POLITICS AND PROMOTIONS

by

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Not enough is known about the promotion and assignment of senior military officers. Though of interest to military careerists, the subject does not often attract the attention of the public, the press, or Congress, which are more likely to be captivated by celebrated resignations or firings, such as those of McClellan, MacArthur, and even Major General Singlaub.

Most military officers, however, get promoted much more often than they are fired. And though the rules as to when one resigns and when one can expect to be asked to do so are by now pretty well spelled out,[1] the interaction of civilian and military authority in the promotion process at the higher levels has remained murky.

Uniformed officers watching the generals' and admirals' careers may puzzle about what is going on and, like Kremlinologists, scrutinize the clues of who's up and who's down. Top civilian appointees may also be baffled and are likely to wonder what, if anything, they should be doing to affect the process. A Secretary of Defense or Secretary of the Army, Navy, or Air Force probably will feel that he ought to have at least some say about who his uniformed subordinates are and what their duties should be. But that instinct is likely to lure him onto a tightrope, swaying uncertainly between the dangers of erratic interference with his organization and supine submissiveness to bureaucratic dictates. In involving himself in military promotions, he enters a region where the hands are played fast and tough, the rules have never been published, and the guidelines are only anecdotal.

This short article is not the last word on the subject. But perhaps it can provoke some thought and dispel some of the mystery about the senior promotion process—a mystery that afflicts not just outsiders, but occasionally the participants in the process themselves.

THE ISSUE OF LEGITIMACY

Most of the discussion of such concerns takes place over cocktails at the officers' club, or when former Pentagon appointees brief successors on what to watch out for, or occasionally in garbled imaginings leaked into the service press. If a civilian appointee looks in the law or in the literature for specifics of what his role in promotions should be, he looks in vain. And though there is a body of custom, most participants in any promotion quarrel are able to find precedents for any position it pleases them to take.

That the subject is not inconsequential is clear enough from the fact that the uniformed Chiefs of the military services (who are also the Joint Chiefs of Staff) spend a large block of their time—some have said as much as a third—simply in moving flag officers around. That may not be terribly excessive. In private business, few effective corporate managers ignore decisions about senior personnel.

When civilian Secretaries start to try to call the shots as to which uniformed officers will be promoted to what jobs, however, they are likely to be met immediately with rumbles against "political" interference in a time-tested, impartial, merit-based process.

So the first question is one of legitimacy. Granted that civilian officials do in fact play some role in the promotion of military of-

ficers, should they? Is their participation simply part of a system functioning normally? Or does it amount to a perversion, albeit a familiar one, of the process?

Different observers, of course, will frame these issues differently. One might ask: Are the selections of our uniformed leaders to be made by tried professionals who know best what the service needs and who have known the candidates for all their adult lives, tested their character, and seen them under fire and pressure? Or should such selections be left to the whimsy of amateurs and dilettantes, temporarily holding figurehead positions and bending to political winds, who don't even know what the service is all about?

But another observer might ask: Dare we leave the defense of the United States in the charge of the bland survivors of factional compromises in unelected military bureaucracies—bureaucracies that subsist on fighting the last war, career advancement, cliques, and cronyism? Or should civilian control be exerted meaningfully by executives who act as the President's deputies, persons of mature managerial judgment who are charged by law with exercising civilian control over the military establishment and ensuring that capable uniformed leaders are in charge of our armed forces?

To weigh adequately the kernels of truth buried in each of these extravagant formulations, it is necessary first to consider how officer promotions work and what the interaction is between promotions and assignments.

PROMOTION AT THE LOWER GRADES

Promotions in the armed services are likely to carry a reasonably able officer to the rank of lieutenant colonel or Navy commander in the course of 20 years. A rather better-than-average officer will retire as a colonel or Navy captain. For these and lower grades, promotion is by selection boards—boards of officers nominated by the service Chief and appointed by the service Secretary, which meet to go over stacks of officer efficiency reports and other personnel data.[2] In theory, the boards select without regard to future assignments; they are simply to recommend the persons best qualified to meet the service's numerical needs for officers of a specific grade for a coming period. In fact, of course, the selection process is influenced by the opportunities the officer has had to that point—sometimes denounced as the "ticket-punching" syndrome. In other words, past assignments as well as boards determine promotions, and an officer who can shape his career to contain the right mix of command and staff duties can improve his opportunities. There are other selection processes, too; in the Army, for instance, selection to attend one of the war colleges usually is tantamount to pinning on eagles.

The service Secretary influences this group promotion process in three ways. First, he is the nominal convenor of the selection boards. The stronger service Secretaries have treated their role in this regard as more than nominal: they have negotiated with the Chiefs of their services to select for board duty officers likely to favor candidates of the sort the Secretary thinks the service needs—somewhat on the theory that Navy aviators will want more aviators, smart people will pick other smart people, traditionalists will favor traditionalists, and in general the board members, like most people making personnel selections, will represent their own groups or try to replicate themselves.

Second, the Secretary gives instructions to the boards. These can range from general

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preachments to choose on merit to very specific recitals of the needs of the service for particular training and skills. In the latter stages of the Vietnam War, for example, Army boards were instructed to look favorably for promotion on officers who had served as advisers to the Vietnamese, regarding them in the same light as officers who had completed tours in combat command. In all the services the need for more members of minority groups in senior grades was emphasized in the 1970s. Important but not necessarily favored specialties like intelligence and logistics often receive some compensating boost in a service Secretary's instructions.

Third, a service Secretary has the power to strike names from the list recommended by a selection board, whose function technically is only advisory, or to add names he thinks ought to be there. This is done occasionally, but rarely; it is likely to take place only after discussion with the service Chief, and it may generate cries of political interference with the impartial service system.

FLAG-GRADE PROMOTIONS

At flag rank, the selection process becomes a great deal more personalized. There are far fewer positions to fill. The Army has, for example, only 392 general officers in a force of about 736,000; moreover, the pyramid is very wide at the bottom. Half the 392 are brigadier generals, and nearly three-fourths of the remainder are at the two-star level. Likewise, for the Air Force the total flag officer figure is 337, and for the Navy and Marine Corps combined, 315, with the distribution of grades among flag officers proportionate to that of the Army.[3]

For the one-star and two-star grades, selection again is by promotion board, though, of course, with a higher rejection rate. Only about one colonel in 12 can expect to be promoted to brigadier general, and only half of those, as noted, rise any further. Again, the Secretary of the service exercises the same control that he does over other selection boards, though at this level his attention to the board's work traditionally has been greater, for a selection board recommending new brigadier generals and commodores is creating the stockpile of candidates to fill, in just a few years, the most responsible uniformed positions.

Two-star grade is the highest an armed forces officer can attain without regard to assignment. Once promoted, a major general or rear admiral remains such unless reduced in grade, a rare occurrence.[4] But a three-star (lieutenant general or vice admiral) or a four-star (general or admiral) officer, by law, retains his grade only so long as he is assigned to a position carrying that grade. Thus, at the three-star and four-star level, assignment and promotion merge into the same thing. An officer is not simply promoted, he is selected for a job. And, although a few of those assignments over the years have almost become sinecures, most three-star and four-star jobs are important.[5]

In practice the custom has been that senior flag officers move laterally or upward, or retire (almost invariably, by special legislation, at the highest grade held) rather than revert to a lower grade. There have been some admirable exceptions to the custom against backsliding, such as General Andrew Goodpaster's move from NATO Commander to the three-star Superintendent's job at troubled West Point, and Lieutenant General DeWitt Smith's acceptance of the two-star position at the Army War College.[6]

The procedure for three-star and four-star promotions is not at all like the promotion board process. It involves a wider variety of players, and it is in reality a great deal less formal.

The formal process for such promotions is that the Chief of the service makes a recommendation (or provides more than one name) to the Secretary of his service. Once approved by the Secretary, a nomination is sent to the Joint Chiefs of Staff for concurrence. From there it proceeds, after nominal endorsement by the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower, Reserve Affairs, and Logistics, to the Secretary of Defense. If he approves, it goes to the President and then is submitted for Senate

confirmation. (In 1980 provision was also made for confirmation by the Senate of officers moving laterally from one three-star or four-star assignment to another.)[7]

The actual process, of course, is a good deal more messy. For the most part, three-star positions are integral to the operation of a single service and call for the incumbent to be from that service. The deputy chiefs of staff of the Air Force, for example, all three-star positions, obviously are going to be Air Force officers. With regard to such positions, the Secretary of Defense and the JCS have almost always deferred to what the appropriate service Secretary and his Chief of Staff work out together. Indeed, the Joint Chiefs have an unwritten rule of endorsing the nominations of a service Chief for positions in his own service.

Some three-star assignments and many of the four-star, however, are in positions that theoretically at least could be filled by officers of any service. For these positions, it is possible, depending on the signals from the Secretary of Defense, for each of the services to nominate an officer and thus compete with each other. But the service Chiefs, wearing their other hats as the Joint Chiefs of Staff, traditionally have tried to limit this competition in ways that in the business world would be violations of the Sherman Antitrust Act. Most often they have carved up the market by an unwritten understanding that certain three-star and four-star assignments, even if nominally in joint commands, "belong" to a particular service. That service recommends and the other services do not even nominate for such a job unless ordered to do so; they, in turn, through a logrolling process, are allotted other jobs, which they fill.

For positions that simply do not lend themselves to permanent one-service ownership—the best example being Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—the services usually try to adopt a rotation. First the Army may have the job, next time the Navy, next the Air Force, and so on. The incoming civilian official who expresses wonderment at this will likely be told that this is the way it has always worked—but sometimes that is not totally true. The services have always wanted it to work that way in order to minimize friction and to keep a stable number of three-star and four-star billets for each service. If you have only 10 four-star officers, every one matters. Even more fundamentally, the services look on the number of three-star and four-star positions as a measure of their relative power. Since World War II the sizes of our three military departments have been approximately equal (except for the Army's temporary growth during the Korean and Vietnam Wars). The number of positions they have at the top level has also stayed in balance. And the Pentagon would surely tremble if instead of dividing the four-star slots approximately 12 and 12, for example, the Army had six and the Air Force 18.

From time to time strong Secretaries of Defense have refused to go along with the rotation game. Robert S. McNamara had three successive Army officers as JCS Chairman—one of them, Maxwell Taylor, called from retirement and imposed on the system. Harold Brown chose an Air Force general, David C. Jones, to succeed another Air Force general, George S. Brown. Indeed, the rotation history of the chairmanship is not so regular as for some other joint positions that shift from service to service. For the most part, Secretaries of Defense have done little to challenge representations that a particular individual should fill an assignment because "it's the Navy's (or Army's) turn."

CIVILIAN CAPABILITIES AND LIMITATIONS

Consider the plight of the newly appointed Secretary of the Army, Navy, or Air Force or Secretary of Defense. He is handed a roster of officers to be assigned to jobs that carry three-star or four-star rank; or, he is shown a list of nominees for the key lower positions (division, air wing, and carrier group commands) that inevitably move the incumbents into position for higher rank. What is the poor civilian, fresh from his congressional seat or his cement company, to do?

The answer is, at that point he can't do much, and he had better be careful in trying. He can do a certain amount. He ought at least to interview the individuals recommended, and he ought not yield to the system's desire to present him, Soviet-style, with one candidate for each position. He ought to make the service Chief of Staff articulate why one person is better than another for a particular assignment and to describe the weaknesses as well as the strengths of each.

One hopes, however, that the appointees to key civilian positions—especially Secretary and Deputy Secretary of Defense—will not be such greenhorns that they don't know how the services work or they are totally unacquainted with the senior people who make them go. Both Republicans and Democrats have been guilty over the years of appointing some civilian leaders who were in no position to arrive at an informed opinion.[8] But even a newcomer, if he has any executive experience, ought to know enough about choosing people for jobs that he can ask a few searching questions and draw some tentative conclusions from interviews.

The greater likelihood for civilian input, and therefore for conflict, comes when the Secretary is more experienced, more widely acquainted with those around him, and better informed. At that point he is more likely to balk at simply signing in ceremonial fashion the slates presented to him. And at that point he is likely to be met with growls from his service Chief about the Chief's prerogatives, and with questions as to the right by which the Secretary, a transitory political appointee, presumes to question judgments bubbling up from a system that knows the candidates much better than he ever can. The argument is likely to take this form: "We've known him for 30 years. We knew his strengths and weaknesses at West Point (or Annapolis). We know his wife and his family, and how he acts when he's tired or in battle or under stress. By what presumption do you, on the basis of a 30-minute interview in the fiftieth year of his life, or a two-day VIP visit to his command, now claim to tell us that you know better than we do who is best for this assignment?"

That respectful but firm reminder is not without force, and it is almost guaranteed to bring any thoughtful civilian official up short with the uncomfortable thought, "Do I really know what I'm doing? Shouldn't I at least give the Chief a large benefit of the doubt?"

At the same time, however, there is a great deal that such an argument does not take into account. For one thing, people grow and change; very few can adequately be judged at the peak of their careers on the basis of their adolescent or post-adolescent personalities. For another, some of what makes an officer attractive or unattractive to his acquaintances may be only marginally relevant to how well he can do a particular job. An outsider, for example, may be able to spot—and to push forward—an unconventional talent with whom the system is not comfortable. Also, executives in business and government make judgments all the time about candidates for senior jobs based on resumes, interviews, and phone calls to trusted observers to ask about one or another of the contending parties. Should it really be so different in the military? Can it be seriously claimed that an outsider cannot come to know the relevant qualities of an officer being considered for a specific assignment?

And is the military bureaucracy's own track record so good? One recalls that there has been need to scramble the top leadership of our armed forces nearly every time we have gotten into a conflict. There is an apocryphal comment attributed to Admiral King (who was not the system's candidate to head the Navy in World War II) that when the going gets tough, they have to send for the SOBs.[9] It is not possible to demonstrate from recent history that, overall, the civilian-directed appointments (often made under the spur of wartime pressures) have been such bad ones. Often as not, they have been some of the best.

THE CHARGE OF POLITICS

It is only by verbal sleight of hand that civilian participation in the promotion process can automatically be dismissed as

"political." Perhaps that word fits in some tautological sense, in that senior civilians are themselves political appointees and not civil servants. But not everything done by a political appointee is crassly political. As a description of what senior civilian managers might be trying to do when they scrutinize the senior military appointments in their services, the word "political" simply confuses the issue.

The word also implies that some inquiry is made into the partisan political beliefs held by generals or admirals, and that promotion decisions consider such beliefs. That charge would be preposterous were one to consider recent history. There are plenty of countries, certainly, where the charge has held merit; it has even been alleged, for example, that among our German allies the air force does better with the Social Democrats and the army with the Christian Democrats. But most US military and naval officers are not outspokenly partisan (nor should they be), and they do not try to engage their civilian bosses in political discussion; moreover, most civilian appointees of either party treat officers properly as professionals and are not even curious about how they vote.

At the same time, a few of the most senior uniformed positions have a *policy* content to them—and ought to if the military is to have any say at all in how our national security policy is shaped.[10] No senior officer should accept an assignment to carry out a policy he cannot in good conscience support. And no Secretary of Defense should be expected to choose, from among several able candidates, one who cannot in good conscience support the Administration's programs. If, for example, a Secretary of the Navy believed that future budgets should emphasize submarines, should he choose an aircraft-carrier advocate to implement that policy simply because the system supports that candidate? If a Secretary of the Army wants to support a volunteer force, should he appoint as senior staff officer to implement that program an officer who unalterably believes in conscription over an officer who favors the plan? Should the Secretary not at least weigh whether the person selected would be a vigorous proponent of the policy, rather than one who has to grit his teeth to carry it out?

For some senior positions, few policy issues have relevance. But for a job tied closely to policy, policy views may legitimately be at least one consideration in the appointment. If the Chairman and the other members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, for instance, are to be listened to in the formulation of national security policy, then although total agreement with the current political leadership should not be a prerequisite for appointment, the views of candidates for those positions on important national security issues are at least relevant to how much useful advice they can be expected to provide. For the same reason, and because it probably would not be desirable to replace the top officers when Presidents change, the current statutory two-year renewable term for the Chairman probably is about right, and would be better for the other JCS members also, instead of the four-year terms they now serve unless removed.

The occasional flap over former Chairman General David C. Jones is a case in point. General Jones, having served for four years as Richard Nixon and James Schlesinger's Air Force Chief of Staff, got off on the wrong foot by being appointed JCS Chairman by Jimmy Carter and Harold Brown when it was the Army's or Navy's turn. He had not resigned as Air Force Chief of Staff over Carter's cancellation of the B-1 bomber. Further, together with then Chairman General George Brown and the other Chiefs, he had supported the Panama Canal treaties. When, as Chairman himself, he later supported the SALT II Treaty (as did all of the Chiefs of service), some members of the right wing concluded that Jones must have been selected because he would be agreeable to the Democrats—a conclusion reached in spite of the fact that the JCS as a body had taken the unusual step of testifying that Carter's last defense budget was not enough. As James Schlesinger later pointedly wrote, it was perhaps the first time an officer was being criticized for *not* being insubordinate.[11]

Yet senior officers should indeed be replaced if there is reason to doubt their competence, their willingness to execute policy, or the compatibility of their views on military matters with those of the Administration. Thus, although General Jones was a scrupulous officer, to suggest that it would have been a misuse of presidential power for President Reagan to have fired him would be an overstatement. Such an action would not have been an abuse, although the decision to take that action would indeed have been serious and not one to be made without considerable reflection.

DIFFERENT KINDS OF POLITICS

Too often when word leaks out that a promotion recommendation forwarded by one of the service Chiefs has not gone through, the immediate cry goes up that the officer concerned was the victim of "politics." His background is rehashed by friends and acquaintances in order to fathom how he might have offended the civilian powers. Journalists sometimes even write stories disclosing dark efforts to purge the services of wrong-thinkers, and editorials that, if they do nothing else, probably serve to embarrass the officer who didn't get the job.

Yet, likely as not, the decision simply was that as nearly as the Secretary of Defense could determine on the limited information available, there was someone else better qualified for the job. President Roosevelt chose General Eisenhower rather than General Marshall to lead the invasion of Europe; this surely was a decision by a politician, and it certainly included a personal assessment of each man and how he could best be used. In no way was it improper. No one has a right to any assignment in any of our armed forces, and most certainly no one has a right to get or hold onto three or four stars until he feels ready to retire—not if one believes, as military officers are trained to, that the needs of the country take precedence over individual ambition.

So the complaint really should not be, and on analysis probably is not, that a choice was political. Rather, it is that the choice was ill-advised or uninformed. Civilian appointees will not always be correct in their judgments, but neither will military officers. And if a civilian Secretary persistently uses unwise criteria or makes poor judgments, the solution is to replace him, not to take civilians out of the process.

Politics in the ordinary sense has only rarely had a role in promotions in the US armed forces over the years, probably less now than ever, and much less than in most countries. The best known recent examples of "political officers," in the sense that they clearly owed their promotions to the intervention of the political process, have been General Alexander Haig and Admiral Hyman G. Rickover. Haig ascended through support in the executive branch, moving from colonel to major general while on Henry Kissinger's staff, then vaulting suddenly at Nixon's direction to the four-star post of Vice Chief of Staff of the Army (and heir apparent to be Chief of Staff) before Watergate called him back to political duties, and Nixon's successor then sent him to command the forces of NATO. Rickover's route was on the legislative side and through his additional assignment in the Department of Energy, which gave him an excuse to speak his mind without clearing it with the Navy or with DOD. Congressional pressure brought successive promotions and successive extensions of active duty beyond the mandatory retirement age; and when congressional support started to wane, the Admiral found he unexpectedly had a friend in the White House in former nuclear submarine officer Jimmy Carter.

What strikes one most about these two political flag officers, however, is what good officers they turned out to be. Haig might have made it to the three-star or four-star level eventually anyway; Rickover surely would not have. On the other hand, were it not for Haig's intimate involvement in the political side of the Nixon Administration, he surely would have been a leading candidate to be Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Rickover, though too eccentric in his later years, used his political base to force on the

Navy a nuclear submarine program that now is absolutely essential to our strategic security.[12]

Is the success of these two a fluke? If not, what lessons can be drawn from it? Perhaps that even though one could not run an orderly system in the face of constant second-guessing by politically appointed officials, it sometimes is the case that an impatient outsider can free the military from its own bureaucratic politics by spotting unconventional talent or forcing ahead someone of unique qualities whom the system either would make wait or would ignore completely. Institutions have difficulty moving quickly enough when change is needed, and even politicians do not always pick wrongly.

Moreover, there is a certain hypocrisy if military bureaucrats cry "politics" when the Secretary of Defense or a service Secretary challenges the "school solution" on who ought to fill a particular job. The service bureaucracies themselves are intensely political (with a small "p"), and although many able people make it to the top, many do not, and a few who make it perhaps do not belong there. Thus, sometimes the nominations that are recommended by the service bureaucracies are themselves political in this sense, while the civilian questioning, based as it is on no permanent bureaucratic obligations, compromises, or long-standing associations, is itself apolitical. At the very least, the service bureaucracies' choices are not free of political considerations; they simply reflect a different politics.

The services each contain personal followings and specialty groups. In the Navy, for instance, the aviator, surface, and submarine factions watch each other warily, and each tries to move its candidates into position for key jobs. In the Army and Air Force this sort of division is less open, but it certainly matters whether one came up through the infantry or the artillery, or whether one's background is in missiles or bombers. In the past there were "battleship admirals." Now we have "carrier admirals," "helicopter generals," and leaders of other constituencies that vie for control. Further, particular leaders, like feudal barons, have identifiable followers, and filling a top job may determine who wins the opportunity to choose for many lesser ones.

The barons even occasionally plot against each other. Not many years ago the senior officer of one service showed his Secretary a proposed slate of candidates for senior jobs to be filled at the next big shuffle. There was something for practically everyone—except for the officer who had been the other principal contender for the Chief's job. Asked about him, the Chief replied, "Oh, of course, he'll retire." That the service would be losing an extremely talented officer and possibly its next Chief did not enter into the equation. The Secretary sent the Chief back to do the list over. In doing so, the Secretary was asserting the interests of the country and those of the service as a whole over the narrower plans of the service bureaucracy, or the current leader of it.

Service bureaucracies tend also to get stuck in ruts, to resist any sudden changes, and to try to replicate themselves. The Army at times has seemed more like an Elks' lodge hall than a fighting organization. Every leader, some generals have argued, should go through each of the chairs of office before aspiring to the highest rank: assistant division commander, senior general staff, command of a division, deputy chief of staff, command of a corps, and, only then, four-star rank. It does, of course, make sense to expect a certain amount of responsible experience, but the service bureaucracy sometimes goes further. It detests unpredictability and is uncomfortable with the idea of one officer zooming up past others willy-nilly, before the time for his year-group, and complicating the careers of others by occupying positions that others had been readied to fill. Again, institutions seldom move quickly enough when change is needed. Intervention of civilian leadership is more likely than the service bureaucracy to bring about change quickly. Symbiosis is possible: the service bureaucracy sifts and winnows and provides stability; the

civilian can provide a spur to the unconventional. The two together can produce a better result than could either alone.

The argument against civilian scrutiny also ignores that too close acquaintance can lead to sentimental management. By the time one is considering three-star and four-star ranks, a Chief of Staff is often dealing with his own contemporaries, old friends and classmates. Lack of distance can be a burden. Ties of personal loyalty can lead a service to keep an officer on high-ranking active duty rather than face the personal awkwardness of forcing retirement. An outsider civilian Secretary, whose wife has not played bridge with the officer's wife for 30 years, who did not happen to buy the retirement home down the street from him, and who does not have to live with him and his friends forever, will be better able to take the unpleasant but necessary personnel actions without which any organization will stagnate.

Two recent examples illustrate the point. In one case, a service Chief insisted on finding another four-star slot for one officer even though all the civilians who looked into the matter concluded, based on the record and on the comments of many persons in and out of uniform, that he was not so distinguished that his abilities clearly exceeded those of other candidates. In the end the civilians prevailed, but only after more unpleasant scenes than any of the participants wanted.

The other, more celebrated, instance was the selection of the present Army Chief of Staff, General E. C. Meyer. Meyer, who was young among the senior Army officers but widely conceded to be future Chief of Staff material, was urged by some for a four-star position, even though he had never commanded a corps. After long negotiations and gnashing of teeth, the uniformed Army reluctantly agreed, although for a different position of that grade. Then, unexpectedly, the position of Army Chief of Staff became vacant. President Carter, who interviewed candidates for the spots on the JCS, was not taken with the first officer sent over, one of the Army's best, but an officer whose comments as commander in Korea on withdrawal plans may not have totally pleased the President. The President's exact reasoning for not accepting this first candidate remains mysterious and the possible role of the interested congressional leadership remains unclear. He asked for another to look at, and Meyer rocketed to the top. Ironically, the other officer later leapfrogged to the highest position of all, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, which simply demonstrates that a good officer should not retire when he misses one assignment, because selections are subjective and the officer may before long be needed for another.

In spite of the wails of doom for the Army that greeted the notion of Meyer's rapid advancement—even though practically everyone in the Army conceded Meyer's ability and opponents said it was just a question of timing—the Army does not appear to have been hurt at all and perhaps was stimulated a bit (after all, it survived Dwight Eisenhower's move from lieutenant colonel in 1941 to four-star Supreme Allied Commander in 1944). But the choice clearly was made personally by the top civilian policymaker, President Carter, whose decision and responsibility it properly was. Had he not done so, the service would have been embarked on a more traditional course. By the same token, President Ronald Reagan was acting properly when he set a more traditional course for the JCS by nominating General John Vessey as Chairman, even though many observers (including this one) would have preferred the appointment of an officer enthusiastically committed to JCS reform.

For another example, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird knew what he wanted, and had the boldness to demand it, when in 1970 he promoted then Vice Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr., over dozens of more senior admirals to be Chief of Naval Operations.[13] The Navy, the most conservative of the services, never got over the shock, which was not made more palatable by Zumwalt's own zeal in pushing novel personnel programs he thought the Navy needed. Too many officers resented him, and as soon as Zumwalt's tour was over, some officers who had tied their

careers too closely to his were quickly purged into retirement. It was perhaps with Zumwalt's difficulties in mind that the Army's Meyer moved at once after being chosen to make his peace with the older generals, while nevertheless leaving an imprint as one of the Army's strongest Chiefs of Staff in recent years. (It is important to recognize that, by and large, the uniformed military accept personnel decisions when made, keep any misgivings out of the press, and work loyally to support the anointed leadership.)

THE CIVILIAN DUTY

Considering the responsibility this government can and properly does place on senior uniformed officers—who, after all, are entrusted with lives and with custody of weapons that can create mischief to the point of blowing up the world—it should be unthinkable for civilian officials charged with directing our defense to be indifferent to the question of which particular officers are to be entrusted with such duties. Directors who choose to play no role in selecting an organization's senior officers have simply abandoned their own duty.

Even if military promotions are too serious a matter to be left entirely to the generals and admirals, however, the utility and defensibility of active civilian participation in the promotion process depends, of course, on how capable those civilians themselves are. The civilians do not have to be 20-year military veterans, but they do have to be experienced, wise, and serious people. Secretaries of Defense usually have been able and confident enough men not to hesitate at playing a role in the major choices. Not all service Secretaries in recent years have been so at home in their own offices, however, that one has felt confident in their ability to judge personnel choices in an institution with which they are unfamiliar. For this reason, as well as many others, it is important to appoint Secretaries of the Army, Navy, and Air Force who are not just political creditors of a President, but who have the experience and talent to know what they are doing.[14]

Even then, of course, no sensible person would suggest that a civilian Secretary should come up with his own list of candidates for all the top jobs or capriciously ignore the recommendations that are presented to him. His role rather should be to relieve the rigidity of the system, to try to counterbalance any quirks or debts of friendship or politics the service Chief may have, and occasionally to seek to force the service to move talented or unconventional officers ahead more rapidly than the bureaucracy would dare. Recognizing that he cannot and should not try to call all the shots, the Secretary should make those that he does call count.

Not only a service Chief's important duty, but often perhaps his most valued perquisite of office, is his role as prime determiner of the future careers of his senior officers. Not surprisingly, therefore, any effort to share a piece of that power often meets with resistance. But a civilian Secretary who simply rubber-stamps the flag-officer promotions and assignments that are handed him is not doing his job.

If the essential precondition of civilian competence is met, then service Secretaries ought to consider the monitoring of senior promotions a part of their duties. The following guidelines would seem appropriate for Secretaries and Under Secretaries of the services, and for Secretaries and Deputy Secretaries of Defense:

- Don't let anyone rattle you or tell you that you haven't a legitimate role in controlling senior promotions and assignments. People operate the military, and unless you think you can do it all yourself, you'll need to be sure the best people are being assigned to the key jobs.
- Don't let anyone tell you that you have more important things to do with your time. If it's worth a large chunk of the hours of your service Chief and the JCS, it's worth at least that much of yours. Helping force talent to the top of your service may be the most lasting contribution you make.
- Be discreet. Absorb the opinions you hear from your staff, but keep discussions of individuals at the top level between you and your uniformed counterpart. That will promote openness on his part and also protect the privacy of people who are being

considered. Don't often talk in detail with your subordinates about what was said.

- Pay attention to the reasons given for particular nominations. Challenge them with searching questions.
- Get to know as many of your senior officers as you can as quickly as possible. Travel some, but also request all officers of a certain level to pay you a courtesy call whenever they are in Washington, so that you can both learn about them and learn from them.
- Take special care in the choice of officers for selection boards and frame the instructions with precision. Though you won't be in office to see those selected performing at higher levels of responsibility, they will include the top leadership of the future.
- Don't be afraid to give some weight to your personal impressions. If you didn't have some ability to evaluate people, you probably wouldn't be where you are. At the same time, keep in mind that glibness is not the test, that not all the essential qualities of military officers are easy for civilians to perceive, and that the thing that counts most is the record.
- Don't fight with your service Chief in public about promotions.
- Use informal networks of informed and reliable people to find out additional information you can't get through the system (just as corporate executives often do). But be careful of people with axes to grind.
- If you are the Secretary of Defense, try, except in the rarest instances, to back your service Secretaries, and to avoid showdowns in which you would not be able to do so.
- If you are Secretary of Defense, make the services compete for senior jobs, rather than allowing those assignments to be passed from service to service in turn. Select on the basis of talent, not color of uniform. And consult those senior military officers who do not have service commitments.[15]
- Ask for nominations of two or three different candidates for every job, even when you are told that the individual whom the bureaucracy puts forward is preeminently qualified. The process of comparison will at least help identify why he is so good.
- Don't agonize about making mistakes. The bureaucratic system does that all the time—witness the prompt shake-up of the top jobs that seems to occur regularly each time we go to war, and the fact that some flag officers are noticeably more talented in some respects than others. Besides, whether you choose one flag officer or another, you still are choosing from among the best the service has to offer.

There is nothing so virginally pure in the services' selection process that should spare a uniformed chief from having to answer an informed civilian's questions, or having to give some consideration to his views of the kind of leadership the service needs. In essence, it is simply a matter of civilian control. More positively, it is an opportunity to compensate for the uniformed services' own personal and bureaucratic biases. Civilian participation is not just something for the uniformed leadership to grin at, bear, and tolerate. It may be awkward at times, and even occasionally wrongheaded, but, as Churchill said of democracy, it is the worst system known except the alternatives.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Maxwell D. Taylor, *The Uncertain Trumpet* (New York: Harper, 1959), p. 112; John G. Kester, "The Future of the Joint Chiefs of Staff," *AEI Foreign Policy and Defense Review*, 2 (No. 1, 1980), 10.
2. See 10 US Code 611, 624. Distinctions among regular, reserve, permanent, and temporary appointments are not treated here. See 10 US Code 531, 603. These distinctions are not important to the present discussion. Nor is this the place to discuss the inadequacies of the efficiency-report and promotion-board process, which, though imperfect, probably nevertheless works better than the civil service system.
3. Figures are from Department of Defense, *Military Manpower Statistics, April 1982*, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (DIOR), Washington, D.C., 30 April 1982, p. 19.
4. For example, after the My Lai incident a reduction in temporary grade of a general officer occurred.
5. See 10 US Code 601. Four-star assignments include, for example, major commanders; three-star officers command corps or fleets and hold positions as deputies to service Chiefs. Ceilings in the number of flag officers are set by law. See 10 US Code 3202, 5442, 8202.
6. In each instance the officer retired at the higher grade and then was recalled to active duty at the lower grade.
7. See 10 US Code 601 (A). The Senate Armed Services Comittee for many years has kept an informal ceiling on the number of flag officers and their grade distribution.

8. See John G. Kester, "Do We Need the Service Secretary?" *Washington Quarterly*, 4 (Winter 1981), 149.

9. See Thomas B. Buell, *Master of Sea Power* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980).

10. Compare, for example, Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "Weinberger's Flying Trap," *The Washington Post*, 10 August 1981, p. A17.

11. James R. Schlesinger, "The 'Charge' Against General Jones," *The Washington Post*, 1 January 1981, p. A21.

12. R. James Woolsey, "Rickover's Lengthening Shadow," *Armed Forces Journal*, 119 (October 1981), 16.

13. Zumwalt recalls that Secretary of the Navy John Chafee told him:

> I was the candidate they had settled upon after he had interviewed me the month before and learned my thoughts about the Navy's future. He added that in addition to agreeing with my views about the Navy, they wanted a non-aviator as CNO for the first time in nine years, and that they also wanted someone younger than the norm in order to help bring the Navy 'into the modern age.'

Elmo R. Zumwalt, *On Watch* (New York: Quadrangle, 1976), p. 46. Similarly, when General Earle G. Wheeler was appointed Army Chief of Staff, President "Kennedy dropped a broad hint that future promotions of high ranking officers would depend upon their demonstration of experience in the counter-guerrilla or sub-limited war field." Cited in Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1982), p. 73.

14. See Kester, "Do We Need the Service Secretary?"

15. In testimony at hearings of the House Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Investigations on 5 May 1982, General Andrew J. Goodpaster recommended that the Chairman of the JCS be specifically authorized "to review, and advise the Secretary of Defense regarding, all recommendations for three and four star officer staff and command assignments to operational forces—service or joint—and also to the joint staff." US Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, Investigations Subcommittee, *Hearings on Reorganization Proposals for the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, 97th Cong., 2d Sess., 1982, p. 446.