New American Security, 2012, https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep06441; Feaver, *Thanks for Your Service*.

65   Robinson, *Dangerous Instrument: Political Polarization and U.S. Civil-Military.*

66   We administered the survey through the platform Qualtrics under Georgetown University Institutional Review Board Study ID STUDY00003129. A copy of the survey instrument is available in the appendix, which is available online at https://tnsr.org/2023/11/speaking-out-why-retired-flag-officers-participate-in-political-discourse/.

Rank/Grade	n
O-7	3
O-8	6
O-9	5
O-10	9
Total	**23**

Table 4. Select Demographics of Sample: Rank/Grade

Partisan Identity	n
Democrat	1
Independent	13
Republican	6
Other/Unaffiliated	3
Total	**23**

Table 5. Select Demographics of Sample: Partisan Identity

Several points regarding the sample are worth noting. First, with only 23 respondents, the sample is by no means representative of the broader population of retired flag officers, which is typically estimated at more than 7,500 individuals at any time. Our small sample thus has limitations, and we stop short of generalizing our findings across all flag officers, active or retired. Rather, the aim of this project is to obtain deeper insights and opinion data from a small, elite group of individuals. Our insights are therefore illustrative, not definitive. Many of the questions we asked respondents were open-ended questions and were designed to elicit deeper perspectives from a select group of individuals. Moreover, existing scholarship on the motivations of retired flag officers with regard to their public, political discourse is limited — a reflection of how difficult it is to survey this particular population. For all of these reasons, we sought to obtain personal, in-depth perspectives from a select group of retired flag officers. But we do not attempt to characterize these views as conclusive or reflective of all retired flag officers today.

Second, the sample is heavily skewed toward retired Army generals. One of us is an active-duty Army officer, and another is a retired Army officer, and the sample is somewhat of a reflection of our professional networks and the snowball sampling techniques we employed in identifying potential survey respondents. Although most respondents in this survey served in the Army, there is little to suggest from past research that branch of service has a significant impact on officers' political views or their adherence to civil-military relations norms.[67]

Third, the inclusion of nine retired four-star officers in our sample drawn from each of the services is unique and provides novel insights into how the senior-most flag officers think about issues related to political speech. Four-stars, including service chiefs and combatant commanders, have arguably given more thought to the intersection of military service and politics than any of their flag officer peers at the one-, two-, or three-star level, and their insights are of particular value to our study.

Fourth, while the sample is small, it is an ideologically mixed group. We sent the survey to retired flag officers who we knew had been politically vocal in the past, as well as to those who have refrained from such activity, and we asked them to forward the survey to their own networks of diverse, retired flag officers. Although our sample is not representative of the entire population of retired flag officers, it does reflect the diversity of opinions on the propriety of their speaking out.

Therefore, the respondents were evaluating their options under high-stakes, real-world conditions, versus in a simulated setting in which the exigencies of deciding whether to speak out were less intense.

Lastly, it is worth noting that we fielded our survey during a volatile period in American politics (following the 2020 presidential election). As such, the survey takes place in the shadow of Trump's presidency. We should expect that retired flag officers faced strong external pressures to speak out during the Trump administration, given the significant partisan polarization in American society at the time

coupled with the prestige associated with the U.S. military.[68] Examining retired flag officer attitudes in this context has some advantages in that the pressure to consider speaking out was more than hypothetical. Therefore, the respondents were evaluating their options under high-stakes, real-world conditions, versus in a simulated setting in which the exigencies of deciding whether to speak out were less intense. As the responses demonstrate, the discussion about speaking out was not abstract — this was a decision that these individuals were actively making and, in some cases, acting upon. At the same time, the particular nature of the context meant that Trump's actions were in the background, framing their assessments of the costs and benefits of speaking, which in many cases these surveyed flag officers made explicit. Whether and how they would have responded five years prior is difficult to ascertain.

Findings

The responses to the survey yield three important insights. First, retired flag officers were aware of and influenced by civil-military norms, yet they varied in how they thought such norms should constrain their behavior in retirement. Second, their social networks matter, but the respondents did not identify peer pressure as a decisive factor in whether they decided to speak out. Third and of most significance, responses from the retired flag officers we surveyed reflected conflicting loyalties and obligations that, in turn, shape the degree to which they are willing to speak out on political issues.

Norms as a Baseline

First, our findings reveal that retired officers are very much conscious of and influenced by their perception of the norm that military personnel should abstain from engaging in public discourse. They are also aware that this norm has implications for retired officers. Norms thus provide a baseline against which those in our survey evaluated engaging in public discourse. They drew a distinction between active-duty personnel engaging in political commentary and retired officers doing so, suggesting that retired officers should not be held to the same strict standards that those on active duty are (see Figure 1). Nonetheless, they also agreed that they and their peers adhere to certain unspoken codes of conduct when it comes to speaking out on domestic political matters.

67   Urben, *Party, Politics, and the Post-9/11 Army.*
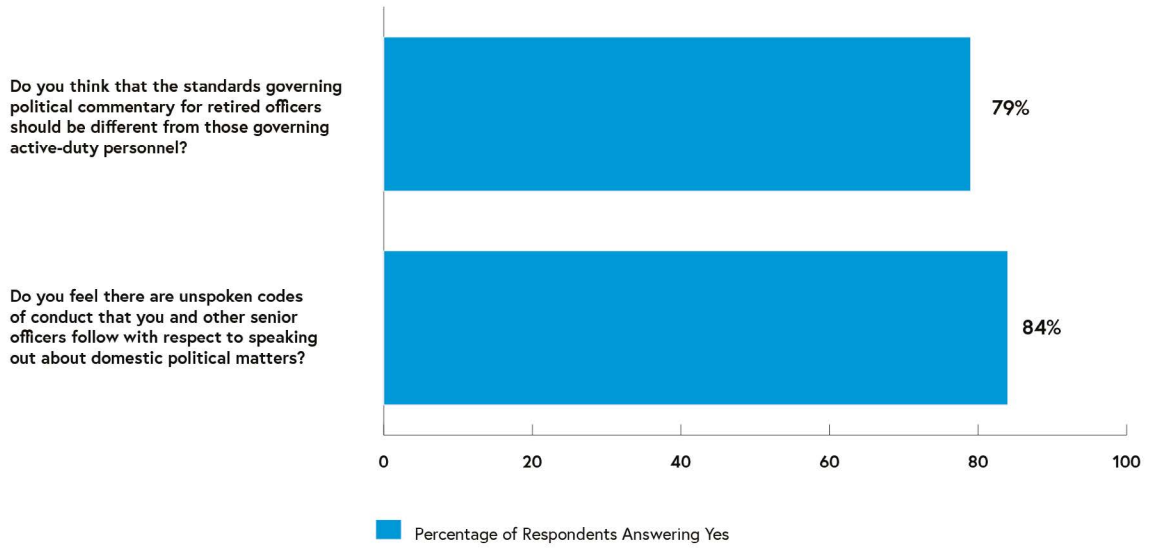
68   Erickson, "Inescapable."

Figure 1. *Views on Appropriateness of Speaking Out on Political Matters*

That they actively grappled with these norms is also apparent in their open-ended responses. As one respondent put it, "The default setting must be to stay of out of political discourse (not policy discourse), however, each individual must apply his or her best judgement on communicating, as an exception." Other comments implicitly affirmed that retired officers were bound by norms, and that weighing in publicly while invoking military service might violate them. As another respondent wrote,

> *I do not object to retired/former military officers running for office or serving in administration cabinet positions and obviously in that role they can and must speak out on political issues and do so as members of their political affiliation, but when they cross that line as political figures, they become politicians and must be careful not to use that military title for solely political means.*

Still others framed the norms in terms of their importance to U.S. civil-military relations: "[P]artisanship among retired [general officers] is the quickest path toward having a litmus test for four-star nominations by presidents. ... [T]hat could be highly detrimental to American civil-military relations." In sum, the respondents' answers reflect a general awareness — and concern for — standards of normative propriety with respect to political speech by retired officers. Whether in the form of "unspoken codes of conduct" or informal fears about military politicization, these responses indicate, at a minimum, the salience of norms when rendering a judgment about these forms of political activity.

Interpretations Varied

While the surveyed officers assuredly incorporated normative considerations into their responses, their understanding of the "red lines" implied by those same norms varied significantly. Few of the retired flag officers we surveyed interpreted these norms to prohibit speech under any circumstances, but those who did had strong opinions on the matter. Of the few who took that view, one noted that "three and four stars should agree before their promotions to NEVER comment ... unless they are running for office." Those on the other side of this issue cited that the first amendment applies to all citizens, including retired flag officers.

The vast majority of our respondents had more nuanced views. Several acknowledged the qualitatively different sets of circumstances that exist when a retired officer declares political candidacy. Many saw that as the one case in which it was definitely permissible to speak about domestic politics, because a retired flag officer would have crossed the line to being a full politician at that point. Others acknowledged that, although there should be no absolutes preventing such political speech, retired flag officers should largely refrain from speaking on political issues or, at the very least, carefully weigh the implications of doing so. One retired officer reflected, "I agree that retired flag officers should generally be reticent to speak out on political issues ... but they should not be prohibited from doing so. They have earned the right, but like all rights, they should exercise it with care and circumspection."

In order to refine this analysis with an eye toward specific forms of political engagement, we asked respondents which kinds of political activities they had
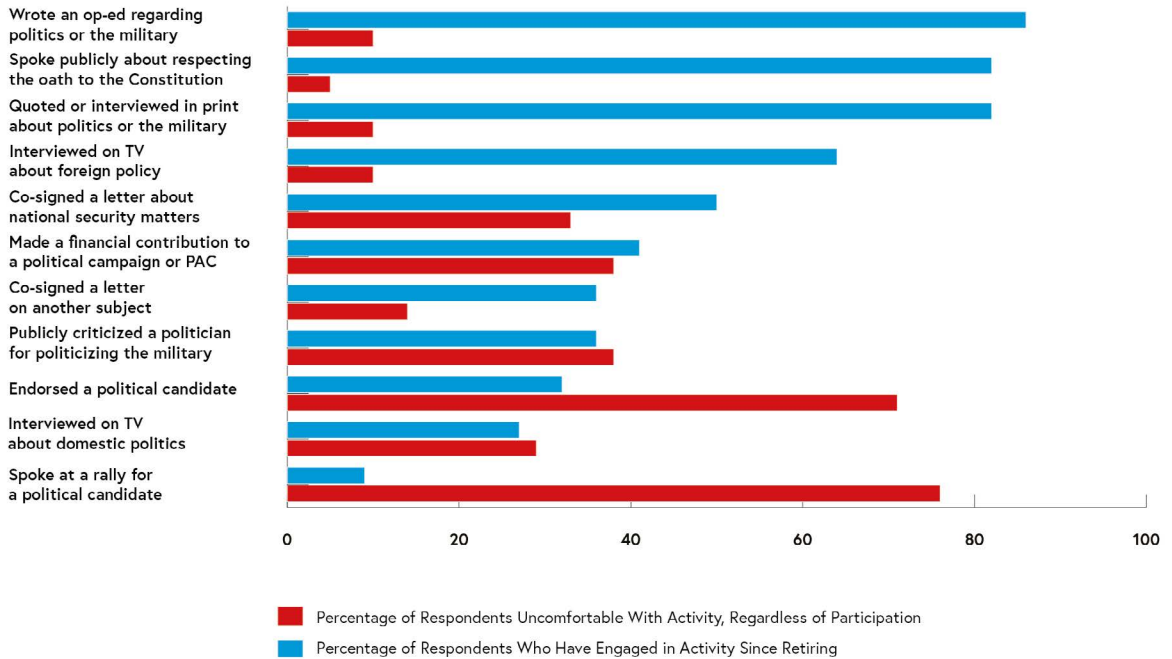
Figure 2. *Self-Reported Political Activities and Associated Level of Discomfort*

engaged in, and, regardless of whether or not they had engaged in those activities, which ones made them feel the most uncomfortable (see Figure 2). The most frequently cited political activities that a majority of retired flag officers indicated they had participated in were writing op-eds, speaking out publicly about respecting the oath to the Constitution, being quoted or interviewed in print media about politics or the military, and being interviewed on television about foreign policy. Relatedly, few respondents indicated that these activities made them uncomfortable.

Respondents were closely divided on other political activities such as publicly criticizing a politician for politicizing the military and donating to a political campaign or political action committee.

Similarly, the types of political activities that the fewest number of respondents reported having engaged in were also the ones that made the most respondents uncomfortable. For example, only 9 percent of respondents had spoken at a rally for a political candidate, but 76 percent indicated that this was an activity with which they were uncomfortable. In addition, while 32

percent of respondents had endorsed a political candidate running for office, 71 percent were uncomfortable with this. Respondents were closely divided on other political activities such as publicly criticizing a politician for politicizing the military and donating to a political campaign or political action committee.

In addition, many respondents distinguished between commentary focused on foreign policy or related matters and commentary having to do with domestic politics. In response to a question that asked what event or action made speaking out necessary, or brought them the closest to speaking out publicly, one retired flag officer noted:

Speaking publicly on issues of history or personal philosophy or in leadership discussions in educational environments, or discussing lesson[s] learned from personal experience are all valid and important means for retired senior officers to use their voice and I routinely engage in those opportunities. Educating and informing politicians on specific national defense policy or historical issues, not related to advocacy for a specific party or candidate, or conducti[ng] similar discussion with the media in a non-partisan manner, are also ways to use your voice.

This was a common theme, although one warned that it was difficult to make hard-and-fast rules relat-

ed to these distinctions, observing that the term "'politics' needs a more granular explanation as almost everything has a political dimension these days."

Still others emphasized that designating particular actions as permissible or off-limits in the abstract was difficult. The context in which such statements might take place mattered. One officer commented:

> *Speaking out against the regime in Nazi Germany is an example most retired officers would agree would have been right to do. Yet not having any specific guidelines beyond this extreme example is profoundly unhelpful, and lends itself to wildly varying interpretations. 'Lock her up' chanted by a retired 3-star at a national political convention is not the same level of speaking out as [James] Mattis speaking out in the aftermath of the Jan 6 attacks at the Capitol, yet some would facilely throw both sets of comments in the same box.*

Social Networks Matter, Peer Pressure Does Not

Our survey also provides insights into the social networks of retired flag officers and the extent to which these retired officers view these networks as playing a role in either encouraging or discouraging their participation in public political discourse. As depicted in Figure 3, the majority of respondents indicated that they routinely keep in close contact with other senior retired officers and discuss issues

pertaining to the U.S. military with them. However, respondents were split on how often they spoke about domestic politics with their retired flag officer peers, with about half indicating that they often or always did, and the other half indicating that they did so sometimes or rarely.

The majority of retired flag officers we surveyed also indicated that their peers encouraged them to speak out on foreign policy and military matters as shown in Figure 4. Of note, 69 percent of retired flag officers indicated that their peers had urged them to endorse a candidate running for office while only 46 percent indicated that their peers had urged them to refrain from such endorsements.

Nevertheless, while the majority of respondents indicated that they keep in close contact with their retired peers, and while more than two-thirds of respondents indicated that their peers had urged them to endorse a candidate or speak out on political issues, respondents cited peer pressure as the least important factor influencing their decisions about speaking out (see Figure 5). In other words, although retired flag officers acknowledged that they have received some peer pressure from their retired colleagues, they claim that such pressure did not affect their decision-making regarding whether to speak out on political matters.

We asked respondents to elaborate on the pressures that they had contended with to either engage or not engage publicly about politics more broadly. Intriguingly, while citing incidents in which they
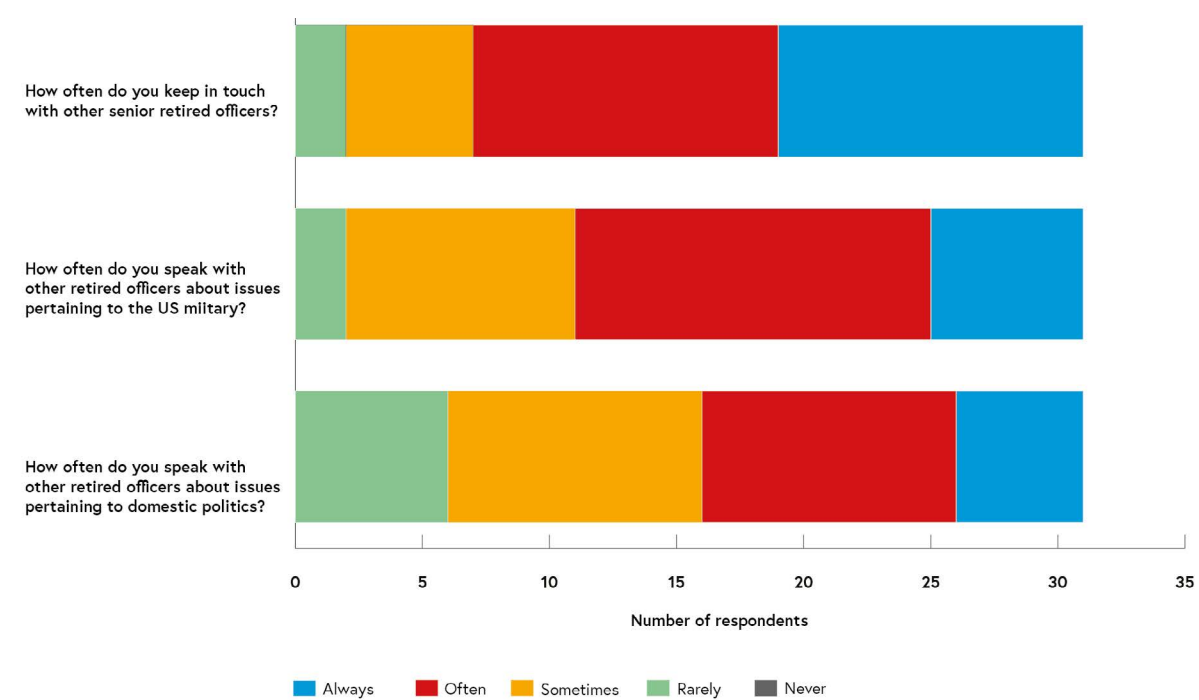

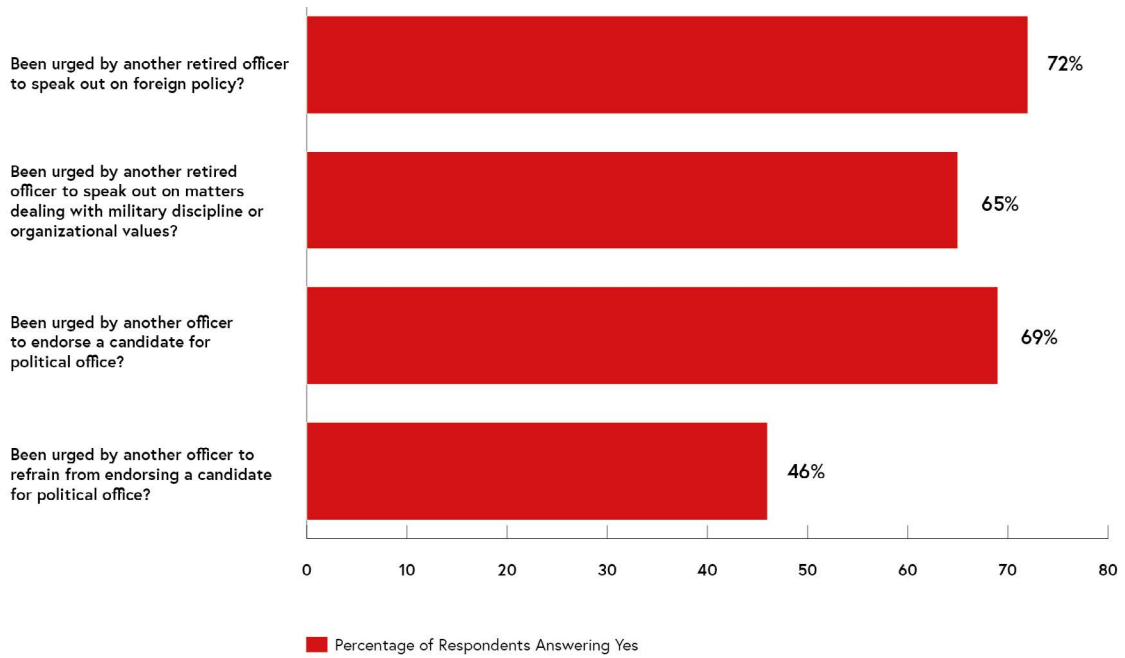*Figure 3. Frequency and Nature of Retired Flag Officer Engagement with Other Retired Flag Officers*

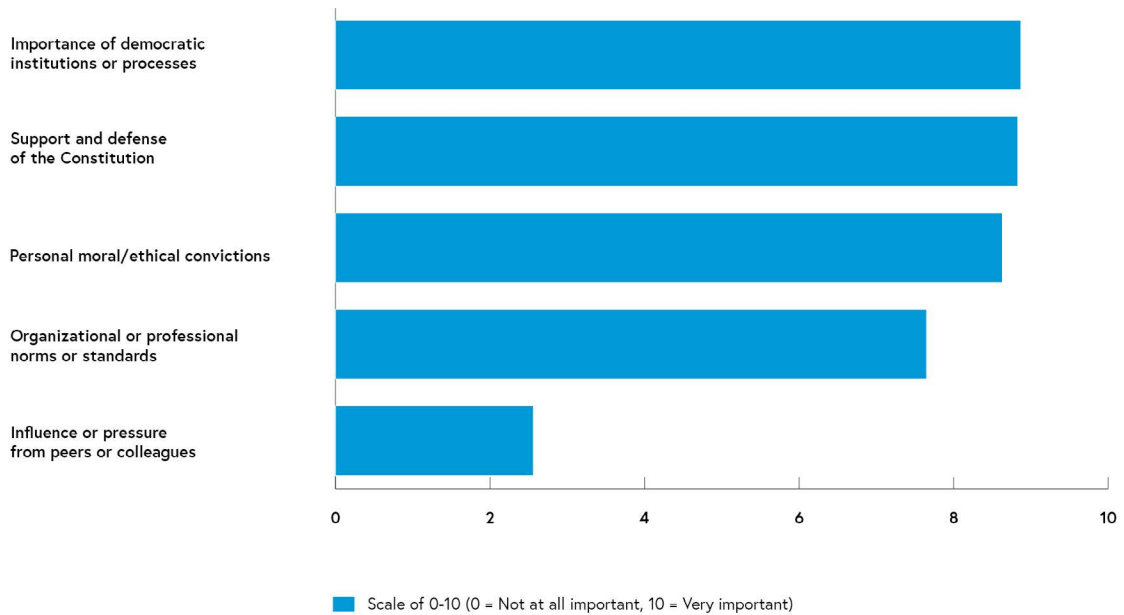*Figure 4: Retired Flag Officers' Self-Reported Peer Influences*

Figure 5. Factors Influencing Retired Flag Officers' Thoughts About Speaking Out

were urged to speak on defense or foreign policy, or even to endorse a candidate, roughly one-third of respondents indicated that they faced no pressures one way or the other. Several cited friends, family, and peers as sources of pressure. Many of these respondents simultaneously reported that they had both been encouraged to speak out and discouraged from doing so by members of their social networks. Despite acknowledging these pressures, once again

few retired flag officers indicated that they shaped their decisions of whether to speak out.

Conflicting Obligations

As discussed previously, the decision among retired flag officers to engage in any form of political activity reflects a complicated landscape of often contradictory pressures or perceived obligations. This network of conflicting loyalties mirrors the same opposing forces

documented among their active-duty counterparts. For example, serving officers are instructed on the necessity of honoring authoritative command channels such as the executive and Congress. However, they are also bound by a variety of other allegiances, ranging from the operational requirements to the mission, professional norms of conduct, supervisory responsibility for subordinates, and support to democratic governance, to name a few.[69] When circumstances place these obligations in tension, servicemembers may be forced to discern — often without clear guidelines — which take precedence. In the case of retired officers, similarly conflicting loyalties may be at play, but the respective weight of each on individual decision-making is likely to change once the officer is no longer bound by formal regulation. For example, deep-seated professional norms are likely to carry over into post-service life but may clash with newly unmuted partisan beliefs or personal ethical convictions that could not take prominence while still in uniform.

Several cited concerns about the impact that their political speech might have on those currently serving on active duty, weighing both the pressures it might put on senior military leaders and an imperative to speak out because their active-duty peers were prohibited from doing so.

To investigate the motivations underlying the decision of whether to speak out politically, we asked respondents a number of open-ended questions about the considerations guiding them. The specific lines they drew about when and why speaking out might be appropriate varied, as noted above. But they shared in common a reflection that there were tradeoffs to consider in making such decisions. As such, the responses reflect the competing obligations that officers in a democratic state face, including efforts to safeguard the well-being of the institution, to protect servicemembers and currently serving military leaders, as well as to be true to their oath to support and defend the Constitution.[70] The retired officers we surveyed seemed attuned to the potentially competing considerations in weighing whether to speak out.[71]

These tradeoffs emerge as prominent themes in many comments. One significant tradeoff of speaking out was the risk it posed to the reputation of the institution and its status as a non-partisan body:

> *The average American does not differentiate between retired and active flag officers. So, when retired flags make public political declarations, the American public tends to believe that active flag officers think similarly, and hold those positions. The military then gets dragged into the political fray.*

Several cited concerns about the impact that their political speech might have on those currently serving on active duty, weighing both the pressures it might put on senior military leaders and an imperative to speak out because their active-duty peers were prohibited from doing so. One retired officer noted:

> *The dominant pressure I have felt is the internal pressure of not making my successor's job any harder than it already is. That said, during the Trump administration I have also felt the pressure of knowing that I can speak when others inside the administration —including military officers — may not be able to speak. In that way, the last four years have been truly unprecedented leading me on occasion to unprecedented actions.*

Yet, another observed:

> *I remind myself that I am not accountable for our national security policy any longer and that those who are accountable — those still serving and in key positions — deserve the opportunity to do their jobs without worrying about how those of us who have retired will "grade" their work. Therefore, the circumstances in which retired Generals and Admirals should engage in public discourse should be few, based on unique expertise, and constructive.*

Still others made a finer distinction between the interests of the currently serving military leadership and the institution itself. As one respondent put it,

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69   Robinson, Cohn, and Margulies, "Dissents and Sensibility."

70   Robinson, Cohn, and Margulies, "Dissents and Sensibility"; Pauline Shanks Kaurin, *On Obedience: Contrasting Philosophies for the Military, Citizenry, and Community* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2020).

71   For those who spoke out, these themes were echoed in their public statements. Daniel Maurer, "The Generals' Constitution," *Just Security*, June 9, 2020, https://www.justsecurity.org/70674/the-generals-constitution/.

"I try to balance what is best for the institution in the long-term vice [versus] what is convenient or supportive of current senior military personnel. I will ALWAYS err on what is best for the long term of the institution."

Another prominent theme related to having an obligation to the public and to potentially enriching public knowledge and debate about issues within their area of expertise. As one put it, "I believe part of my responsibility is to use the experiences I had in the military, and what I know about the actions of the military, to better inform the American people (the vast majority of whom have no military experience and do not know the reasons for various actions by the government)." Another added, "I also believe that reinforcement of the military role to 'support and defend the Constitution' can require education in the public domain but requires a factual, historic, non-partisan approach to that dialogue, both on and off the record."

One respondent explicitly framed the decision to speak out in terms of tensions between the public good and the consequences for currently serving military leadership. As he or she put it:

> *Quite often retired officer commentary is not helpful to the discourse. And I personally observed what a specific Chief of Service and a former CJCS thought of the public input retirees were providing. However, I believe retired Sr. military expertise should be part of the public discourse. They've earned the right to voice a civil and informed opinion.*

Perhaps the most salient tension in the responses, however, related to their oath to support and defend the Constitution. Those we surveyed seemed acutely attuned to this obligation and it appears to have weighed heavily in the calculations of many. This is reflected in their responses to questions about motivating causes for political activity in which they might have engaged. Overall, retired flag officers listed the importance of democratic institutions, supporting and defending the Constitution, and personal moral or ethical convictions as the most important factors in considering their public engagement (see Figure 5).

Indeed, many felt that their oath to the Constitution required them to engage in public discourse under exceptional circumstances. Specifically, when we asked what event made speaking out necessary or brought them the closest to speaking out, roughly two out of five explicitly referenced events that occurred in recent years, such as the forceful disbursement of peaceful protesters in Lafayette Square in June 2020.[72] In all, nearly half of respondents reported having made explicit or implied references to political events within the past couple years.

One respondent described his or her decision to speak out in the following way:

> *It really was a culmination of events linked to the President's [Trump's] disrespect for the Constitution that caused me to speak out, write an Op-ed, and for the first time publicly endorse a Candidate. The President's recent statements and activities in the Summer and Fall that questioned whether or not he would accept the results of the Election, his reference to "my Judges and Obama Judges", "my Generals', etc. all demonstrated he did not respect the Constitution.*

Another respondent described the pressures that might compel him or her to speak out: "When the actions are harmful to protecting the Constitution or Constitutional norms, when the military is being asked to follow illegal, immoral, or unethical orders, or when the military is being used for over partisan purposes." And yet another wrote: "Lafayette Square rhetoric and actions by government officials, including POTUS, using the military as props for domestic political power. And, more recently, actions by POTUS to overturn [the] electoral process, calling right wing extremists out against the Capitol, and abusing power."

Often, although couching their considerations in terms of their oath, respondents explained that they saw their decision as a personal choice based on moral and ethical concerns. As one respondent explained, "I felt it was time that I make sure I spoke out on Constitutional issues ... and I wanted to be on the 'right side of History.'" As another framed the decision: "Although I remain skeptical of retired officers speaking publicly, I have concluded that when the protracted actions, behaviors and policies of political leaders threaten the foundations upon which the nation was established, it would be wrong — a dereliction of duty — to remain silent." Still another explained:

> *I believe there are circumstances when it is acceptable — and required — for retired military to engage on public discourse, as stated in the first answer I provided. If there is partisan activity that goes against our Constitution or constitutional norms, our laws, or our national values, I believe it is imperative for retired military to engage.*

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72   Rebecca Tan, et al., "Before Trump Vows to End 'Lawlessness,' Federal Officers Confront Protesters Outside White House," *Washington Post,* June 2, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/washington-dc-protest-white-house-george-floyd/2020/06/01/6b193d1c-a3c9-11ea-bb20-ebf0921f3bbd_story.html.

Lastly, we asked respondents what has been the response of their fellow retired flag officers regarding their choice to engage or not engage in public political discourse. Nearly half of respondents indicated that the feedback they have received has been mostly positive or supportive, while approximately one-fifth reported that the feedback they received was mixed. While some respondents were discouraged from public commentary by peers "advocat[ing] strict non-negotiable abstinence," others found their retired colleagues more accommodating, "recognizing it as an exception that was needed," or found that peers "actively persuaded [them] to speak out more." No respondent indicated that the majority of the feedback they received was negative. This is likely a function of the social circles that retired flag officers maintain following active service, where an opportunity exists to curate peer networks to others of like mind. Hence, while the respondents did not cite peer pressure as a factor in their decision to speak out, they nonetheless reported that members of their social networks often validated their decision to do so.

Yet, despite that, we find a great deal of contention over the boundaries of the norm and the scope and depth of their commitment to it.

Discussion

Our findings reveal a nuanced understanding of norms among the retired flag officers we surveyed. Despite being sensitive to norms that govern officer involvement in politics, many of our respondents indicated they were not rigidly bound by them. Many were willing to suspend or qualify their adherence to the norm that discourages retired flag officers from participating in partisan politics. The variety of explanations confounds a simplistic assumption that all retired flag officer speech must be the result of political opportunism. Some cited moral and ethical concerns, while others invoked the Constitution and respect for democratic processes — a nod to the many crises and extraordinary circumstances during the Trump administration. Several indicated that there were certain circumstances that required norms to be sidestepped. This self-expressed permis-

sion structure is worthy of note in that it cannot be ascribed to a lack of awareness. Many norm violations among active-duty servicemembers can be explained by incomplete or shallow socialization. However, we cannot attribute the same lack of recognition to these retired flag officers, the most elite and well-socialized stratum of the officer corps. Most of our respondents acknowledged that an unspoken code of conduct exists that guides how retired flag officers engage on political matters in public, and many voiced discomfort with certain partisan activities. However, strong minorities in our sample reported engaging in those activities and thus jettisoning the norm of partisan neutrality.

Of note, while the majority of our respondents indicated that they maintain robust peer networks of their fellow retired flag officers, many of whom pressured them to either speak out or refrain from speaking out publicly, they also cited peer pressure as the least influential factor in their decision-making. This stands in contrast to Griffiths and Simon's findings, which suggested that personal connections with peers were the motivating factor behind campaign endorsements.[73] It is striking that the majority of our respondents acknowledged the existence of peer pressure but then dismissed such pressure as not influential in their decision-making. Given the military's hierarchical nature, it seems improbable that respondents were as immune to peer pressure as they indicated. Their responses in our survey could be a product of social desirability bias: Respondents may have felt compelled to downplay the impact of peer pressure in favor of loftier motivations such as moral and ethical considerations, support and defense of the Constitution, and the importance of democratic processes.

At the same time, the fact that they did not report normative pressures as an explicit factor in their decision-making may itself indicate a lack of robustness of the norm. When a norm is vibrant, an individual who is thinking of violating that norm might be expected to express concerns that they would be going against social expectations. The fact that the retired flag officers whom we interviewed were comfortable stating that they felt free to make decisions based on their own calculus and volition may be revealing in this regard. This finding from our analysis may also have larger lessons for understanding norm internalization. Yet another way of interpreting these findings is that, although peer networks may have played a critical role in enabling or facilitating campaign endorsements, letter sign-

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73   Griffiths and Simon, "Not Putting Their Money Where Their Mouth Is."

ing, and other forms of political activism, retired flag officers had other pre-existing motivations for engaging politically. Regardless, the role that peer networks play in retired flag officer political activism merits further research.

Assessing the State of the Norm Today

In this section, we analyze insights from our survey respondents in the context of the framework introduced earlier in this article. Contrary to those that argue that there should be few limits on the political activism of retired flag officers, we find strong support among our respondents that a norm against engaging in partisan speech and actions does and should exist. Yet, despite that, we find a great deal of contention over the boundaries of the norm and the scope and depth of their commitment to it.

Overall, given our findings that most retired flag officers are uncomfortable engaging in partisan political activity — even if some nonetheless indicated that they had engaged in those activities — coupled with trends in retired flag officer political speech and campaign endorsements over the past 35 years, we assess the norm against this population engaging in political speech to be contested. Despite the increase in partisan campaign endorsements by retired flag officers since the late 1980s, the percentage of those who endorse candidates remains fairly low at about 5 percent of all living retired flag officers.[74] Nonetheless, the increase in the number of endorsements in the past several decades coupled with the high-profile nature of recent endorsements, including senior retired flag officers speaking at both party nominating conventions in 2016, raises the salience of campaign endorsements in our estimation. Because of this, we assess these to be indicators of a contested norm, rather than a robust norm.

As we indicated at the outset of the paper, and as reflected in the open-ended responses of our respondents, Trump served as a motivating factor not just in terms of making campaign endorsements but also in retired flag officers' decision to publicly criticize the president. It may turn out that public criticism of the president reached its peak in the Trump administration, and in future years such criticism may recede, causing us to re-assess this particular factor as indicative of a robust norm. However, the "Revolt of the Generals" in 2006 that well preceded Trump and open letters by "Flag Officers

4 America" that were critical of President Joe Biden cause us to evaluate this as an ongoing indicator of a contested norm.[75]

Lastly, recent survey research provides insights into how active-duty officers view retired flag officer political speech — another indicator that speaks to the health of the norm. In 2009, a survey of active-duty Army officers found that 68 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that it is proper for retired generals to publicly express their political views. However, in a similar survey of Army officers conducted from 2017 to 2020, only 49 percent of Army officers agreed with that statement.[76] The decline in support among active-duty officers for retired flag officers speaking out on political issues could be in response to the increase in high-profile campaign endorsements, the spectacle associated with retired flag officers at the 2016 nominating conventions, or the various controversies that retired flag officers were involved in during the Trump administration. In 2009, these survey results might have indicated a defunct norm, but the more recent results are further evidence of a contested norm.

Conclusion

Our unique survey sample — retired general and flag officers, over half of whom were three and four stars — yields important new insights into how normative considerations impact retired flag officers' decision-making process of whether to speak out publicly on political matters. These officers, many of whom served in the military for 35 to 40 years, are the most well versed in professional norms, including the norm of nonpartisanship. Past research has shown that the socialization process for officers takes time, and lengthy time in service and higher rank are often correlated with a greater adherence to professional norms.[77] Moreover, many of these officers served at the highest levels of government, working closely with and advising civilian political leaders. Senior retired flag officers, by virtue of their selection process, professional military education, time in service, and professional experience, are the most socialized and sensitive to civil-military norms and political considerations. Nevertheless, we show that even among that sample, norms against retired officer involvement in partisan speech are contested, and increasingly so.

74   Griffiths and Simon, "Not Putting Their Money Where Their Mouth Is."

75   Paula Thornhill, "Should We Care About That Letter?" *Defense One*, May 14, 2021, https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2021/05/should-we-care-about-letter/174041/.

76   Urban, *Party, Politics, and the Post-9/11 Army*, 148.

77   Brooks, Robinson, and Urban, "What Makes a Military Professional?"; Urban, *Party, Politics, and the Post-9/11 Army*.

Specifically, while those in our sample did perceive the existence of a norm against partisan speech by retirees, they also raised questions about its boundaries and, in some cases, supported violating it openly. Importantly, it is not so much that they disagreed about whether partisan activity should generally be off limits, but whether retired officers should always be bound by that rule. In line with other survey research that shows that regard for norms of nonpartisanship have steadily eroded more broadly within the active-duty military, the findings from our anonymous survey of retired officers may indicate a decline in the robustness of those norms more universally.

This point is worth expanding upon, as it highlights a larger observation about norm robustness and what is required practically to sustain a norm. Just because a norm is vibrant and robust today does not mean it cannot become a contested norm, or even a dead norm, at some future point. Absent deep internalization, constant teaching, clarity, and well-specified standards that are agreed upon and enforced, civil-military norms can and will deteriorate. We present our model about the norm of retired flag officer political speech along a continuum, indicating a degree of movement along norm adherence. Some respondents in our survey indicated that recent events required them to speak out publicly on political matters, suggesting a one-time deviation from norm adherence for them, while other respondents reflected a greater fluidity in their normative interpretations. Regardless of their individual motivations, however, repeated norm violations in the aggregate combined with minimal social disapprobation in response to those violations move a norm from robust to contested and raise the possibility of further deterioration toward the norm becoming defunct.

What is unclear from this study alone is how quickly a norm can deteriorate or, conversely, how long it might take and what actions might be required for a norm to rehabilitate once it has deteriorated. Given our assessment that the norm pertaining to retired flag officer political speech is contested, the issue of rehabilitating a norm merits increased attention by scholars and practitioners concerned about this development.

Ultimately, time will tell whether the attitudes professed and actions supported by the retired flag officers in our sample were merely an artifact of a particularly fractious moment in American politics, or whether they presaged a broader sea-change in retired officer attitudes and behavior. Regardless, for scholars and practitioners who are concerned about the health of U.S. civil-military relations today — and who believe a norm against partisan non-involvement by retired officers is a key pillar of the military's nonpartisan ethic more broadly — our findings are not reassuring. ℹ

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Image: *Gage Skidmore (CC BY-SA 2.0 DEED)*[78]

The Strategist

This section is dedicated to publishing the work of current and former senior policymakers, members of the military, and civilian national security practitioners.

SHINING A LIGHT ON THE DEFENSE DEPARTMENT'S INDUSTRIAL BASE PROBLEMS

Jeff Decker and Noah Sheinbaum

With the recent release of the National Defense Industrial Strategy, the Defense Department has acknowledged the urgency of strengthening the linkages between a healthy defense industrial base and U.S. military power. Despite this, the views of defense-tech companies are often overlooked. Using original data derived from a new survey, Jeff Decker and Noah Sheinbaum offer a number of steps the Defense Department can take to lower the barriers that companies face in converting disruptive commercial technologies into widescale defense capabilities.

From bands to chiefdoms to states, political structures historically evolved to provide more resources (e.g., land, labor, and capital goods), which led to more effective militaries and, subsequently, better security and prospects for survival.[1] These efficiencies of scale, both in terms of manpower and resources, established an irreducible relationship between a state's industrial base, military power, and security. A state incapable of leveraging industry for its own defense may struggle to project power and establish security.

In 2014, the Defense Department began to acknowledge that declining government-led research and development activity meant it needed to seek access to defense-relevant technologies developed and brought to market by commercial partners. Over the past decade, the department increased its ability to partner with commercial companies by establishing new organizations (e.g., Defense Innovation Unit, AFWERX, Army Applications Lab, and NavalX) and programs (e.g., Rapid Defense Experimentation Reserve, Accelerate the Procurement and Fielding of Innovative Technologies) to help defense personnel access the technologies they need. These new organizations and programs resulted in significant progress in attracting commercial companies and funding to the defense market. It is now easier than ever for companies to work with the Defense Department and raise capital while doing so. Yet, significant challenges remain.

On Jan. 11, the Defense Department released its first *National Defense Industrial Strategy*, laying out four strategic priorities to modernize and expand the U.S. defense industrial ecosystem.[2] The strategy is an acknowledgement that despite numerous acquisition improvements and record levels of private investment into the defense tech industry, companies struggle to move from the government's pilot stage to widespread adoption, the process known as crossing the "valley of death."[3] The valley of death causes thousands of companies to leave the defense market annually and has resulted in a 43 percent decline in small businesses in the defense industrial base over the last decade.[4] Overcoming the valley of death has been a primary concern of policymakers and defense personnel to ensure warfighters have access to rapid technological advancements that can change the conduct of warfare.[5]

The *National Defense Industrial Strategy* highlights a variety of issues in the industrial base and the Defense Department's inability to sufficiently leverage all aspects of it. Two of the four *National Defense Industrial Strategy* pillars — resilient supply chains and flexible acquisition — are directly tied to the U.S. government's desire to woo commercial companies to bring their capabilities to the defense market.[6] Yet, industrial strategy does not exist in a vacuum. The *National Defense Industrial Strategy* comes on the heels of the release of the Defense

1   Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: Norton, 2005), 154.

2   U.S. Department of Defense, *National Defense Industrial Strategy*, 2023, accessed January 11, 2024, https://www.businessdefense.gov/docs/ndis/2023-NDIS.pdf.

3   Defense Innovation Board, *Terraforming the Valley of Death: Making the Defense Market Navigable for Startups*, 2023, accessed January 8, 2024, https://innovation.defense.gov/Portals/63/DIB_Terraforming%20the%20Valley%20of%20Death_230717_1.pdf.

4   U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Small Business Contracting: Actions Needed to Implement and Monitor DOD's Small Business Strategy*, accessed January 8, 2024, https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-22-104621.

5   U.S. Department of Defense, Summary of the 2018 *National Defense Strategy of The United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, accessed January 8, 2024, https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf.

6   U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy of The United States of America*, accessed January 8, 2024, https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/trecms/pdf/AD1183514.pdf.

Department's 2023 *Small Business Strategy*[7] and the establishment of the Defense Innovation Board's task force focused on "Terraforming the Valley of Death."[8] These initiatives view the issue primarily from the government's perspective and lack sufficient quantitative data from the perspectives of companies that can illuminate the scale of the challenges they face in entering and growing in the federal market. We aim to fill that gap here, using survey data as well as our backgrounds in the defense industry, management consulting, university-based research, and military service.

Without rapid progress to improve the transition of novel commercial capabilities to widescale defense capabilities, the United States faces the bleak prospect of competing against an adversary with a superior modernized military. Neglecting the needs of the defense industrial base may cause companies to lose interest and instead choose to pursue commercial opportunities elsewhere. It may also cause investors to lose patience, resulting in fewer founders entering the national security space. This would result in the Defense Department facing a technology shortfall when it can least afford to do so.

About the Survey, Respondents, and Report

We collected data from a 10-question survey fielded in October and November 2023.[9] The questions focused on the issues companies face when partnering with the U.S. government. The survey was distributed to a network of Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) and Small Business Technology Transition (STTR) grant recipients, consortiums supporting Other Transaction Authority opportunities, venture capital portfolios, personal networks, and public requests via LinkedIn and emails to companies previously or currently doing business with the U.S. government or seeking to do so.[10] It received 859 responses.

Respondents included a mix of companies from the defense industrial base as well as commercial businesses, ranging from small businesses to large

Company Output	% of Respondents
Hardware	34%
Software	32%
Services	34%

Table 1. Which of these do you sell?

Government Experience	% of Respondents
None	23%
1-5 years	18%
6-10 years	15%
11-15 years	8%
15 or more years	34%
Unknown	2%

Table 2. How much experience has your founding team had working with or in government prior to founding?

Revenue Type	% of Respondents
Commercial	68%
Federal Research and Development	87%
Federal Operations and Maintenance or Procurement	29%
Non-Federal Government (State or Local)	33%
International Government	16%
Academic Grants	21%
Other	7%

Table 3. Please select all of the types of revenue that you have earned.

7   U.S. Department of Defense, *Small Business Strategy*, January 2023, accessed January 8, 2024, https://media.defense.gov/2023/Jan/26/2003150429/-1/-1/0/SMALL-BUSINESS-STRATEGY.PDF.

8   Defense Innovation Board, *Terraforming the Valley of Death*.

9   "Doing Business with the U.S. Government," Frontdoor Defense, accessed January 17, 2024, https://www.frontdoordefense.com/report.

10   Other Transaction Authority refers to the authority of the Defense Department to carry out certain prototypes, research, and production projects. It was created to provide the necessary flexibility to adopt and incorporate business practices that reflect industry standards. "Contracts and Legal: Other Transaction Authority," AcqNotes: The Defense Acquisition Encyclopedia, accessed January 17, 2024, https://acqnotes.com/acqnote/careerfields/other-transaction-authority-ota.

Investment Type	% of Respondents
Personal Capital	78%
Equity Investments from Friends and Family	33%
Private Venture Capital	24%
Corporate Venture Capital	11%
Debt	33%
Non-Dillutive Funding	82%

Table 4. Which of these have you used to fund your business?
Note: The composition of companies receiving private investment in this sample reflects the wider defense industrial base consisting of approximately 100,000 companies.

corporations. Together, they represent a broad range of products, levels of experience in working with the government, and funding types.[11] [12]

Findings

Our survey and research yielded five key findings on the most pressing needs and significant challenges companies face when working with the Defense Department. First, partnering with different types of companies requires different tactics. The U.S. government should develop unique approaches for partnering with each type of company. Receiving contract awards quickly is crucial for smaller companies and startups, whereas size is more important for companies with substantial commercial revenue. Second, Defense Department partnerships with new entrants to the federal market often falter because companies and buyers are disconnected. Companies struggle to identify customers and to align the users, buyers, and contracting officers who each play a role in a successful sale. Third, new entrants are unprepared to meet federal government requirements like technical certifications (e.g., airworthiness) or licensing requirements (e.g., authority to operate), which can impede technology transition and cause delays in award. Fourth, the U.S. government's overly assertive stance on intellectual property rights delays awards and shrinks the pool of companies willing to sell to the Defense Department. Finally, the difficulty companies face in obtaining security clearances and accessing physical and virtual classified environments limits the U.S. government's exposure to new or commercial capabilities. We expound on each of these findings in the following sections.

Policymakers and defense personnel will benefit from this work as it offers empirically based insights on the needs of companies as well as recommendations for how to improve the U.S. government's ability to adopt commercial technologies. Both insights and recommendations are essential to informing U.S. defense and industrial policy. Each individual recommendation would be a step forward, even if the entire package is not adopted.

Different Companies, Different Tactics

"As a small business, the cost of doing business with the federal government is steep, risky, and always uncertain." -Survey Respondent

What companies need from the federal government depends on their size and previous record of success.

Companies dealing exclusively with the federal market are most focused on receiving contracts faster. Reducing the time that the government takes to award a contract is the top choice of 44 percent of respondents with operations and maintenance or procurement contracts, and 42 percent of respondents with more than 15 years of government experience.

On the other hand, companies with commercial revenue prefer larger contracts: 67 percent of companies with commercial revenue rate contract size first or second.

Companies offer a variety of perspectives on contract challenges in their commentary on this point. Some companies struggle to understand how the government buys products, while the government struggles to understand what companies need from a government partnership. One respondent mused: "It is becoming a joke out in industry about how little acquisition personnel, program managers, [and] 'innovation' personnel understand emerging technology rapid acquisition and adoption, especially from small business."

Several respondents were concerned about the long time it takes for the government to award a contract, even after a decision is made. These delays

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11   Non-dilutive funding is a type of capital financing that does not require a startup to surrender equity in exchange for funding. "Dilutive funding vs non-dilutive funding," Liquidity Group, accessed January 17, 2024, https://www.liquiditygroup.com/resource-funding/dilutive-funding-vs-non-dilutive-funding#:~:text=Non%2DDilutive%20Funding%20is%20any,%2C%20vouchers%2C%20and%20tax%20credits.

12   "What is the Defense Industrial Base?," Institute for Defense and Business, accessed January 19, 2024, https://www.idb.org/what-is-the-defense-industrial-base/#:~:text=There%20are%20more%20than%20100,and%20services%20to%20the%20government.

**Which of the following 10% contract increases would you most prefer
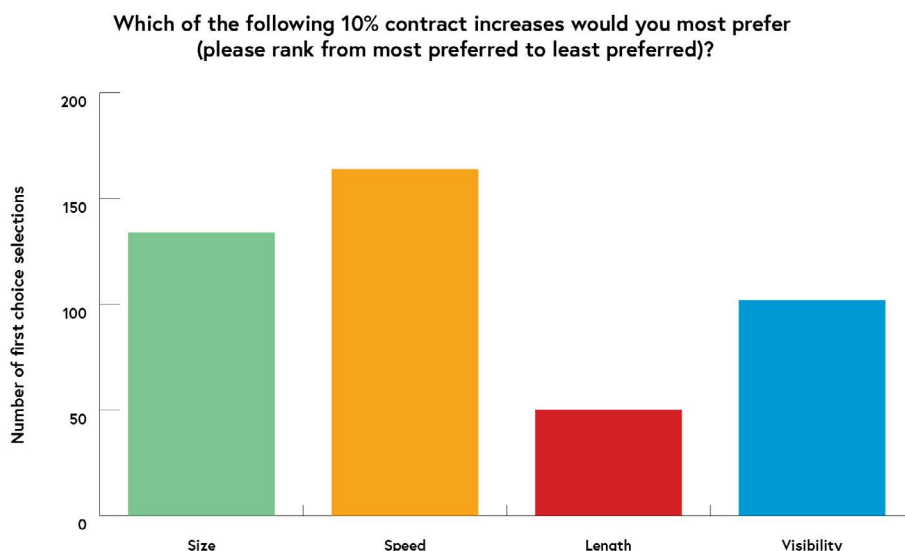(please rank from most preferred to least preferred)?**

Figure 1. Contracts

can have acute financial impacts on small businesses. One respondent noted: "As a small business we can't afford to float labor costs and wait around for the government to finalize a contract. They are destroying their own productivity with bureaucracy and delays." Another claimed that the "[long] time to award for research and development grants almost nullifies its utility." Yet another called out slow time-to-award, which makes "it very difficult to project a runway with a nine month turn-around."

The results suggest the federal government should recognize and appreciate variations in company type when developing and carrying out an acquisition strategy.

If the Defense Department is serious about the goal of "diversifying its supplier base and investing in new production methods," as stated in the *National Defense Industrial Strategy*,[13] and implementing its "fast follower" strategy, it should offer larger, more secure revenue for firms with existing commercial products.[14] Companies require financial upside from the defense market to justify resource investments in defense sales and product customizations. This means that "picking some winners"[15] — awarding fewer contracts for larger sums of money and rapidly scaling successful pilot projects to production — is not just a smart transition strategy, but an essential market signal to startups and investors that the federal market holds sufficient promise.[16] Larger contracts will create longer runways to deal with Defense Department timelines,

which will help fast-follower companies devote resources to pursuing government opportunities.

On the other hand, securing a contract in a timely manner is even more important to newer companies relying on the government as a primary revenue source. Some survey respondents indicated that contracting delays created problems such as prohibitive costs in keeping experts on the payroll while the company waited for a contract to be awarded. In addition, long award times make it more difficult for companies to successfully execute their contracts, as government sponsors often transition to new roles before contracts are awarded. This leaves companies without internal support for initiatives when they are finally under contract. If the U.S. government wants to continue attracting new companies to the defense market, it should award contracts quicker.

What should the Defense Department do to address this problem? One option would be to publish an annual transition playbook detailing examples of successful company transition pathways to serve as guides for similar companies and program offices to follow. The Defense Department can help companies replicate technology transitions from introducing their technology as a test, or pilot, all the way to full-scale production manufacturing at scale. In addition to explaining the planning, programming, budgeting, and execution process, the playbook should include a set of transition spotlight case studies, detailing the steps successful companies took to transition. Entities such

13   U.S. Department of Defense, *National Defense Industrial Strategy*, 19.

14   David Vergun, "DOD Modernization Relies on Rapidly Leveraging Commercial Technology," *DOD News*, January 25, 2023, https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3277453/dod-modernization-relies-on-rapidly-leveraging-commercial-technology/.

15   Stew Magnuson, "SPECIAL REPORT: Pentagon Makes Moves to Speed Up Tech Transition," *National Defense*, February 14, 2023, https://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/articles/2023/2/14/pentagon-makes-moves-to-speed-up-tech-transition.

16   Lara Seligman, "Pentagon Criticized for 'Spray and Pray' Approach to Innovation," *Foreign Policy*, October 16, 2018, https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/10/16/why-the-pentagons-spray-and-pray-approach-isnt-working-investment-technology-china/.

as AFWERX, DIU, NavalX, and others would submit exemplary case studies of companies each year. The playbook would be organized by technology area (e.g., autonomy, quantum, and energy), service, and other key delimiters to help companies and program offices identify similarities. Companies could then create a defined deployment pathway based on these case studies, tailored to their technical focus, needs, and maturity.

Additionally, the government could clarify the acquisition process to attract the right companies for the desired capability — and help companies determine

Expanding and increasing the capacity of the defense industrial base means not only attracting more companies to the market but also helping them determine which awards to pursue.

when not to bid. Expanding and increasing the capacity of the defense industrial base means not only attracting more companies to the market but also helping them determine which awards to pursue.[17] Program managers and contracting officers can work with companies to develop acquisition strategies that expand the vendor pool while also helping companies filter through relevant opportunities. Government acquisition offices should be required to release their determination of contracting approach in their market research or initial solicitation, including information about the competitive process, timeline, contract type, and evaluation criteria. Each office responsible for an acquisition should publish an estimated time to award the contract, and then assess annual accuracy, so that vendors can evaluate the potential costs and benefits of a response and the timeliness of the office. Furthermore, acquisition officials should be seen as strategic advisors to the program office, communicating the commander's intent to craft a strategy that delivers capability and provides a path to scale up rapidly if successful or terminate quickly if unsuccessful. While not every contract will be built for speed, the Defense Department can provide more information to help companies self-select where their time will be well-spent.

Disconnected From the Buyers

"If you don't start with shot-callers, you're going nowhere fast." -Survey Respondent

Companies need connectivity to government program offices because they control budgets.

Among all respondents, 43 percent ranked a program officer the government representative they most prefer to meet, while end-users were the clear second choice. Meanwhile, 27 percent of respondents ranked end-users the most important.
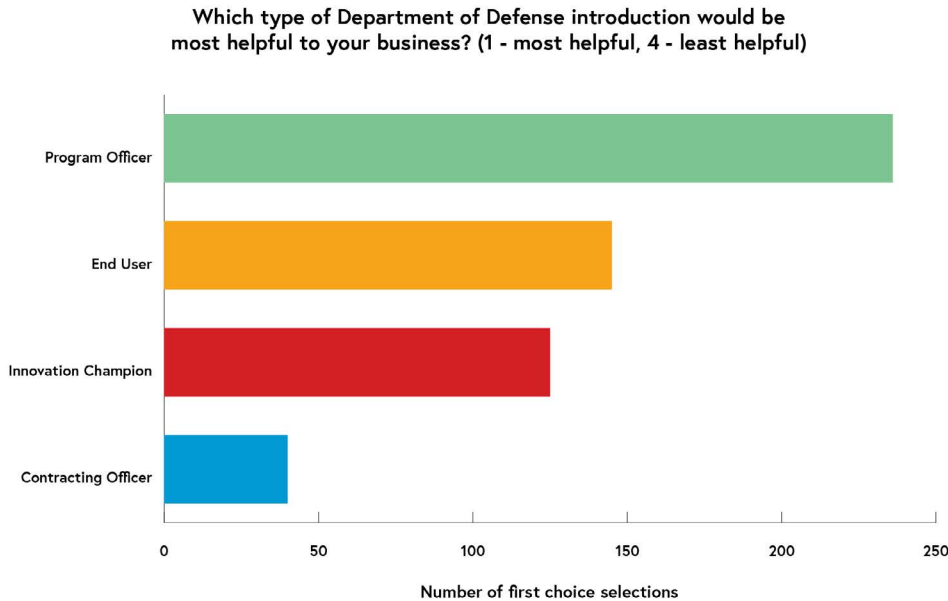
Which type of Department of Defense introduction would be most helpful to your business? (1 - most helpful, 4 - least helpful)

Figure 2. Introductions

17   Tony Bertuca, "DOD pushing new defense industrial strategy to expand weapons stockpiles," *Inside Defense*, October 25, 2023, https://inside-edefense.com/share/219411.

The preference for program officer introductions cuts across all types and sizes of companies, regardless of founder experience, product type (i.e., software, hardware, or services), funding raised, and revenue earned.

Survey respondents did not see much value in connecting with contracting officers. However, of the 7 percent of respondents who ranked contracting officers as their most preferred government contact, nearly half had earned or are actively pursuing operations and maintenance or procurement contracts.

Most respondents believe that program offices are the gateway for successfully transitioning their pilot awards into production contracts. One respondent explained that "businesses hope for transition into longer-term relationships with the government; not just quick research and development efforts that get nowhere" and while "users are very important to delivering the right/best solution...if [program executive offices] aren't on board, it's a short-lived opportunity." Another respondent put it more bluntly: "If there is no budget, you [the company] have zero chance of success."

Overall, respondents viewed program offices as critical to scaling early pilot contracts, through programs like SBIR/STTR, to production. One small business entrepreneur stated: "It can be very challenging to mature a program from SBIR-level funding to direct program office. The challenges are largely non-technical (e.g., arranging a meeting to get all the key decision-makers in a room at the same time, competing with lower-quality versions of similar capabilities that have been developed by government labs)." They went even further to suggest that "having a clear vision and aligning with key stakeholders from the outset of what success looks like would go a long way to de-conflicting overlap with existing government-led initiatives."

Numerous respondents also provided their perception of contracting officers. Many were dismissive, with one respondent writing that "contracting officers don't actually make any favorable decisions, they just implement." Another wrote that "contracting officers simply manage the contracts but lack the whole picture to move the project forward." However, some expressed appreciation for these officials. One respondent exclaimed: "If you find a good contracting officer, you never let them go!"

It is not surprising that companies want to connect with program offices that control budgets. Nevertheless, these results are notable in that they suggest that the Defense Department has made significant progress in the past eight years on another front. The department took on the challenge of connecting companies to end-users by establishing entities such as the Army Applications Lab and the U.S. Cyber Command's Tech Outreach Division to improve entrepreneurs' understanding of which problems their solutions address and who might benefit from their solution. Moreover, entities such as the Air Force Spark Cells, Defense Ventures Fellows, and Defense Entrepreneurs Forum, among others, have increased the interest and willingness of servicemembers to engage directly with industry, and Phase I SBIRs provided the contractual basis for enhanced engagement between companies and government.[18]

Companies report that having end-user support, while necessary, is insufficient to win production contracts with the government. Even seasoned entrepreneurs with government experience struggle to navigate the Defense Department's acquisition bureaucracy, to turn end-user enthusiasm into programmatic requirements and meaningful business. The failure to connect companies and programmatic buyers is inhibiting companies from transitioning technologies to the warfighter. Pursuing commercialization objectives (Phase III) is not a guaranteed next step in the SBIR program. Rather, it refers to the sole-source authority companies can use if they successfully complete any previous phase of SBIR work. Companies can technically enter Phase III when a government customer obligates funds and issues their own contract. However, there is no guarantee that performing on a pilot contract will yield programmatic interest, funding, or pathways to continuing business. Companies need access to program offices.

Most companies view contracting officers solely as implementers or barriers to overcome, as paper-pushers as opposed to key influencers in the acquisitions process. "Contracting officers typically are the roadblock," as one respondent put it, typifies this sentiment. But this may be to their own detriment. Companies that have successfully earned defense revenue recognize that contracting officers are critical to success, especially in accelerating the speed with which a contract is awarded. Put simply, contracting officers are an underappreciated key to successful transitions. Few commercial companies fully understand the government acquisition process. Contracting officers can translate strategic guidance into action — making decisions about which type of contract to use, how long it takes, what intellectual property rights a company receives — and can set a company up for repeat business or, alternatively, leave them struggling to re-engage. Companies will need to shift their thinking about contracting officers if they are to be successful.

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18   The SBIR program consists of three phases: Phase I establishes the feasibility and commercial potential of a technology, Phase II continues the research and development efforts of Phase I, and Phase III pursues commercialization goals. "America's Seed Fund: Powered by the Small Business Administration," U.S. Small Business Administration, accessed January 19, 2024, https://beta.www.sbir.gov.

Companies that have successfully earned defense revenue recognize that contracting officers are critical to success, especially in accelerating the speed with which a contract is awarded.

How can the government do a better job of connecting companies to buyers? First, the Defense Department could create more meaningful opportunities for companies to collaborate with program offices before a contract is awarded. Making it easier for companies to identify and engage relevant program officers would enhance the government's ability to take advantage of commercial technologies. Industry days are often one-sided conversations in which companies learn about abstract government requirements rather than two-way learning opportunities to shape future requirements based on end-user needs and technological capabilities. Acquisition organizations such as the Defense Innovation Unit and AFWERX can bring together relevant program offices, end-users, contracting officers, and industry partners to inform new requirements, increase companies' awareness of technical readiness, and apprise the government of the benefits non-traditional companies are able to offer.

Companies engaging in such opportunities for collaboration could gain a better appreciation for the acquisition process and the vital role contracting officers play within it. The Army's Soldier Center, for example, has succeeded in helping defense organizations understand the latest commercial technology, while connecting companies to program offices and contracting officers.[19] In addition, dialogue between government personnel and entrepreneurs can shape an acquisition strategy to ensure it meets both government and commercial needs before issuing a request for proposal. The recently established Mission Acceleration Center network could provide great spaces for these engagements. Alternatively, these engagements could be included within "technology insertions" activities, which some program offices, like submarines, hold approximately every other year to integrate new technology into existing products.[20] Crucially, these engagements should educate companies about the best opportunities to engage program officers, and

who to engage and with what material, to maximize chances of success and minimize wasted time.

Additionally, Defense Department pilot sponsors should identify, engage, and share information with relevant program offices from the start of pilot contracts. Companies and end-users know that the goal is a successful transition from pilot to production through a program office. Successfully making the jump requires companies and end-user organizations to mitigate perception of risk and engage with the program office well in advance. Pilot sponsors can identify key performance indicators for the existing programmatic capability a pilot seeks to replace and share pilot performance information with relevant program offices early on. While many pilots are too small to be of interest to major programs, early communication would help to build familiarity and trust, allowing the programs to monitor the maturity of a capability. This would serve the dual purpose of increasing visibility into new technologies for the program office while giving successful pilots a greater chance of transitioning inside the Defense Department.

Unprepared for Technical Transition

"Certifications and compliance requirements [are] highly complicated to navigate." - Survey Respondent

Currently, most companies are not prepared to meet the compliance requirements necessary for federal government production contracts. The Defense Department requires technologies to be tested and evaluated, assessed for risk, and approved for use in a variety of operational environments.

Most respondents do not have any government license or certification, such as an Authority to Operate: 43 percent of respondents reported receiving some government license or certification, while 47 percent have not. Notably, of those that have received a license or certification, nearly half have an operations and maintenance or procurement contract. This reinforces the point that companies that do transition from pilot to production will often require certification.

The Authority to Operate is the most common certification, held by nearly one-third of those certified. Among software companies, 49 percent have an Authority to Operate, as do 56 percent of companies with operations and maintenance or procurement contracts.

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19   Jane Benson, "Soldier Center hosts U.S. Army Small Unmanned Aircraft System Technology Innovation Network Event," *DEVCOM Soldier Center Public Affairs*, November 3, 2020, https://www.army.mil/article/240535/soldier_center_hosts_u_s_army_small_unmanned_aircraft_system_technology_innovation_network_event.

20   Clive Kerr, Robert Phaal, and David Probert, "Technology insertion in the defence industry: A primer," *Proceedings of the Institution of Mechanical Engineers, Part B: Journal of Engineering Manufacture* (August 2008), https://doi.org/10.1243/09544054JEM1080.
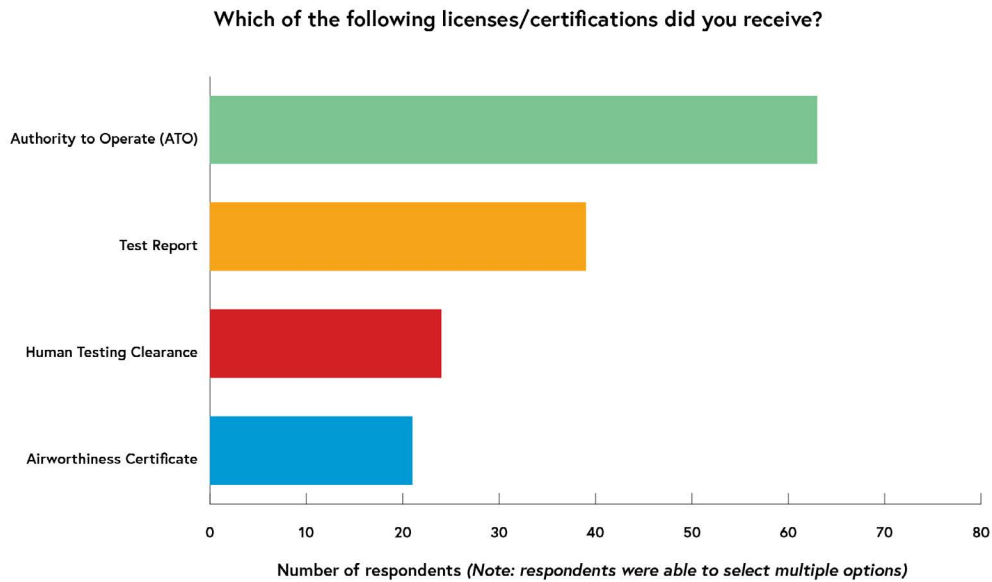
Which of the following licenses/certifications did you receive?

Figure 3. Licenses and Certifications

The problems companies have with compliance relate to being unaware that compliance requirements exist, as well as difficulty in completing the steps needed to obtain certifications and licenses. Companies are willing to comply but are often unaware of what certifications or licenses are required. Government customers are often unwilling to contract with companies that are not already certified. Knowledge of these requirements is an essential prerequisite to successfully navigating them. "The biggest challenge is gaining familiarity with processes. Processes are generally good but require experience to navigate," one respondent explained. "The process of going through this type of certification needs to be streamlined and easier, but it is important," another respondent shared. Another respondent reported that the government even canceled the award after learning that the company lacked a particular certification during contracting.

Multiple respondents noted that certifications are too expensive and do not account for the limitations of small businesses and newer companies: "The certifications required are not conducive to small business. The business can go out of business while trying to obtain them." The *National Defense Industrial Strategy* acknowledges this risk as well, recommending that the government "mitigate cybersecurity costs of entry to work in the defense industrial ecosystem."[21] But challenges go beyond cybersecurity compliance. Respondents highlighted the cost of certifications when a government customer is unwilling or unable to pay for it. "The certification process and requirements price out smaller companies," one respondent explained. Companies that try to navigate government certification processes often report difficulty in obtaining them. One respondent was concerned that "government application of security requirements ... place a barrier to continuing work with no commensurate offer of assistance in obtaining the appropriate infrastructure."

The disconnect occurs because few pilot contracts require companies to obtain government licenses or certifications, but virtually all production contracts demand them.

Companies need a better understanding of the array of licenses and certifications they need to deploy their capabilities, and on what timeline, so they can build, budget, and plan appropriately to avoid costly delays and disruptions. Small or new companies do not have the large compliance departments to handle the administration of these requirements, nor the budgets to pay for some of these requirements out-of-pocket. They therefore need sufficient warning to ensure they are budgeted for any contract, no matter the cost (e.g., airworthiness certifications can cost upwards of $2 million).

Even in cases when a company has a total understanding of the required compliance activities, they still face additional hurdles. One issue is the chicken-and-egg problem: Companies need to have a contract to be eligible for most licenses and certifications, but they must have those licenses and certifications to receive a production contract in the first place. Another hurdle is that most innovative commercial technology acquisitions tend to be smaller in size and are therefore deprioritized for testing in government facilities. The result is that the smallest awards can take the longest to satisfy testing requirements.

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21   U.S. Department of Defense, *National Defense Industrial Strategy,* 20.

One issue is the chicken-and-egg problem: Companies need to have a contract to be eligible for most licenses and certifications, but they must have those licenses and certifications to receive a production contract in the first place.

How can the government assist companies in preparing for production without putting up new barriers for pilots?

One way would be to provide companies with a compliance checklist upon receiving a pilot contract. Venture capitalists set clear milestones for transitioning from one funding round to the next. A similar pathway consisting of clear milestones for companies maturing their technologies in the defense market does not exist. While companies bear primary responsibility for understanding their customers, the government can do more to help commercial companies understand the compliance requirements necessary to move from pilot to production so they can plan accordingly. Organizations sponsoring the pilot can work with program offices to provide a checklist consisting of the various compliance items companies need to satisfy to be eligible for production-level contracts.

Additionally, the *National Defense Industrial Strategy* recognizes that SBIR/STTR is a valuable gateway for many small businesses.[22] The Defense Department should further use this gateway by creating a category of supplemental SBIR/STTR funds for testing and evaluation. The SBIR/STTR program is a major source of initial government contracts, and thus the first exposure many smaller commercial companies have to government requirements. The government can hold some funding in reserve for "plus-up" of entry-level innovation contracts for testing and evaluation. The funds could be unlocked subject to a set of pre-defined requirements at award and would only be used for testing and evaluation for promising companies to go through certification processes, so that the government is better able to employ the solutions it is buying. These extensions could be executed through SBIR-trained contracting officers or a partnership intermediary agreement with access to relevant facilities.[23]

Intellectual Property Problems Abound

"DoD [struggles to understand] what a commercial sales model looks like, including private company IP rights."- Survey Respondent

Vague intellectual property rights language causes confusion between the Defense Department and companies, slowing award time and limiting the overall vendor pool.

Survey responses suggest that most companies would be willing to give up their intellectual property rights to the federal government. However, write-in responses add a degree of nuance, as most companies are deeply protective of their intellectual property and are wary of handing over their rights. This disconnect occurs because companies do not understand government intellectual property rights.

Among all respondents, 67 percent indicated they would accept language corresponding to government purpose rights on their contract, while just 24 percent would require restricted rights. Meanwhile, 27 percent of respondents are open to accepting unlimited rights on their contracts. Among venture capital-backed companies, 68 percent are open to either government-purpose or restricted rights, while only 15 percent are willing to accept unlimited rights. Companies do not understand the government's intellectual property rights framework. Accepting general purpose rights can seem harmless but can deeply impact a company's ability to profit within the defense market. On the other hand, the government either does not understand, or care about, company concerns about the need to protect their intellectual property. Companies develop products, and get funding for expansion, based on intellectual property and the defensibility of that intellectual property. However, the government requires access to the data to operate the system. Both parties — the company and the government — have an interest in reaching a mutually beneficial agreement on intellectual property rights.

Respondents highlighted that intellectual property rights negotiations are a common source of friction between companies and the government. One company representative explained that the "DoD [struggles to understand] what a commercial sales model looks

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22   U.S. Department of Defense, *National Defense Industrial Strategy*, 20.

23   A partnership intermediary agreement is a contract, agreement, or memorandum of understanding with a non-profit partnership intermediary to engage academia and industry on behalf of the government to accelerate tech transfer and licensing. "Contracting Cone: Partnership Intermediary Agreement (15 USC §3715)," Defense Acquisition University, accessed January 19, 2024, https://aaf.dau.edu/aaf/contracting-cone/rd-agreements/pia/.

Which of the following IP arrangements would you accept on a government contract (select all that apply)?

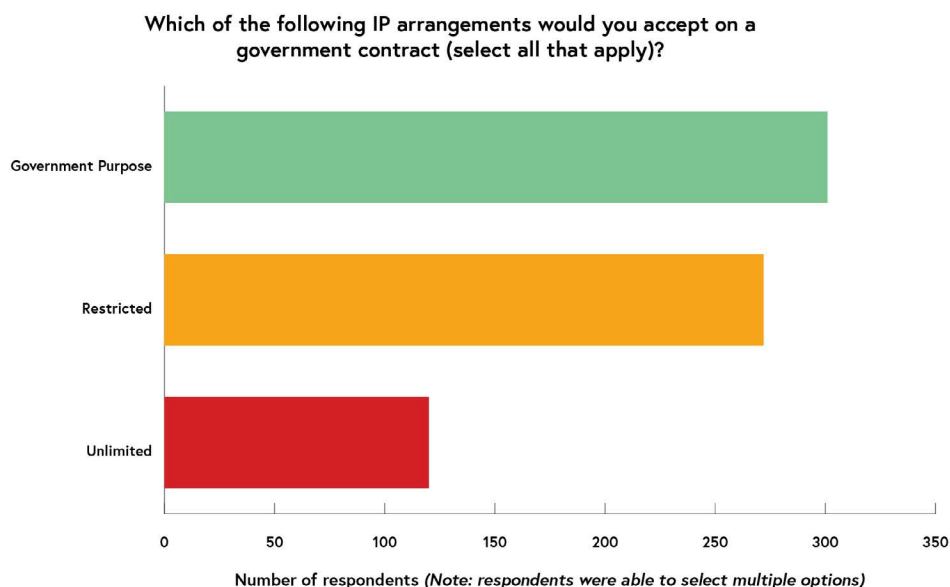Number of respondents *(Note: respondents were able to select multiple options)*

Figure 4. Intellectual Property

like, including private company intellectual property rights." Another added that "the [U.S. government] must do better at protecting our proprietary and SBIR rights." Others pointed to the disconnect between rights negotiated in SBIR awards, and those granted in follow-on contracts: "Getting SBIR data rights on contracts that extend from SBIR Phase I and II contracts [is a challenge]." Another explained that a contracting officer "has attempted to remove our existing data rights." A respondent summarized the difficult tradeoff that companies face: "The company either incurs significant fees to understand what they're agreeing to and negotiate with the government, or takes the risk, and neither is ideal."

Intellectual property rights negotiations should begin with a proven template based on previously accepted terms between similar companies and defense entities.

Negotiating intellectual property rights can be a daunting task for companies entering or growing within the federal market. The government often wants unnecessarily stringent intellectual property rights, either to minimize their perceived risk in the contract or due to differing perceptions of what they think they are buying versus what companies

believe they are selling. Companies unfamiliar with the intellectual property rights process often struggle to weigh the costs of prolonged negotiations against the risk of accepting terms they fear they may come to regret. Such confusion results in companies either leaving the defense market with their technology or spending precious time and resources hiring an intellectual property lawyer. In both cases, the Defense Department loses because the underlying requirement remains unmet.

The *National Defense Industrial Strategy* acknowledges the challenges it has imposed on companies, stating that the Defense Department will "integrate IP planning fully into acquisition strategies" and "seek to acquire only those IP deliverables and license rights necessary to accomplish these strategies."[24]

There are two additional steps the Defense Department can take to reduce the friction around intellectual property rights. First, the government should create intellectual property rights templates for different business models to facilitate the transition from pilot to production. Most intellectual property issues surface as companies transition their capabilities and contracting moves from pilot to production. The government can clear the way for more companies to engage directly with fewer concerns and roadblocks by offering clearer guidance and standard frameworks. Intellectual property rights negotiations should begin with a proven template based on previously accepted terms between similar companies and defense entities. Doing so would ensure both

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24   U.S. Department of Defense, *National Defense Industrial Strategy*, 37.

parties are protected and reduce the time spent on negotiation. Such templates would give each party confidence and stability, while reducing the time to award and the cost incurred by small companies.

Second, the Defense Department should default to Other Transaction Authority for SBIR awards and check intellectual property rights for clarity and practicality. Government-published language is notoriously opaque and incomplete. As a result, some companies are too eager to do business without recognizing the risk, while others are scared away, believing the government will own their intellectual property. The Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment should develop a plain-language communications document about intellectual property rights terms so companies can make decisions on their own, without involving lawyers. Federal Acquisition Regulation-based contracts present complicated intellectual property language barriers and outdated models of engagement that deter new entrants.[25] This is especially true for software, where the government struggles to differentiate between buying software licenses and buying services to develop software. Using Other Transaction Authority as a basis for SBIRs would provide better flexibility in negotiating rights in plain language as well as a baseline rights framework that can scale up to production.

Frozen Out by Classification

"We have huge value for classified activities (because most of them are supported by software engineering). Yet we can't make contact with clients without having clearance. And we can't get clearance without a classified client requesting it. We are stuck with an unsolvable problem."
-Survey Respondent

Dealing with classified information may be the greatest challenge companies face in accessing opportunities to work with the federal government.

Difficulties accessing classified environments prevent companies from entering the defense market. Classified environments frustrate the ability of companies to bid on new opportunities and deliver on existing contracts, insulating incumbents from competition even if they have inferior technology.

Among all respondents, 44 percent ranked accessing classified environments as the greatest barrier to working with the government, compared to 18 percent for obtaining necessary licensing and certifications, 15 percent for accessing test and evaluation facilities, and 14 percent for accessing data. The challenge of classification was greatest for companies whose leaders lacked government experience.

Respondents struggle with classified environments for two reasons: (1) gaining security clearances and (2) accessing cleared facilities. First, "getting security clearances for our team to meet and work in classified environments" remains a challenge for new entrants and small businesses, per one survey respondent. Obtaining security clearances is a problem because pilot contracts (especially SBIR/STTR) do not usually come with a Defense Department Contract Security Classification Specification (DD-254), which establishes the firm's need-to-know, and permission to do classified work.
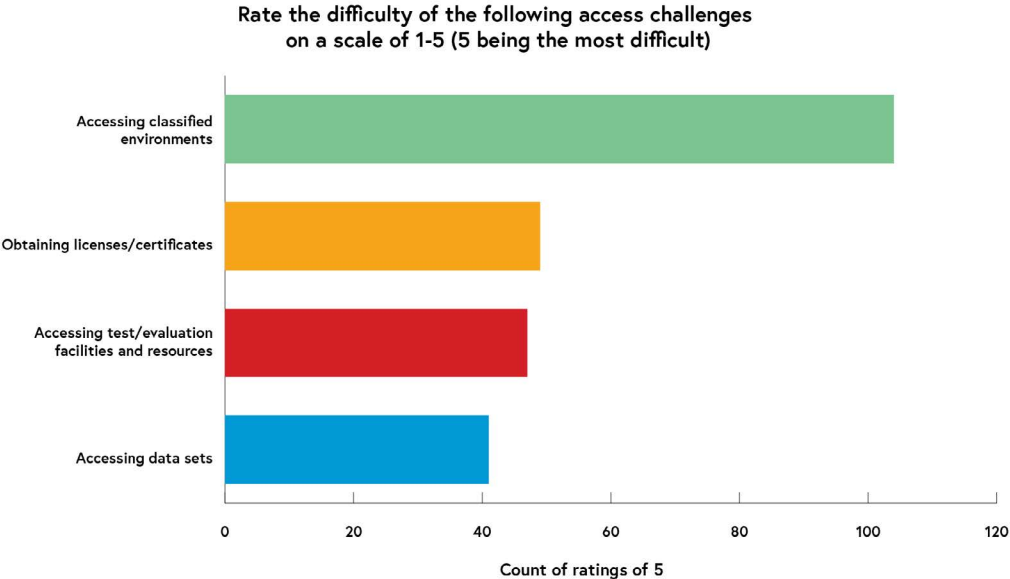
Rate the difficulty of the following access challenges on a scale of 1-5 (5 being the most difficult)

Figure 5. Access

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25   The Federal Acquisition Regulation is the primary regulation used by executive agencies to acquire supplies and services with appropriated funds. "Federal Acquisition Regulation," U.S. General Services Administration, accessed January 19, 2024, https://www.acquisition.gov/browse/index/far.

Second, access to classified facilities is a problem, as small companies often lack the ability to perform work or learn about new opportunities in a secure facility. Multiple respondents reported difficulties gaining clearances for their facilities enabling them "to get classified communications at our facilities so we can respond to [request for proposals] and qualify for critical programs. Currently the vast majority of large [Defense Department] contractors have this access but the mid/small [-sized companies] do not." Another respondent pointed to the ways in which classification protects established contractors at the expense of newcomers: "It is often impossible to win without us using classified or [Controlled Unclassified Information] we have from other work, even on supposedly open competition." In short, many companies feel that they "cannot innovate if the door is literally locked shut."

A company lacking facility clearances or cleared personnel is often viewed as risky by the acquisition community. It is an easy argument for a contractor to disqualify a new vendor, or to stick with a trusted partner, even in the face of a superior technical assessment. As a result, large traditional prime contractors are insulated from competition, and the government limits its own exposure to new or commercial capabilities. To broaden participation in the defense industrial base, the U.S. government should solve the challenge of accessing classified facilities for qualified participants.

The government needs to find new ways to involve companies without security clearances into competitive bidding, rather than dismissing them out of hand.

The classification challenge goes unmentioned in the *National Defense Industrial Strategy*. There are a few immediate steps the Defense Department could take to help address this challenge. First, it could co-locate security officers, industrial security specialists, and security Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency liaison officers within innovation units (e.g., AFWERX or the Defense Innovation Unit). There has been reluctance among innovation units to establish the need-to-know for companies, issue a DD-254, and begin the clearance process. As a result, many companies with pilot contracts do not have a realistic chance of deploying their products into the hands of end-users in classified environments, severely limiting the government's ability to leverage commercial technologies across the defense enterprise. An in-house security officer can begin to facilitate the clearance process while contracting work is ongoing, giving companies a better chance of success. The Defense Innovation Unit, as the front door to commercial companies, still relies on the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Evaluation to process clearances, dramatically slowing the process. With a higher volume of contracts, and a smaller overall contract size, these innovation units are typically deprioritized and require a dedicated officer to prioritize their awardees.

Second, the Defense Department could use non-military sites to create secure compartmentalized information facilities (SCIF) for companies. One of the great challenges for companies entering the defense market is that even if they have cleared staff, those individuals require admittance to SCIFs to be able to access classified information, compared to traditional contractors who own and manage their own (expensive) classified facilities. This is a significant barrier for many companies on pilot contracts.

The government should use the Mission Acceleration Centers, Defense Innovation Unit, and other off-base locations where companies can establish shared sites that provide SCIF access — either on existing contracts or for bidding on classified requirements. This may mean accelerating and scaling up the Defense Advanced Research Program Agency's Bringing Classified Innovation to Defense and Government Systems program to sponsor interim facility security clearances and giving companies access to classified terminals at select sites.[26] The government should also explore private company partnerships to make SCIFs more widely available.

One of the great challenges for companies entering the defense market is that even if they have cleared staff, those individuals require admittance to SCIFs to be able to access classified information, compared to traditional contractors who own and manage their own (expensive) classified facilities.

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26   "Bringing Classified Innovation to Defense and Government Systems," Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, accessed January 19, 2024, https://www.darpa.mil/work-with-us/bringing-classified-innovation-to-defense-and-government-systems.

Conclusion

The Defense Department needs access to advanced commercial technologies to keep pace with adversaries. For this to happen, the department should build stronger partnerships with all types of companies. These partnerships should be mutually beneficial, allowing companies to swiftly discover defense customers while enabling defense customers to rapidly acquire commercial technologies. Otherwise, companies may lose interest and investors may lose patience and take their business elsewhere. A smaller vendor pool with less competition risks widening the defense technology gap between the United States and its technologically advanced adversaries. The potential harm to U.S. national security could be immense.

Over the past decade, Defense Department policies have focused on improving the government's ability to acquire commercial technologies. These policies have been highly successful at attracting companies to the defense market. The next step is to focus on the company side of the partnerships to improve the government's ability to retain company interest in the defense market by mitigating the issues they face. The outcome of an expanded supplier base should not be just an "increase in number of suppliers newly doing business with the Department," as the *National Defense Industrial Strategy* states.[27] Rather, the goal should be the rapid and widespread adoption of more advanced technology that is better able to accomplish essential mission objectives faster and more effectively.

Our survey results highlight five challenges that companies face when doing business with the U.S. government. These findings can help inform the development of new techniques the Defense Department can use to reduce these barriers.

Company success in the defense market is inextricably linked to the military's success on the battlefield. The government's success metric should not be tied to the success of any one company. Rather, success for the government means building the infrastructure that allows a parade of mission-driven entrepreneurs and company builders to develop, deliver, and scale disruptive technology and services to benefit the warfighter and strengthen U.S. national security. Achieving this goal means better aligning government policies and personnel with companies, making access easier, and eliminating the myriad obstacles that dissuade many from entering and thriving in the defense market. ♟

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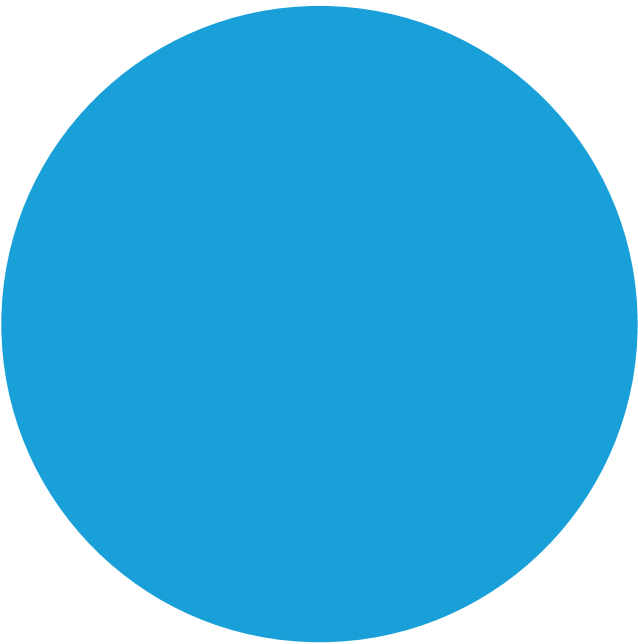
Noah Sheinbaum *is the founder of Frontdoor Defense, a platform to simplify the defense industry for mission-aligned builders and operators. He also co-founded Defense Tech Jobs, a jobs board for defense technology companies, and consults for various purpose-driven companies.*

Image: *Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Alexander Kubitza*[28]

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27   U.S. Department of Defense, *National Defense Industrial Strategy*, 24.

28   For the image, see https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3643326/dod-releases-first-ever-national-defense-industrial-strategy/.

The Roundtable Feature

Roundtables are where we get to hear from multiple experts on either a subject matter or a recently published book.

MAKING PEACE FROM THE OUTSIDE-IN OR THE INSIDE-OUT

Janice Gross Stein

In this roundtable feature, Janice Gross Stein reviews Galen Jackson's book, "A Lost Peace," and argues that outside powers can hinder or support efforts toward peace but cannot impose it.

A s the most violent war yet in the long history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict rages, a war especially horrific in its consequences for civilian populations, thinking inevitably jumps to "the day after" the fighting stops. Front and center is the opportunity, this time, to make peace between two states, the state of Israel and the state of Palestine, living side by side. This, sadly, is not a new idea. It has a long and frustrating lineage.

Despite this long history of failure, people are uncommonly willing to step forward with ideas on how to make peace. Beyond the obvious professional diplomats and international lawyers, peace cartographers are almost a cottage industry. Historians, political scientists, journalists, scientists, and foundations, not to mention politicians, regularly draw virtual maps of how peace can be forged. They do so even when the conflicts are regional, intractable, violent, and enduring. These peace maps are well-drawn, logical, comprehensive, and compelling. Why then do they succeed so rarely? Why do so few leaders of governments and oppositions follow the directions to get to peace?

One word best simplifies the complex forces at work: context. Context that is shaped by historical memory and deep grievance. Louise Arbour, the chief prosecutor of war crimes for the International Criminal Tribunals for Rwanda and for the former Yugoslavia, famously remarked that the Middle East suffers from too much history and too little geography.[1] In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, both peoples make historical claims to the same small piece of territory, they both reach back into history for validation but start the historical clock at different times, and their historical narratives each exclude the other except as an aggressor. Each sees itself as a victim of self-interested imperial powers who were remarkably ignorant when they came to the region. And each has a deeply ingrained confidence — a confidence that is invisible to outsiders who do not speak the local languages — that they will be there long after the outsiders lose interest and go home. Finally, each community includes religious voices that regard their right to all of the land as divinely inspired. It should be no surprise that peace has eluded Israel and Palestine for well over a hundred years.

Galen Jackson approaches the Arab-Israeli dispute with little attention to the historical memories that have etched the politics of the region. That is perhaps a function of the limited historical period that is the focus of his book.[2] He looks only at 13 years, a small and very particular period in the long-enduring conflict when Arab states were deeply involved in the wake of the war in 1967 and replaced Palestinians as the principal focus of attention. Even then, Amman and Damascus are largely ignored in this story. Cairo does better, but this is largely a history of the Arab-Israeli dispute told from the perspective of Washington that was primarily focused on Moscow rather than on the Middle East. Not for the first time and not for the last, an outside great power saw the Middle East as an arena of competition with another great power.

A Cold War Story

The central argument of this meticulously researched book is that the United States "lost" the opportunity to make peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors largely because of Washington's determination to oust the Soviet Union, once and for all, from the Middle East. Henry Kissinger, first the national security adviser and then secretary of state for eight of these 13 years, was focused on disrupting the alliance between the Soviet Union and Egypt and Syria and expelling Moscow from the region. That grand strategy framed everything he did during those critical years. The secretary of state, Jackson shows, ignored clearly expressed signals from Soviet leaders, especially from 1973 on, that they were willing to agree to terms to resolve the Arab-Israeli dispute that were acceptable to the United States.

Jackson mines newly released historical documents, particularly from the United States, and provides compelling evidence that challenges the conventional wisdom that the Soviet Union was determined to prevent a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Moscow was allegedly motivated by ideological reasons and by the opportunities that an ongoing conflict provided to strengthen its alliances and deepen its presence in the region. Jackson asks the counterfactual question: Would it have not made more sense for the superpowers to have collaborated to find a solution to a conflict that conceivably could escalate

1   Personal conversation, June 2010.

2   Galen Jackson, *A Lost Peace: Great Power Politics and the Arab-Israel Dispute*, 1967-79. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2023.

to a major war between them? Moscow and Washington had an obvious interest in not being dragged into war by their partners in the region. And, if they did share an interest in avoiding war, why didn't they — as the Nixon administration suggested they would — subordinate special interests in order to resolve the conflict and strengthen détente that was so important to both governments? That is the defining puzzle that Jackson tries to solve in this carefully researched book.

The story leaps off the page in this lively and well-written story. It should be no surprise to regular readers of American history that both President Richard Nixon and Kissinger use extraordinarily vivid language in their private memos and conversations. Nor is their frustration with Israel and the colorful language they use to describe its leaders surprising. What does become clear in Jackson's careful reconstruction of these years is that Nixon was far more interested in a comprehensive settlement than was Kissinger. It is surprising to read how deeply committed the president was, in theory, to a settlement but how little he was willing to do in practice. It is almost as if these conversations were a private outlet for Nixon that then absolved him of the need to do very much about pushing a settlement forward in practice.

Jackson establishes clearly that, from 1971 on, Moscow wanted to work with Washington on a comprehensive agreement. That interest in stabilizing the conflict deepened after Egypt and Syria launched a war in 1973 in a deliberate and politically sophisticated attempt to destabilize the *status quo* and force open a pathway to a political settlement. It would have been helpful if Jackson's account had made more space for the deep frustration in Cairo that was ignited by Moscow's repeated refusals to supply the advanced weaponry that President Anwar Sadat requested. That refusal is consistent with the broader argument that Jackson makes about Soviet restraint, a lesson learned the hard way after the disastrous role they played in igniting the war in 1967 when Soviet intelligence shared false information with Cairo.

The book also clearly establishes its central argument that Kissinger gave priority to the expulsion of Soviet forces from the Middle East over a comprehensive settlement that would be orchestrated by the two superpowers. Frustration in Cairo made that a possible option. It was not only the refusal to supply advanced weapons but also the condescension that Soviet officers displayed toward their Egyptian counterparts, their belittling of the skills of the Egyptian army, and Soviet officers' frequent stereotyping of their Egyptian counterparts that bordered on racism that damaged the relationship.

Sadat's expulsion of Soviet advisers — designed to satisfy one of Kissinger's core demands in order to draw the United States in — was met with widespread relief and considerable *Schadenfreude* among the officer class in Egypt. Kissinger's objective of expelling the Soviets was far easier to achieve than he had imagined because of the toxic relations between the Soviet and Egyptian officer corps. And Sadat understood well that only the United States had leverage with Israel.

The Limits of Seeing "Outside-In"

Where Jackson goes beyond the evidence that he so meticulously gathers is in his claim that the United States "lost" the opportunity to make peace. Washington sacrificed peace, Jackson claims, because Kissinger gave priority to the geopolitical objective of expelling the Soviets rather than reducing the risk of war between the two superpowers by imposing a peace on Israel and on its Arab neighbors, including Palestine. The flaws in the logic are not hard to spot.

First, although Kissinger cannot claim credit for the expulsion of the Soviet Union from the region — that was almost exclusively Sadat's doing — the result was to drastically reduce the risk of war between the two nuclear superpowers. Removing Soviet forces resolves part of the puzzle that Jackson poses in the book — that U.S. decision-makers seemingly sacrificed the opportunity to reduce the risk of nuclear war when they privileged the expulsion of Soviet forces at the expense of joint peacemaking. The two objectives — reducing the risk of superpower war and expelling Soviet forces — are mutually reinforcing objectives. If Soviet forces were no longer in Egypt, the probability of an encounter between the forces of the Soviet Union and Israel, which could drag the United States in on behalf of its ally, was now close to zero. There was, in other words, more than one route to reducing the risk of war.

The core claim, then, is that Kissinger forfeited the opportunity to work together with Soviet leaders to impose a peace and that Arabs, Israelis, and Palestinians have paid the price ever since. That claim can only be tested against the consuming efforts of subsequent U.S. administrations to broker peace agreements. President Jimmy Carter came to office wholly committed to a comprehensive peace and found himself dealing with Sadat, who refused to allow his Arab allies to get in his way of a bilateral peace agreement with Israel that would return the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt. Although the agreement crafted at Camp David between Egypt and Israel was difficult to achieve, it was the easiest to accomplish because of the relatively favorable geography of a large desert

that separated the two former combatants. President Bill Clinton devoted enormous time, attention, and effort to reaching an agreement between Israel and Palestine but was ultimately unable to overcome the challenges that have bedeviled those who have tried to impose or mediate comprehensive agreements for more than a hundred years. It is hard to argue, then, that a U.S.-Soviet effort would have succeeded from 1973 to 1974, had it been tried, when everything else, before and after, has failed.

Perhaps the problem comes in the framing of the book. Jackson suggests that using the Middle East as a window is an effective way to comprehend why Washington and Moscow were unable to cooperate on Arab-Israeli peace and consequently jeopardized détente. To treat the Middle East as a window into the superpower relationship, however, is to ignore a great deal of what is important to the leaders and peoples of the region. It is ultimately to deprive them of agency in the making of agreements that are far more important to them than they are to powers outside the region. The analytic challenge of under-standing why peace has not been made has to start in Jerusalem, in Ramallah, in Amman, in Damascus, and in Cairo. Washington and Moscow can hinder, as they have at times, they can help, as they have tried to do at times, but they cannot "lose" a peace that the peoples of the region have not yet found.

That conclusion is again top of mind as Israel and Hamas engage in the most violent episode yet in the enduring Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And once again, peacemaking is being led from the outside — by the United States and by Arab governments who historically have privately shown no great con-cern either for the suffering of Palestinians or the independence of Palestine. This time, it has fallen to outsiders because both parties to this war — the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the military leadership of Hamas — have no in-terest in a peace agreement or a two-state solution. That it is the only option does not, however, make it an option that is likely to succeed. Peace cannot be imposed from the outside. It can only be made from the inside. 🔴

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Image: *White House Photo Office*[3]

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3   For the image, see https://catalog.archives.gov/id/7268212.