

Book Review

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Christopher P. Gibson: *Securing the State: Reforming the National Security Decision-making Process at the Civil-Military Nexus* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008).

For those whose scholar trajectories were shaped by the likes of Samuel P. Huntington, Morris Janowitz, and other students of civilian control of the military in the United States, Christopher P. Gibson's *Securing the State* comes as a very welcome contribution to the literature on civil-military relations. Taking up the challenge to reform the national security interagency process whose inefficient functioning has come to light with the Iraq war, Gibson uses four case studies to develop a provocative normative theory on civil-military relations and a proposal for a throughout reform of Pentagon management systems.

Gibson is a soldier-scholar, and besides having served a very distinguished military career he holds a PhD in Government from Cornell University. His approach has been built from a very privileged vantage point, mixing intellectual ingredients with the expertise of the practitioner. The outcome is a well-argued proposal for a balanced partnership between civilian and military leaders within the US national security establishment. Whatever their theoretical dispositions and feelings about civilian control, scholars of civil-military relations will need to contend with Gibson's arguments. His book is also sure to become required reading for students of the subject in civil and military educational institutions in the US, but also in other countries in spite of the exceptional US constitutional design and the difficulties of a controlled comparison of its model.

Gibson builds on his previously developed concept¹ of "civil-military nexus, the top civilian and military advisers to the President and Congress who offer strategic analysis, develop options, and convey recommendations,"² to criticize both objective and subjective concepts of civilian control. The former fails to provide insights on the preponderance of civil-military interaction, the latter micromanages a profession with political appointees with generally lesser practical experience which usually implies a reduced effectiveness. As the civil-military nexus consist of structures and norms, he

draws on new institutionalism to lay the methodological foundation of his approach.

In Chapter 2, Gibson briefly summarizes the military argument to explain the failures in civil-military relations during the Vietnam War and the subsequent “Vietnam syndrome” which would permeate US politics until the Gulf War. He describes the conflicts in civil-military relations during the Clinton years to explain the political climate of Rumsfeld’s appointment by President George W. Bush. Rumsfeld’s controversial management style, though formally supported by the Goldwater-Nichols Law, ignited the conflict with the top brass during his tenure as Secretary of Defense. This was the case in particular in the war planning for Afghanistan and Iraq.

Gibson is in good company in his analysis of this last case. As Strachan has pointed out,³ strategy is the product of the dialogue between politicians and soldiers, and its essence is the harmonization of the two elements, not the subordination of one to the other. Strategy in war is a process. The issue now is not that of overall political direction, but of coherence among policy, military capabilities, and the events on the ground. The National Security Council exists to make strategy, to align policy with operational capabilities. But in the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq it did not do so. The clashes and competition between the State Department and the Department of Defense, like those between the Joint Chiefs of Staff and CentCom, were not reconciled: strategy fell through the cracks.

In Chapter 3, Gibson analyzes with some detail four cases of civil-military interaction in US history, and especially these last cracks: General George Washington and the Continental Congress; General George C. Marshall and Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson; General Earle Wheeler and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara; and General Richard Myers and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. He tries to draw lessons from historical positive role models. He uses the next chapters to examine the scholarly contributions to the academic debate on civilian control.

Chapter 4 is devoted to the Founding Fathers of the subfield of civil-military relations during the Cold War, Huntington and Janowitz. His criticisms are meaningful. In Chapter 5, Gibson depicts some of the main contributions to the matter in our post-Cold-War era. He elaborates a detailed criticism of Peter Feaver’s agency theory of civil-military relations, singled out as the most salient contribution, problems notwithstanding. But its main targets are the reprisals of objective control by Richard Kohn and of subjective control by Eliot Cohen.

Finally, in Chapter 6, Gibson proposes his own model: the Madisonian approach. Building on Feaver’s contribution, he draws a clear dividing line between elected leaders, the President and the Congress, and their top civilian and military advisers. The former are the principals in the agency theory parlance, the latter are the agents, including here the Secretary of Defense.

This is probably going to be one of the most controversial points made by Gibson in some quarters. He proposes a revision of the Goldwater-Nichols and the processes for developing the National Military Strategy, Campaign Planning, Joint Force Requirements and Force Development, and Programming and Budgeting in the Department of Defense. His proposal consists on:

a centralizing and unifying of power (bringing the combatant commanders and service chiefs under the Commanding General [(CG) of the US Armed Forces, a position that would replace the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff]), but in other respects, at the highest levels of the DOD, there will be a diffusing and balancing of power (competing advice from the CG and Secretary of Defense and competing advice from the services and the DOD leadership), thereby providing for pluralistic advice (civilian and uniformed) for elected leaders, the President and Congress.⁴

Basically this means a double loop of advice, civilian and military, in the inter-agency process to make decisions at the highest level. Gibson makes the case for military voices to be heard in the production of strategy, and his argument is a sound one. The next President of the United States will have in his administration's agenda the reform of the national security interagency process, and he will be well-advised if he reads Gibson's book. The real danger for the United States and the rest of Western democracies is the failure to develop coherent strategy to win the actual war against Islamic extremism in the different theaters of operations.

NOTES

1. C. P. Gibson and D. M. Snider, "Civil-Military Relations and the Potential to Influence: A Look at the National Security Decision-making Process," *Armed Forces and Society*, vol. 25, no. 2 (Winter 1999): 193–218.
2. C. P. Gibson, *Securing the State: Reforming the National Security Decision-making Process at the Civil-Military Nexus* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008), 1.
3. Hew Strachan, "Making Strategy: Civil–Military Relations after Iraq," *Survival*, vol. 48, no. 3 (Autumn 2006): 59–82.
4. C. P. Gibson, *Securing the State*, 109.