Understanding Current Threats to Democracy: The Limits of the Civil-Military Relations Paradigm

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Although the post-9/11 era has been marked by scholarly angst about what many view as a distinct deterioration in civil-military relations, a review of the evidence suggests that civil-military relations during this period have been complex and sometimes contradictory, rather than unidirectional. But a narrow or formalistic focus on civil-military relations obscures the risks to democracy that stem not from the military but from newer means of coercion that have been enabled by recent technological changes. Concern over civil-military relations and civilian control of the military rests on the presumption that because it possesses the tools of large-scale physical violence, the military is the primary institution capable of subverting democracy through the exercise of raw power. If this was ever true, it is no longer the case today, as recent events have demonstrated.

In the quarter-century since the Twin Towers fell, the United States has been almost continuously at war, with manifestly negative consequences for American democracy, individual rights, and the rule of law. This period has also been marked by substantial angst about what many commentators view as a distinct deterioration in civil-military relations, characterized by a range of potentially worrisome trends: a military that has grown too central to U.S. foreign policy, with military leaders gaining excessive influence relative to civilian decision-makers; increased politicization of the military; and a growing divide between the military community and civilian society – or, alternatively, a troubling militarization of civilian culture and institutions. A close examination of the evidence suggests, however, that civil-military relations in the post-9/11 period have been complex and sometimes contradictory, rather than unidirectional.

But the absence of a clear crisis in civil-military relations doesn't mean there's no cause for concern. Most scholarship on civil-military relations is animated by the presumption that the military is the sole institution in possession of the tools of mass coercion, making healthy civil-military relations uniquely important to managing coercion in a democratically accountable manner. However, the tech-

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nological and social changes that have marked the post-9/11 period cast this assumption into doubt. Our global interconnectedness and increasing dependence on networked computers have created stunning new vulnerabilities, and recent decades have seen the emergence of new kinds of security threats and new means of mass coercion. These threats stem from sources that include the cyber domain, artificial intelligence, disinformation, financial market manipulation, and bioengineered weapons, and they come not only from state actors but from nonstate organizations and super-empowered individuals. Increasingly, they have the potential to threaten international security, domestic stability, and democratic institutions, including here in the United States.

In fundamental ways, these changes challenge our ability to articulate clearly what counts as "war" and even what counts as "force." They undermine longstanding assumptions about the unique role of the military, blur the boundaries between the military and civilian spheres, and make traditional understandings of civil-military relations and civilian control of the military less analytically useful than in the past.[1]

The U.S. military still possesses fearsome destructive powers, but it no longer represents the sole or even primary coercive threat to the norms, processes, and institutions that safeguard human rights, the rule of law, and democratic accountability. Given this context, formalistic accounts of civil-military relations may increasingly obscure as much as they enlighten. With the United States now facing unprecedented authoritarian threats, it is critical that we grapple not only with challenges to democracy that stem from traditional forms of military force, but also with those challenges stemming from newer, subtler forms of mass coercion.

The rebels who fought for American independence against the British in the late eighteenth century had personal experience living under the thumb of a powerful military that suppressed colonial self-determination. The U.S. Constitution, with its complex system of checks and balances, represents a deliberate effort to break up concentrated power. Preoccupied with the need to prevent the will of the people from being supplanted by the will of the powerful, the framers gave special attention to the need to diffuse potential risks posed by the military, which they viewed as the primary potential threat to the fledgling republic. Our constitution thus divides authority over the military between the elected civilian president, who serves as commander in chief of the armed forces, and Congress, which has the power to declare war and to raise, support, and make rules governing the military. By making military commanders subordinate to an elected president and dividing authority over the military between the executive and legislative branches, the framers sought to diminish the potential internal threat a capable military might otherwise pose to the young American republic.

Today, nearly two and a half centuries later, the U.S. military possesses tools of violence unimaginable at the birth of the American republic. In addition to its two million–strong mix of trained, armed active-duty and part-time uniformed personnel, the U.S. military possesses fighter and bomber planes, submarines and aircraft carriers, tanks and unmanned aerial vehicles, and sufficient conventional ordnance and nuclear warheads to destroy the earth several times over. And today, as in 1787, scholars and policymakers remain rightly concerned with ensuring that raw power does not prevail over individual rights, self-determination, and the rule of law.[2] This concern lies behind the proliferation of scholarship on civil-military relations and civilian control of the military.

Commentators typically understand the term *civil-military relations* in one of two ways.[3] To many, civil-military relations in the United States encompass a straightforward series of questions about the dynamics of power and control between two elite groups, one composed of national-level political leaders and the other composed of leaders of the uniformed military services. [4] Scholars who focus on this understanding of civil-military relations examine how those two elite groups interact, cooperate, or compete.[5] Other scholars broaden the circle of concern, viewing civil-military relations as also encompassing larger questions about the relationship between the public, the military, and the military community writ large – often understood to include veterans, military families, and Department of Defense (DOD) civilian employees – as well as questions about public attitudes toward war and the use of military force.

In a strictly formal sense, it seems simple enough to define the appropriate outer limits of questions about civil-military relations. The U.S. military consists of the Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard, and, most recently, the Space Force. These uniformed services are made up of a mix of enlisted personnel and commissioned officers and, all told, there are today roughly 1.3 million active-duty members of the U.S. military, along with nearly 800,000 members of the Reserve and Guard components.[6] They are supported by an additional 680,000 civilians employed directly by DOD and the various military departments.[7]

In this narrow sense, the U.S. military is an institution with clear boundaries, and by implication, we have little difficulty in defining what we mean by "civilians" when we speak of civil-military relations. From the President of the United States to elementary school students, everyone who is neither enlisted nor commissioned in the military counts as a civilian for purposes of analyzing civil-military relations.

Most of the influential literature on civil-military relations has focused on the relationship between military and civilian leaders at the national level. Samuel P. Huntington's *The Soldier and the State* (1957) and Morris Janowitz's *The Professional Soldier* (1960) helped define civil-military relations as a field of scholarly concern, and like the framers of the American republic, both authors viewed civilian control of the military as a necessary democratic check on the use of the tools of mass violence.[8]

To Huntington, ensuring the integrity of civilian control over the military required maintaining a clear distinction between civilian and military spheres of authority. He famously argued that the military should be understood as a distinct profession possessed of unique expertise. Civilian leaders, he asserted, should therefore defer to military leaders on matters relating to the use of military force, allowing the military to operate in a realm largely divorced from political debates, while military leaders should defer to civilian leaders on political and strategic questions.[9] Janowitz, in contrast, saw military decisions as inherently political, and argued that the best way to ensure democratic accountability for the use of force was to encourage blended civilian-military decision-making; if the military grew too culturally isolated from the rest of society, he warned, military policy might be ineffective in achieving national strategic goals, and the military's institutional imperatives might dangerously diverge from the needs of the society it was meant to protect and serve.[10]

Since these classic works were published, there has been an ongoing debate over the best framework for ensuring healthy relations between military and civilian leaders. Scholars have taken various approaches, but the concept of civilian control of the military has remained central.[11]

Since 9/11, numerous commentators have warned of dangerous shifts and perhaps even a "crisis" in relations between military and civilian elites. Some assert that with the advent of the open-ended "war on terror," military leaders have gained an outsized role in critical national policy decisions and the military's role in foreign policy has expanded, while military leaders and the military itself have grown more politicized, threatening what many scholars view as the vital norm of military nonpartisanship. Meanwhile, the broader public oscillates between reflexive adulation of the military and a lack of knowledge and interest, raising concerns about a potentially dangerous disconnect between the military and the society it is supposed to serve. Other scholars worry that military practices and values are distorting civilian institutions such as law enforcement in ways that bode ill for transparency and individual rights, as the contributions to this volume by Azadeh N. Shahshahani and Sofía Verónica Montez and by Jacob Swanson and Mary Fainsod Katzenstein discuss.[12]

As I have argued elsewhere, "claims of civil-military crisis have been a recurring feature of American politics" since the early years of the republic.[13] But while the post-9/11 era has ushered in numerous noteworthy changes, there is little reason to conclude that the protracted and often ill-defined wars of this period have brought about a meaningful shift in the balance of power between civilian and military leaders or threatened fundamental principles of civilian control, or otherwise clearly damaged civil-military norms. The evidence for crisis in civil-military relations is far more equivocal – and as I will suggest, concerns about civil-military relations may be distracting us from recognizing the more urgent threats to democracy posed by newer forms of coercion.

With regard to relations between military and civilian elites, U.S. reliance on the military as a tool of national policymaking has unquestionably grown, with consequent growth in senior military engagement in high-level strategic decision-making. The military has also expanded its activities into spheres traditionally dominated by civilian government agencies. At the same time, however, civilian actors have increasingly engaged in activities once largely left to the military. What is not clear is whether increased *involvement* of military leaders in strategic decisions either reflects growing military *influence* over these decisions or undermines critical principles of civilian control.[14]

The Military Intervention Project at Tufts University's Fletcher School of Diplomacy has documented more than five hundred U.S. military interventions since the nation's independence in 1776, with nearly 20 percent of those interventions occurring in the last quarter-century, many in connection with the war on terror.[15] And while large-scale U.S. combat deployments ended with the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, U.S. forces today remain actively involved in numerous conflicts, particularly in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and the Red Sea; in June 2025, the U.S. military used "bunker-buster" missiles in attacks on several Iranian nuclear sites.[16]

The U.S. military's global role has expanded in other ways as well. The traditional defining quality of a military is its responsibility for the large-scale, organized use of force in service of national political ends. In the post-9/11 era, however, the U.S. military has engaged in an expanding range of activities many degrees removed from any direct threat or use of force. U.S. civilian foreign affairs agencies such as the State Department and USAID have small budgets, limited personnel, and minimal expeditionary capabilities. And as the United States has grappled with nontraditional transnational threats emanating from nonstate actors as well as more traditional threats from states, presidents from both major political parties turned to military personnel to fill the gaps that civilian agencies could not.[17]

The post-9/11 military has been tasked with a wide range of activities that might previously have been considered "civilian" in nature, from intelligence gathering and analysis to training and advisory missions in support of civilian foreign government entities such as police departments and foreign parliaments.[18] U.S. military personnel also assist during humanitarian catastrophes, engage in defensive and offensive cyber operations, plan and carry out psychological operations, attempt to dismantle terrorist financial networks, support public health missions, assist with agricultural reform projects, and take part in hundreds of other activities that seem far away from "traditional" military actions.[19]

These activities are understood by the military as critical to preventing broader conflicts that might require the large-scale use of conventional force. As a legal matter, such activities usually are not construed as "armed conflicts" – war, as we put it more loosely – but they have been incorporated into military doctrine in which they are defined, variously, as military "shaping operations," "stability operations," "gray-zone warfare," or "irregular warfare."[20]

Superficially, these developments might lead one to conclude that in the post-9/11 period, the military's power greatly increased vis-à-vis civilian branches of government, insofar as the military has become more central to U.S. foreign policy and has expanded the scope of its activities, pushing deeper into formerly civilian spheres. But centrality, influence, and power are not the same things. If military power had increased in a general way, for instance, we might expect to see this reflected in a larger military with an ever-expanding budget. But despite temporary recruiting surges at the peak of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, the overall size of the active-duty force has changed little in the last quarter-century, and is well down from its Cold War size.[21] And although military spending spiked to 4.5 percent of GDP in 2009, when the United States was engaged in active ground combat in both Afghanistan and Iraq, it has declined again since; by 2024, the defense budget had dropped back to 2.7 percent of GDP.[22] Military spending as a share of GDP since 9/11 has been, on average, far lower than it was for most of the twentieth century.[23]

Similarly, while America's near constant post-9/11 military interventions have, of necessity, given military leaders an increasingly prominent seat at the policy-making table, there is little evidence to suggest that this has translated into greater military *influence* over national policy. Certain pivotal interactions have been much debated: Consider President Barack Obama's unhappiness with military leaders who were, in his view, trying to box him in on Afghanistan policy, and his eventual decision to fire General Stanley McChrystal. Or, during President Donald Trump's first administration, consider that military leaders largely opposed Trump's intermittent proposals to use the active-duty or National Guard troops for domestic law enforcement purposes, but military personnel were nonetheless involved in Trump administration efforts to quell the racial justice protests that roiled Washington, D.C., after George Floyd's death in 2020.[24] Or consider General Mark Milley's decision to appear, in combat uniform, alongside President Donald Trump in Lafayette Square shortly after racial justice protesters had been violently cleared out, and his subsequent public apology for his appearance, which, he noted, might have inappropriately suggested a military role in domestic politics.[25]

Seven months later, a January 12, 2021, memorandum from all members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff declared the events of January 6, 2021 (which President Trump applauded) to be "a direct assault...on our Constitutional process" and noted that President Joe Biden's upcoming inauguration was "in accordance with the Constitution."[26] This could be seen as a clear rebuke of claims made by the then–commander in chief, but they were made in service of military subordination to the Constitution. And after President Biden was sworn in, senior military leaders repeatedly found themselves overruled on significant policy issues, most notably with regard to the August 2021 withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan.[27]

Since his second inauguration on January 20, 2025, President Donald Trump has gone to unprecedented lengths to assert his authority over the military's uniformed leadership. In his first two months, President Trump fired the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the commandant of the Navy, the commandant of the Coast Guard, the vice chief of the Air Force, and the Judge Advocates General for the Army, Navy, and Air Force. All were replaced by personnel deemed by the president to be more loyal to his ideological agenda. In the months since then, President Trump has removed – among others – the generals and admirals heading the National Security Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Naval Academy, the U.S. military representative to NATO, the head of the Naval Special Warfare Command, the head of the Navy Reserve, and the top uniformed lawyers for each of the military services, all of whom held general and flag officer rank.[28] These recent Trump administration actions mark a sharp and disturbing disjuncture with the past, and in the short term, the message is clear: displeasing the president or those close to him will bring a rapid end to even the most illustrious military career. Rather than asserting "too much" influence over policy, military leaders under Trump occupy a precarious status, reduced to implementers of policy decisions made in the White House. At the moment, the civilians are most assuredly controlling the military.

Even as military leaders have been sidelined from the decision-making process, the Trump administration has shown a striking willingness to use military personnel to advance the president's domestic policy agenda. Both National Guard troops and Marines were deployed to Los Angeles in June 2025 to support the administration's immigration agenda, taking on roles normally occupied by federal civilian personnel. As this essay goes to press, President Trump has deployed National Guard troops to Washington, D.C., to help address a supposed crime crisis, and has threatened to send Guard troops, and potentially active-duty forces, to other U.S. cities such as Chicago and Baltimore. The legality of these actions is hotly contested, but in terms of civil-military relations, they represent a continuation of the trend toward using military personnel to address problems that would once have been viewed as purely in the civilian domain.[29]

It seems possible that the Trump administration's actions will alter the civil-military balance in enduring ways, but less than a year into the second Trump administration, it is difficult to predict the long-term impact. Overall, however, looking back at the last quarter-century, the picture is a complex one, suggesting no unequivocal increase in either civilian or military power but rather a constant jostling. The dynamics between military and civilian leaders are never static; they are constantly being renegotiated. While there have been moments when civilian leaders have been swayed by military leaders and when military leaders have pushed back against decisions or statements by civilian leaders, military pushback has remained within the confines of traditional constitutional norms, and military leaders appear to have "lost" as many battles for influence as they have won – particularly in recent months.

Adding a further layer of complexity, the rapid post-9/11 expansion of military activities into traditionally civilian spheres has been paralleled to a substantial degree by the increasing encroachment of civilian government agencies and private actors into traditional military spheres, blurring the lines between "civilian" and "military." With the notable exception of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, most U.S. conflicts in the post-9/11 period have involved few conventional military units in combat roles, and have instead relied heavily on a mix of military special operations forces, paramilitary actors from civilian agencies such as the CIA, and personnel and assets provided by private military contractors (PMCs).

The CIA's Special Operations Group undertakes raids, targeted missile strikes, direct combat actions, and other similar activities, in addition to training and fighting with foreign partner forces (traditionally a task undertaken mainly by Army Special Forces personnel). Publicly available evidence suggests the CIA has played a large role in U.S. drone strikes and cross-border raids, sometimes operating in tandem with military actors and sometimes on its own.[30] Executive branch decisions about whether military or civilians will be involved and which actors will lead have often been made on an ad hoc basis, frequently avoiding oversight by exploiting loopholes relating to congressional reporting requirements – a practice that has created both new forms of collaboration and new tensions between military and civilian actors, and that also poses real threats to democratic accountability.[31]

Since 9/11, the United States has also relied heavily on private military companies to carry out missions that might once have been assigned to uniformed military personnel. Private contractors provide military base and convoy security, train local personnel, staff military detention facilities, maintain weapons systems, and engage in other similar activities. In practice, their roles can be difficult to distinguish from those of uniformed military personnel. While many PMCs operate under Defense Department contracts, others are employed by civilian agencies, from the CIA to the Department of State.[32] The growing role of PMCs can be seen as both expanding and diluting the power of the military. When PMCs operate under Defense Department contracts, they act as a force multiplier for the military, enabling it to further extend its operations and scope via civilian proxies. Yet when PMCs operate outside of DOD and beyond military command and control, they can dilute the military's power.

The post-9/11 era is replete with examples of frictions between military personnel and PMCs, just as it is replete with examples of tensions between the uniformed military and civilian government paramilitary actors, such as CIA paramilitary personnel. And as with executive branch reliance on its own civilian paramilitary employees, executive branch reliance on private contractors also often has the effect of obscuring the nature and purpose of government spending and activities we might consider "military" in nature. Here, too, the growing interchangeability of military and civilian actors often allows the executive branch to evade congressional and judicial checks on the use of force.

All these developments render "civil-military relations" an increasingly imperfect proxy for understanding the relationship between the use of military force and democratic accountability, and it muddies what is meant (and what can be achieved) via "civilian control of the military."[33] If we define the military narrowly – as the uniformed services – we risk overlooking other means through which both governmental and nongovernmental actors use physical force or the threat of force to achieve their ends. If we define the military broadly – as all actors capable of engaging in large-scale uses of physical force – terms such as *military* and *civilian* lose all specificity. And if our concerns relate to democratic accountability, it becomes less and less useful to analyze the relations between nonuniformed political leaders and the U.S. military's uniformed leadership.

The effects of a quarter-century of war since 9/11 on the relationship between the uniformed military as a discrete institution and the broader civilian society have been similarly equivocal. Public trust in the U.S. military went up after 9/11, then declined, only to rise and then more recently decline again.[34] In 2024, 61 percent of Americans still said they had a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the military, a number that remains far above the level of public confidence expressed for Congress, the presidency, the judiciary, public schools, the police, or any other government institution, as Sarah Maxey discusses in her contribution to this volume.[35] What's more, a positive assessment of the military remains constant across virtually all demographic groups.[36]

Though down from its highest levels fifteen and twenty years ago, relatively robust public trust in the military manifests in a range of ways. Before 9/11, civilian federal employees and military personnel with similar levels of experience received roughly comparable pay and benefits; since 9/11, congressional action has ensured that military personnel now receive far more generous compensation and benefits packages than their civilian counterparts.[37] Public largesse does not end with pay and benefits: Most Americans have become familiar with semimandatory cultural rituals of admiration for military service. Sporting events offer special tributes to the military, airlines invite military personnel to board early, chain stores offer discounts to military personnel, veterans, and families – the list goes on.[38] One 2018

YouGov survey found that 50 percent of Americans felt that every member of the military is a "hero," regardless of whether they had served in combat or done anything unusually noteworthy.[39]

These trends might well be construed as the militarization of American culture, but their impact on public opinion, policy decisions, or democratic norms is not straightforward. There is no evidence that widespread public support for the military has translated into sustained support for specific military interventions, for instance. In fact, in the last decade, most polls have reflected substantial public wariness about the use of military force and little public tolerance for extended conflicts.[40]

Confusingly, during the post-9/11 period, Americans appear to have grown both more inclined to defer to the opinions of military leaders on matters relating to the use of force but are also more cynical about the military.[41] They are less inclined to view it as an institution they would like to join or would recommend to their child, and less inclined to view it as an apolitical institution.[42] Penny M. Von Eschen's essay in this volume finds cynicism about the military and other agencies of U.S. foreign policy promoted in popular culture, including movies, television series, and video games.[43] A 2022 Reagan Foundation survey found that 62 percent of Americans felt military leadership was becoming more politicized, and this reduced their confidence in the military as an institution.[44] In recent years, Donald Trump and his allies have repeatedly attacked the military as a "woke" institution captured by the radical left – and while there is little basis for this critique, it appears to have reduced trust in military leaders within the Republican Party while slightly increasing it within the Democratic Party.[45]

Since taking office, President Trump and his secretary of defense have given openly partisan speeches at military installations and made it clear that promotion and even job security are linked to demonstrations of political fealty. Given these developments and the high-profile dismissals of senior military leaders deemed insufficiently enthusiastic about President Trump's agenda, the public is understandably becoming ever-more skeptical of military claims of nonpartisanship. Studies suggest that younger military personnel are more likely to be partisan than older personnel and that political activity by military personnel has increased during a period in which political engagement by civilians has decreased.[46] Increasingly, prominent retired military leaders have been visible endorsers of candidates for state and national office, and numerous veterans have run for office with campaigns suggesting their military credentials make them uniquely well-suited to opine on a wide range of foreign policy and domestic matters.[47] This is a topic that Heidi A. Urben takes up in her contribution to this volume.[48]

Meanwhile, public understanding of the military remains minimal. Studies suggest that most Americans are unfamiliar with even the most basic facts about the military, such as its approximate size, budget, and organizational structure.[49]

The public's lack of familiarity with the military parallels a general decline in civic knowledge among the American people, a phenomenon variously attributed to the weakening of civics education programs in schools, too much television and social media, or any of a range of social ills. Factors such as these surely play a role, but in the case of the military, the end of Vietnam-era conscription and the advent of the all-volunteer force are also likely contributing factors. During World War II, more than 12 million Americans served in the military. In 1968, the United States had 3.5 million active-duty service members. By the mid-1990s, the active-duty force had shrunk below 1.5 million, a number it has not exceeded since.[50] In 1980, 18 percent of U.S. adults were military veterans; today, that number is only 6 percent.[51] As the military and veteran populations have shrunk, it's no surprise that public understanding of the military has also declined.

For much of the twentieth century, mass conscription ensured that the military was broadly representative of the nation's geographic, ethnic, racial, and partisan identities, although practices such as educational deferrals and the bar on women's participation in combat led to class and gender inequalities. The all-volunteer army, however, has become simultaneously more and less representative of the larger U.S. population. It has more women and people of color in it, and those underrepresented groups have slowly moved into leadership positions.[52] At the same time, military service has increasingly become a hereditary occupation rather than a widely shared burden, and today's military draws heavily on the middle class; high school graduation requirements, weight-related requirements, and other criteria effectively shut out many of the poorest Americans.[53] Perhaps for this reason, and contrary to popular mythologies, veterans tend to do better economically than nonveterans, with higher median incomes and lower unemployment rates.[54] There remain, however, class- and race-based discrepancies among veterans, as Heidi Peltier's essay in this volume points out.[55] While women remain severely underrepresented in the military, making up fewer than 20 percent of all personnel, today's military is more racially diverse than the civilian population; people of color are overrepresented relative to population size. The military is also geographically skewed: half of all active-duty troops live in just six Southern states, and the military draws far more heavily on recruits from the South, the Southwest, and the Mountain states than from the coasts.[56]

In terms of partisanship, the picture is rapidly changing: while studies during the 1970s through the mid 2000s found that enlisted personnel were less conservative than officers, some evidence suggests that officers today are beginning to tilt more liberal than enlisted personnel.[57] What's more, there is evidence of declining military respect for civilian society. Recent research suggests that the military increasingly views itself not only as a distinct and separate institution but as a morally superior one, and that military personnel have diminishing respect for their civilian leaders.[58]

It is hard to draw definitive conclusions from all this about the state of civil-military relations. Since polling questions (and the presence of polling) vary over time, it's difficult to say if civilian or military attitudes since 9/11 have changed in enduring ways, or in ways that reliably translate into meaningful differences in policy or practices affecting democratic norms. Military demographics have changed, and it is possible to point to ways in which civilian life has grown more "militarized," but in these cases, too, it is not clear that this has decisively or unidirectionally affected the norms, processes, or institutions that protect individual rights, democratic accountability, or the rule of law.

Consider, for instance, concerns about the militarization of domestic law enforcement. Municipal police departments emerged in the mid-nineteenth century in the United States and were structured from their inception along paramilitary lines (with military-style uniforms, rank structures, and the like).[59] Today, military veterans and members of the National Guard and Reserves still make up a disproportionate number of sworn law enforcement officers.[60] Since the 9/11 attacks, numerous domestic law enforcement agencies have received military surplus equipment under various controversial federal programs, discussed in the essay by Shahshahani and Montez, and police departments increasingly use predictive software and surveillance technologies first deployed in the counterterrorism arena.[61]

The impact of these shifts is unclear. While some studies have found increased use of lethal force by agencies receiving more military surplus equipment and increased use of force by officers with military experience, others have reached conflicting conclusions; the impact of surplus military equipment on crime rates is also debated.[62] In the United States, policing is highly decentralized and the professionalism of policing varies greatly from region to region. It is therefore not surprising that the impact of what might be seen as police "militarization" has been negative in some departments and neutral or positive in others (some studies have found, for instance, that officers who are military veterans are *less* likely to use excessive force than nonveterans).[63] And, of course, "the military" is not monolithic: an infantry or special operations veteran with a decade of combat experience may bring different assumptions and skills to civilian policing than a veteran whose military occupational specialty was mechanical engineering or logistics, or a veteran who never deployed. Similarly, some civilian law enforcement agencies relied on military surplus programs to acquire armored vehicles and weapons, while others used such programs to obtain office furniture.

Likewise, the adoption of artificial intelligence programs and surveillance by police departments may actually reduce the use of force by police, even as such technologies create new potential threats to civil liberties. In any case, the development and use of these technologies owe as much to civilian counterterrorism as to the military.[64]

The issues highlighted above are the bread and butter of the scholarly literature on civil-military relations. But while it remains valuable to contemplate these questions and the ways in which a quarter-century of conflict may have changed civil-military relations, it is no longer clear that the inquiry tells us anything important about the health of American democracy.

When the U.S. Constitution was drafted, organized militaries, including militias and volunteer units, had outsized, near-monopolistic control over the means of large-scale coercion. The framers faced a dilemma: A capable military was seen as necessary to protect the newly independent United States from external enemies and, at times, from perceived internal threats such as the Whiskey Rebellion or Indian hostility to westward expansion. But the more capable the military, the more it also posed potential risks to the polity itself: those in control of the means of mass violence might be tempted to impose their will on the fragile republic. The framers of the U.S. Constitution viewed civilian control of the military and related checks and balances as critical to ensuring that the will of the people would prevail over the will of the powerful.[65]

Most recent commentary on civil-military relations rests on similar assumptions about the military's role: it is perceived as both a vital protector of American democracy and a unique potential threat. And for most of U.S. history, the military did indeed possess unique and unparalleled destructive and coercive capabilities, making it natural for those concerned with protecting democratic norms and institutions to view civil-military relations as a critical area of inquiry.

Today, however, other actors and methods have emerged to challenge the military's former near-monopoly on the tools of mass coercion. In some cases, organized state militaries, including the U.S. military, have been challenged by nonstate actors making creative, asymmetrical use of physical force; in other cases, both state and nonstate actors have successfully employed new forms of coercion that do not rely upon physical force at all.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss those emerging sources and modes of large-scale coercion in detail, but consider the paradigmatic example of the 9/11 terrorist attackers: nineteen men, armed only with boxcutters, succeeded in turning commercial passenger planes into weapons that killed nearly three thousand people and jolted the global economy. Those nineteen 9/11 hijackers hailed from four different countries; they wore no uniforms and were loyal only to a small, decentralized terrorist network.

Or consider the potential threat posed by bioengineered viruses: while most experts believe the COVID-19 pandemic came about as a result of a natural crossover of the virus from animals to humans, few would dispute that both states and nonstate actors are experimenting with novel biological agents capable of causing widespread illness and death.[66] Indeed, in the era of genetic manipulation – fueled by the ready availability of open-source information, increasingly economical laboratory equipment, and AI-driven tools – U.S. intelligence agencies have warned of a growing risk of bioengineered weapons, some of which could even be tailored to specific genetic signatures.[67] Producing or deploying such "weapons" would not necessarily require a state or its military: they could be produced by nonstate organizations or even individuals. Such biological innovations have the potential to harm or compel individuals or whole populations as effectively as the conventional weapons possessed by conventional militaries.

Consider also the potentially coercive power of cyberattacks, capable of crippling electrical grids, bringing down financial markets, or selectively threatening the assets or reputations of individuals in sensitive government or nongovernmental positions. Already, cyberattacks have had devastating "real-world" effects. In 2010, the Stuxnet virus caused physical damage to Iranian centrifuges. In 2017, the WannaCry ransomware attack shut down critical hospital infrastructure in the United Kingdom. In 2021, a ransomware attack on JBS Meat Processing, a Brazil-based company, shut down plants providing 20 percent of U.S. meat production for days, while a ransomware attack on Colonial Pipeline caused fuel shortages and panic-buying in much of the Eastern United States. These and similar attacks have collectively caused billions of dollars in damage, and companies have in many cases paid out millions in ransom to halt the attacks.[68]

In a world grown so dependent on networked computer systems, the potential for still more devastating future cyberattacks is acute. Critically, while some of the most well-known attacks have been attributed to state-based or state-sponsored actors, others have been traced to private groups and even individuals. Cyberattacks cost attackers little, but their consequences can be as devastating as attacks on infrastructure using conventional military means.

As we enter the era of artificial intelligence, AI-fueled disinformation and deepfakes have emerged as tools to influence, frighten, or blackmail key individuals or even entire populations.[69] Already, bots, AI-produced memes, and AI-generated false photos, video, and audio have been used to further financial fraud and sway voters and public opinion in France, Germany, and the United States. It is difficult to quantify the impact such efforts have had on election results, but it seems clear that they at least have the potential to alter electoral outcomes.[70] Here, again, neither militaries nor states have any special ability to deploy such AI-fueled tools, which are available to ordinary individuals and private organizations as well; yet with such tools, their destructive and coercive powers may rival the destructive and coercive powers historically associated with militaries. The threat or use of conventional military force can disrupt or halt elections, but if AI-generated tools wielded by individuals or organizations can achieve the same effects far more cheaply and easily, military force, and the military itself, may become almost superfluous.

Consider also the role of super-empowered individuals. Here Elon Musk is a paradigmatic example: he is the richest man in the world; he owns X, one of the world's major social media networks; and his Starlink satellite network is relied upon by individuals, corporate actors, and numerous states around the globe. The U.S. military depends on Starlink for services ranging from internet access for deployed Navy sailors to Army command-and-control systems. This places extraordinary power in the hands of a single individual, and even before joining the Trump administration, Musk showed a willingness to use this power. In 2023, he prevented Ukrainian forces from using internet communications during a planned attack on a Russian-controlled target by declining to provide Starlink internet services in Crimea; at one point, Russian President Vladimir Putin reportedly asked Musk not to extend Starlink service over Taiwan, as a favor to the Chinese.[71] Musk, a single individual, has the unilateral power to deprive powerful militaries of a vital tool. Other extraordinarily wealthy individuals, and many multinational corporations, similarly have a degree of coercive power once associated solely with states and large-scale organized armed groups.

Musk's involvement in the early months of the second Trump administration highlights another way in which new forms of coercion have emerged. When Trump took office in January 2025 and established the so-called Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), placing Musk at the helm, Musk hand-selected and brought in a small group of computer experts from outside the U.S. government. Using their expertise and the access and authority provided by President Trump, the tiny DOGE team rapidly seized control of vital U.S. government payroll, personnel, and data systems, including those at the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), the federal government's internal human resources department, at the Treasury Department, and, ultimately, at virtually every federal agency, including the IRS, the Social Security Administration, the State Department, and the Defense Department.[72]

Within weeks of Trump's inauguration, DOGE – via the OPM and other agencies, and assisted by artificial intelligence tools – had placed thousands of federal employees on administrative leave and reassigned scores of others, some to offices hundreds of miles away (particularly those deemed insufficiently loyal to the new president, including numerous senior career civil servants at the FBI and Department of Justice). DOGE announced planned permanent layoffs of hundreds of thousands more and froze or canceled billions of dollars in federal spending, including nearly all U.S. foreign assistance grants and grants for scientific and medical research. Programs and positions slated for elimination were identified in part through a rapid "review" that relied on artificial intelligence.

As a means of coercion, DOGE's actions were stunningly effective. Near universal reliance on networked computer systems for personnel and payments enabled DOGE to do all this almost overnight, and at least in the first months of the Trump administration, DOGE's actions brought about rapid compliance by many of the same actors and agencies who had pushed back against what they saw as unlawful Trump initiatives during Trump's first term. Numerous universities, nonprofits, and government contractors lost access overnight to the funds necessary to pay staff, maintain equipment, and cover the rent for laboratory and office space. Meanwhile, career senior officials found their access to government buildings and computer systems cut off from one day to the next. DOGE access to IRS and Social Security records raises the specter of these systems and agencies being used to coerce private individuals through politically motivated audits or denial of benefits.

Even the U.S. military was rapidly brought to heel: thousands of DOD personnel were notified that their jobs were being eliminated, others were reassigned or fired, and DOD websites were altered to remove information about individuals, programs, and information disfavored by the new administration.[73] When newly appointed Trump administration officials found existing secure communications mechanisms inconvenient, they simply bypassed them, instead making use of commercial apps such as Signal.[74] Effective internal opposition was essentially eliminated – all without a shot fired.

As of this writing, numerous lawsuits against the Trump administration are pending, and by the time this essay is published, some of this may have changed. Thus far, however, the Trump administration has been largely successful in its efforts to expand executive power while silencing or eliminating effective means of internal dissent. Regardless of how courts ultimately rule and how the Trump administration responds, the facts on the ground have been permanently altered, offering a powerful object lesson in new forms of vulnerability and compulsion. In this brave new world, traditional militaries can still use physical force to pose large-scale threats to individual rights, the rule of law, and democratic accountability – but so too can a wide range of other actors, from civilian government agencies to nonstate organizations and even solitary individuals. Similarly, both military and civilian actors – and state and nonstate actors and individuals – can increasingly deploy tools that enable large-scale coercion without using physical force, instead making use of financial or reputational threats, misinformation, cyber and artificial intelligence tactics, or denial of access to communications. If military power posed unique threats to democracy in 1787, American democracy today faces an expanding array of threats from a widening range of actors.

Traditional ways of thinking about civil-military relations and civilian control of the military do not fully capture these new and emerging sources and methods of mass coercion. As a result, evaluating the impact of prolonged war on civil-military relations doesn't necessarily tell us much about the degree to which the post-9/11 era has increased the vulnerability of democratic norms and institutions. While most commentators would agree that the post-9/11 era has been one of significant democratic erosion, looking at this period through the lens of civil-military relations offers only a partial view of these changes.[75]

That said, more "traditional" threats to stable and healthy civil-military relations also loom large. President Trump has made it clear that he views the U.S. military as both a weapon and a target. He has ousted senior military leaders he considers too "woke," deployed active-duty military forces to detain and deport undocumented migrants, and used the National Guard to impose "law and order" in American cities. [76] Already, he has cast aside long-standing norms about the value of a nonpartisan military and its appropriate role within a democratic society and further blurred the lines between what can be viewed as a uniquely "military" function and what is more properly a civilian function. If President Trump follows through on his threats to use the military to suppress domestic political protest, the United States may become the latest society to illustrate that civilian control of the military is no guarantee of democracy or human rights.

Civil-military relations remain an important area of study. But as the United States enters uncharted political waters, it is vital that debates about civil-military relations not descend into empty formalism, obscuring both current security challenges and emerging threats to democratic norms. The technological and social changes of recent decades mean that healthy civil-military relations no longer suffice to protect democracy from raw power – and to understand and manage these changes, we will need to develop new analytic and political tools.

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ENDNOTES

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2 As James Burk notes, the "important theoretical problem for [mature democracies] is how to maintain a military that sustains and protects democratic values." James Burk, "Theories of Democratic Civil-Military Relations," *Armed Forces & Society* 29 (1) (2002): 8. See also Richard Kohn, "An Essay on Civilian Control of the Military," American Diplomacy, March 1, 1997, https://americandiplomacy.web.unc.edu/1997/03/an-essay

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3 See, for example, Burk, "Theories of Democratic Civil-Military Relations," 7, noting, "The empirical domain of civil-military relations is large. It includes direct and indirect dealings that ordinary people and institutions have with the military, legislative haggling over the funding, regulation, and use of the military, and complex bargaining between civilian and military elites to define and implement national security policy.... Only in the loosest sense can we claim to have overarching theories of civil-military relations that explain the widely divergent patterns of conduct that occur throughout this domain under the whole range of imaginable conditions. What we have instead are limited theories that examine one aspect of the matter."

4 Doyle Hodges and Kori Schake, "Healthy Worry About Healthy Civil-Military Relations," talk delivered by Kori Schake and introduced by Doyle Hodges at the Clements Center Summer Seminar in History and Statecraft held in Beaver Creek, Colorado, July 2022, War on the Rocks, August 5, 2022, https://warontherocks.com/2022/08/healthy-worry-about-healthy-civil-military-relations. Hodges notes, "Simply, [civil-military relations] is the relationship between the military and the civilian government that it serves." See also Alexander Vindman, "Civil-Military Relations: Repairing Fractured Ties," *Democracy* 71 (2024), https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/71/civil-military-relations-repairing-fractured-ties; "Simply put, they are the norms governing the interaction between civilian authorities and the uniformed military."

5 See, for example, the writings of Samuel P. Huntington, Richard Kohn, Morris Janowitz, Douglas Bland, and Peter Feaver.

6 With the exception of the Coast Guard, which is situated organizationally within the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the military is situated within the Department of Defense. But in times of war, command of the Coast Guard is transferred to the Department of the Navy within DOD.

7 U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 Demographics: Profile of the Military Community* (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023), https://www.militaryonesource.mil/data-research-and-statistics/military-community-demographics/2022-demographics-profile.

8 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Belknap Press, 1957); and Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait* (The Free Press, 1960).

9 Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*.

10 Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier*.

11 Scholars such as Richard Kohn, Eliot Cohen, Peter Feaver, Kori Schake, Risa Brooks, Douglas Bland, Thomas Bruneau, James Burk, Ronald Krebs, and many others have sought a more nuanced approach that seeks to account for what is unique about military expertise while also ensuring that military power remains subordinate to broader soci-

etal objectives, as expressed by elected leaders operating within the U.S. constitutional framework of checks and balances. See generally Douglas L. Bland, "A Unified Theory of Civil-Military Relations," *Armed Forces & Society* 26 (1) (1999): 7–25; Risa A. Brooks, *Shaping Strategy: The Civil-Military Politics of Strategic Assessment* (Princeton University Press, 2008); Thomas C. Bruneau and Scott D. Tollefson, eds., *Who Guards the Guardians and How: Democratic Civil-Military Relations* (University of Texas Press, 2006); Burk, "Theories of Democratic Civil-Military Relations"; Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (Anchor Books, 2003); Michael Charles Desch, *Civilian Control of the Military: The Changing Security Environment* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Peter D. Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations* (Harvard University Press, 2003); Richard H. Kohn, "How Democracies Control the Military," *Journal of Democracy* 8 (4) (1997): 140–153; Ronald R. Krebs, "In the Shadow of War: The Effects of Conflict on Liberal Democracy," *International Organization* 63 (1) (2009): 177–210; and Jim Mattis and Kori N. Schake, *Warriors and Citizens: American Views of Our Military* (Hoover Press, 2016).

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13 See Rosa Brooks, "Are U.S. Civil-Military Relations in Crisis?" *The U.S. Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 51 (1) (2021): 7. The twentieth century saw numerous tensions between military and civilian leaders and between the military and society more generally, ranging from General Douglas MacArthur's defiance of President Harry Truman in 1951 and the military's overt hostility toward President Bill Clinton's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy in the 1990s to the antidraft and antiwar protests of the 1960s and early 1970s. For some pre-9/11 discussions of "crisis," see Richard H. Kohn, "Out of Control: The Crisis in Civil-Military Relations," *The National Interest* 35 (1994): 3–17; Deborah Avant, "Conflicting Indicators of 'Crisis' in American Civil-Military Relations," *Armed Forces & Society* 24 (3) (1998): 375–387; Don M. Snider and Miranda A. Carlton-Carew, eds., *U.S. Civil-Military Relations: In Crisis or Transition?* (CSIS, 1995); Gregory D. Foster, "Confronting the Crisis in Civil-Military Relations," *Washington Quarterly* 20 (4) (1997): 15–33; and Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, "Civil-Military Relations in the United States," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 15 (2) (2021): 12–37.

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control–in some instances even much more so than in the Western democracies." See Yehuda Ben Meir, *Civil-Military Relations in Israel* (Columbia University Press, 1995), 12.

[15] Sidita Kushi and Monica Duffy Toft, "Introducing the Military Intervention Project: A New Dataset on U.S. Military Interventions, 1776–2019," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 67 (4) (2023): 752–779; Monica Duffy Toft, "America Now Solves Problems with Troops, Not Diplomats," The Conversation, August 29, 2019; and Monica Duffy Toft, "Ending Our Military-First Foreign Policy," *The American Conservative*, September 26, 2020, https://www.theamericanconservative.com/ending-our-military-first-foreign-policy.

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[21] Kim Parker, "6 Facts about the U.S. Military and Its Changing Demographics," Pew Research Center, April 14, 2024, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2017/04/13/6-facts-about-the-u-s-military-and-its-changing-demographics.

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[23] U.S. Department of Defense, "Defense Spending as a % of Gross GDP," March 12, 2019, https://media.defense.gov/2019/Mar/12/2002099941/-1/-1/0/190312-D-ZZ999-001.JPG. As points of contrast, the defense budget consumed 8.6 percent of GDP in 1968, during the Vietnam War; 11.3 percent of GDP in 1953, during the Korean War; and 43 percent of GDP in 1945, the final year of World War II. Dinah Walker, "Trends in U.S. Military Spending," Council on Foreign Relations, August 22, 2012, https://www.cfr.org/report/trends-us-military-spending#:~:text=In%20the%20base%20budget%2C%20the,%2447.4%20billion%20in%20FY%202015. It should be noted that while the Trump administration has slashed civilian foreign policy–related budgets and asserted an intention of building up military capabilities, it also seems likely to reduce defense-related staffing and spending.

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[28] Idrees Ali and Jonathan Landay, "In Latest Purge, Hegseth Removes Head of Pentagon Intelligence Agency, Other Senior Officials," Reuters, August 22, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/us/latest-purge-hegseth-removes-head-pentagon-intelligence-agency-other-senior-2025-08-22; and Phil Stewart, Idrees Ali, and Lili Bayer, "U.S. Admiral at NATO Fired in Expanding National Security Purge," Reuters, April 7, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-admiral-nato-fired-expanding-national-security-purge-2025-04-07.

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[31] John Abizaid and Rosa Brooks, *Recommendations and Report of the Task Force on U.S. Drone Policy* (The Stimson Center, 2015), https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep10993.13.

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