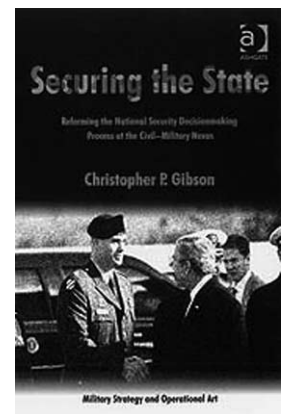


Securing the State: Reforming the National Security Decisionmaking Process at the Civil-Military Nexus

Christopher P. Gibson

A review essay by Peter Leahy



This book, written by a serving colonel in the United States Army, comprehensively examines the complex and often difficult relationship between senior US military officers and their elected and appointed civilian leaders. To understand the book it is important to comprehend the differences between the US command and control system and our own.

In the US the President is Commander-in-Chief, in fact and action, and he commands operations through regional and functional combatant commanders such as the Commander of Central Command (covering the Middle East and Central Asia) and Pacific Command (covering the Asia-Pacific region).

The Secretary of Defense is the principal defense policy adviser to the President and under the President's authority exercises direction and control over the Department of Defense. During operations the chain of command to the combatant commands runs from the President to the Secretary of Defense directly to the commander of the combatant commands.

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) is not formally part of this operational chain of command. Although he is the principal military adviser to the President, neither the Chairman nor the Joint Chiefs of Staff (the US equivalents of our Service Chiefs) as a body have any command authority over combatant forces.

These arrangements establish a tension between the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. This tension is not evident in Australia (or the UK, Canada and New Zealand) where the Chief of Defence Force (CDF) is both the principal military adviser to the Minister for Defence (and the Government) and the senior commander of the defence force. The CDF's command and control of operations is exercised through the Chief of Joint Operations (CJOPS).

While our national security command and control arrangements are different, *Securing the State* has much to offer the Australian national security community. This is especially the case as we introduce a National Security Adviser within the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and move the Chief of Joint Operations and his staff to the new headquarters facility at Bungendore. Happily, we are in much better shape than the United States, but this does

not mean that there is no room for analysis and debate about senior-level civil-military relationships in Australia.

The thesis of *Securing the State* is that under current arrangements the President and the Congress do not get balanced strategic analysis, options and advice from their most senior military professional advisers. The author seeks a balanced approach where elected leaders get advice from all senior participants, civilian and military. He is direct about his thesis and no punches are pulled when discussing the performance of individuals, past and present, in the American national security apparatus.

Using historical examples Gibson advances his preferred model of a balanced relationship between the Secretary of Defense and the CJCS. In his view Generals Washington (Continental Army) and Marshall (World War II) got it right and 'set the standard'. Generals Wheeler (Vietnam) and Myers (Iraq in 2003) got it wrong and 'ultimately proved ineffective'.

The historical discussion is comprehensively covered and is a particularly strong point of *Securing the State*. While at times the thorough footnoting is a distraction, it adds considerably to his argument and the utility of the book. Those who lived through Vietnam and have read Robert McNamara (*In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*), and H.R McMaster (*Dereliction of Duty*), on the topic will find the historical section of the book most interesting. Gibson concludes that the decision to Americanise the Vietnam War, and how the decision was taken, stand as clear examples of the dangers of political control of the military being misused to over-ride or marginalise the very independent and direct professional military advice that government leaders need to hear. McNamara, for example, undervalued military advice and senior officers did little to ensure that their dissenting voices were heard.

Gibson saves his strongest condemnation however, for more recent events and joins the healthy, largely military, analysis of the 2003 Iraq War and the failure of post-war policy. Gibson's assessment is that the relationship between Secretary Rumsfeld and General Myers was dysfunctional. Gibson concludes that Rumsfeld wrongly believed that it was his job to keep the military 'in check' by intruding in military professional and operational matters (rather than limit his oversight to overall strategic and policy direction)

– and Myers behaved as if such a degree of domination and intrusion by the Secretary was somehow a legitimate exercise of civil control of the military.

Gibson advances the view that the degree of structural dysfunction, and the resultant weakness in the military advice provided, were not just based on personality differences. He believes instead that current US command and control arrangements marginalise the CJCS and the Joint Chiefs of Staff – and that this is a serious mistake in principle, structure and practice.

While the CJCS and the Joint Chiefs might be the senior military officers, the combatant commanders of each operational theatre work directly to the Secretary of Defense as the representative of the President. Consequently, Gibson argues, the CJCS is not integral to war plan development, and due to a centralisation of power in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the individual and collective judgments of the Joint Chiefs are dangerously excluded or diminished. Gibson makes very strong points about how General Franks contributed to the marginalisation of the Joint Chiefs by offering Iraq war plans that matched Secretary Rumsfeld’s personal theory of war – the ‘Afghan model’ and ‘transformation’. We are now very much aware of the catastrophic results achieved when these theories met actual battlefield situations and complex wider strategic circumstances. Indeed, the recent nomination of former Chief-of-Staff of the US Army, General Eric Shinseki, to a Secretary’s position under the new President reminds us of the reaction of Secretary Rumsfeld to Shinseki’s unwelcome but eventually correct advice on troop numbers required to secure Iraq.

Gibson proposes that US legislation be amended to ensure that the civil control and military professional responsibilities of the Secretary and CJCS respectively be better delineated, and that USA’s top military leaders are more involved in the deliberations and drafting of war plans. His proposals include the establishment of a Commanding General of the Armed Forces to replace the CJCS (in the same way our CDF grew out of the Chairman of the Chiefs-of-Staff Committee). He further proposes that the Combatant Commanders be subordinated to the CG Armed Forces and then to the President, not in principle or practice to the Secretary of Defense. It will be interesting to see if these recommendations achieve any traction.

Much of Gibson’s thesis concerns failures attributable to the marginalisation of the CJCS and the Joint Chiefs due to control of professional military advice through the Secretary as an individual and his Office as an institution. In Australia the situation is different and better. But there are elements of our system that bear monitoring and recognition of the lessons that Gibson points out.

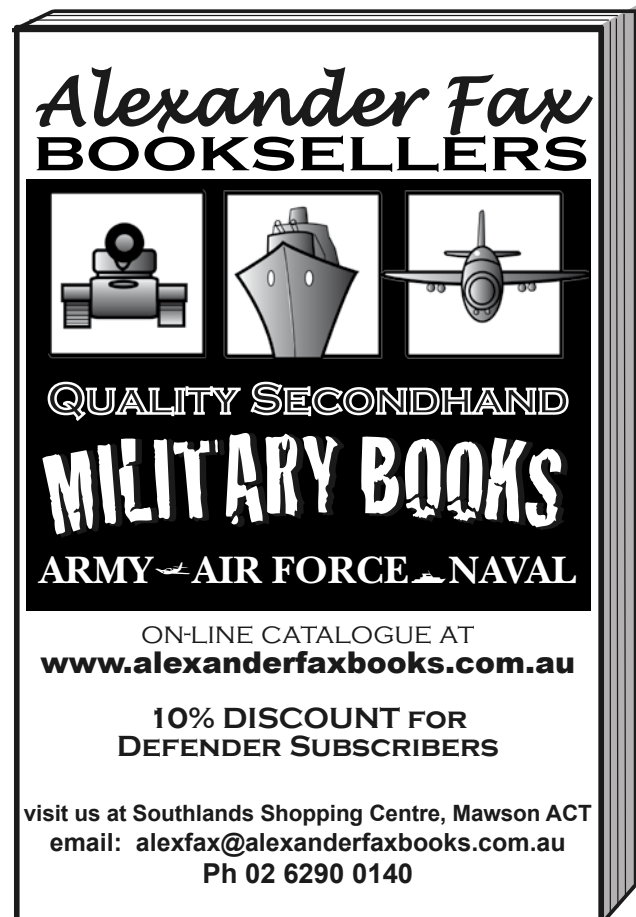
Some in Australia remain confused over the principle of civil control of the military. This means civil control by the Prime Minister and the Minister for Defence, through the CDF, not by civilian employees within the bureaucracy.

Personalities also play an important role in any institutional structure. In the Australian case our ‘diarchy’, of often ill-defined shared responsibilities between the CDF and the Secretary of the Department of Defence, introduces unnecessary tensions. While generally handled well by the individuals involved, this structure could be a major catalyst for dysfunction and perpetually risks potential failures in the system, especially in coping with more serious crises.


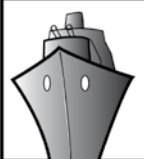

Additionally, as we transition to new arrangements under CJOPS at Bungendore, it is essential that the CDF and Service Chiefs remain intimately involved in the analysis and determination of national strategy and war plans. It is essential, for example, that the presentation of CJOP’s analysis and plans is through the CDF and his military advisers, which include the Service Chiefs, not direct to a National Security Adviser, Minister or Prime Minister.

One of the best things about *Securing the State* is that it continues the now well established trend of serving US military officers writing about important topics and having the courage to state their case clearly and loudly. It makes the American military stronger and better. Wouldn’t it be nice if it happened more often here? ♦

Christopher P. Gibson, ‘Securing the State: Reforming the National Security Decisionmaking Process at the Civil-Military Nexus’, Ashgate Publishing Limited, Aldershot UK, Casebound, 162pp., RRP \$A132.00.



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