

Transcript of Episode 11, “Rethinking the Norms and Practices of U.S. Civil-Military Relations”

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[Note: This is a rough transcript of the audio recording, based on digital transcription and human review.]

Benn: [00:00:00] One, two, three, go.

Morgan: [00:00:18] Hello, and welcome to *International Security: Off the Page*. On today's episode, we are talking about the norms and practices of civil-military relations within the U.S. I'm Morgan Kaplan, the Executive Editor of *International Security*. We will be speaking with Dr. Risa Brooks, the author of the recent IS article “Paradoxes of Professionalism: Rethinking Civil-Military Relations in the United States.”

And a little later, we'll go off the page with retired General Joseph Votel, a nonresident senior fellow here at the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center and the former commander of U.S. Central Command and U.S. Special Operations Command.

Benn: [00:01:00] belfercenter.org/offthepage is where you can find past episodes as well as supplemental reading materials. It is also where you can subscribe to Off the Page on your favorite podcast platform.

Morgan: Risa Brooks is the Allis Chalmers Associate Professor of Political Science at Marquette University and a nonresident senior associate in the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Risa, welcome to the show.

Brooks: [00:01:27] Great to be with you.

Morgan: [00:01:28] So tell us a little bit about why you've written this article about rethinking civil-military relations in the U.S.

Brooks: [00:01:35] The article really focuses on the norms of professionalism that are prevalent in the U.S. military today, especially in the officer corps. Those norms reflect the arguments of Samuel Huntington in his seminal book *The Soldier and the State*.

I wrote the article for two reasons. First of all, while there have been critiques of Samuel Huntington's arguments in *Soldier and the State*, there really hasn't been a full, [00:02:00] comprehensive assessment of sort of all the aspects of those norms, so I wanted to get that on the table. More fundamentally and more practically, there are problems with those norms that are especially relevant today. I felt that we really needed to address those, to get out there and become more aware of the kinds of issues that are occurring in civil-military relations in the U.S. today.

Morgan: [00:02:22] Risa, can you tell us a little bit more about what these Huntingtonian norms are? I believe the phrase used for it is objective control. What are these norms of objective control, these norms of professionalism?

Brooks: [00:02:35] Absolutely. Let me just start with the concept of objective control, which Huntington argued was sort of the best way to both secure civilian control of the military and ensure its effectiveness in armed conflict. He advocated this model for that reason. At its core, it envisions that there's sort of this clear line between the civilian and military spheres, that civilians are in charge of policy decisions [00:03:00] and deciding political objectives in relation to the use of force and that the military really focuses on implementing those decisions and cultivating its expertise in the management of violence. There's this separation of spheres idea, and we find even when people don't associate Huntington's name with it, they're very familiar with this idea of this separation and that normative foundation that we see in the contemporary U.S. officer corps.

What Huntington argues with objective control has specific sort of behavioral implications, and let me just sort of outline those. There are four of them. One of them is that there's this premise and belief that military and political activity are easily separated and should remain separated. There are political decisions, there are military decisions, and they don't much interact with each other. This idea has been roundly critiqued, especially by Eliot Cohen in his 2002 book *Supreme Command*, [00:04:00] and by others. And that's sort of the first contention.

There's three others, though. The second is that Huntington supports this transactional view of military advice, the idea that, because there are these two different domains, the civilians get together, figure out what they want to do in war. They come up with some guidance, they go over and tell the military, "Okay, this is what our objective is. Military, come up with some options." The military takes that guidance, comes up with three options, comes in the room, delivers it. [The] civilians maybe say, "Okay, tweak it here and there," but it's not a collaborative or interactive process as Huntington envisions it. Those norms sort of shape our understanding of contemporary strategic assessment and how the military and political leadership interact today.

Third, one of the ideas that's central in Huntington is that the military really needs to exist in its own separate sphere away from society, not just away from politics, and that its members [00:05:00] inhabit a worldview that's distinctive and better than its civilian counterparts. At the very end of the book, there's this discussion of how West Point abuts the city of Highland Falls and that Highland Falls should look to West Point and emulate the values that are held among the cadets there. It's sort of this supremacist idea of military culture over civilian culture.

Fourth, the biggest one, and the one that I talk about a lot in the article, is the idea that military should abstain from all that is political. What's important about this is that it's not just abstaining from political activism or behaviors that might subvert or affect civilian control, it's even intellectual. It's the idea that if a problem comes up that has political overtones or ramifications, you pass that off to the civilians. That disengagement or that

apprehension about thinking and engaging in politics is really central to Huntington and also really destructive as you might be able to [00:06:00] anticipate right off the bat.

Morgan: [00:06:01] One thing that's fascinating about your article is that, in a way, you're arguing, it's not just that Huntington is wrong or Huntington is misleading in the nature of these norms, but that there are actual paradoxes built into Huntington's own norms that actually make the exact type of relationship Huntington was hoping for kind of unravel. The seeds of its own unraveling are within the theory itself. Tell us a little bit about these paradoxes of professionalism that you found within Huntington's work and what that means.

Brooks: [00:06:34] Yeah. You're exactly right. There are these internal tensions such that the behavior that Huntington says his norms prescribe is actually undermined by other things that it supports, other behaviors. The article is organized around these three paradoxes. The first is that while those norms promote abstention from partisan political activity, they also enable it. You know, Huntington is very [00:07:00] clear that the military stays out of politics in all respects, but the tautology he creates, the idea that professionals are apolitical and therefore being a military professional means that you are by definition apolitical, fosters a lack of introspection and reflection and creates what I call blind spots. There's a lack of awareness of the way that one is actually behaving in a political way that is encouraged and supported by Huntingtonian norms.

The second is that Huntingtonian norms both support and undermine civilian control of the military. In the most common meaning of civilian control, it just comes down to [the question], does the military follow orders? But if we step back and think more broadly, civilian control means that the military acts in a way that supports and promotes civilian policy preferences. Those norms undermine it, first through this transactional advisory process but [00:08:00] also by creating a culture averse to civilian oversight of the military.

The third paradox is that Huntingtonian norms support military effectiveness, especially operational and tactical effectiveness, but they undermine strategic effectiveness. They do this principally because of that transactional advisory process but also because of the way the mindset that Huntington supports undermines a sense of accountability and responsibility for the strategic level of conflict so that the military is leaving it to the civilians to kind of figure out how to connect strategy to politics. It's washing its hands of its responsibility to ensure success in war.

Morgan: [00:08:46] Can you tell us a little bit about why these paradoxes are particularly important today?

Brooks: [00:08:52] I think the first one, sort of promoting political activity, is important because there's evidence that a political norm that [00:09:00] Huntington says is so robust isn't really working very well. There's all sorts of sort of different studies today that are showing that many military personnel really don't believe in those norms. They think they should be able to criticize civilian leaders, that they should be able to engage in public political expression whenever they want to, those sorts of things.

Also, those norms matter today, and the reason we need to view them critically is that there's these overt efforts to politicize the military by the civilian political leadership, the president. The military is completely unprepared to handle that. Those norms, to me, need to be more developed and robust, to prepare [the military]. And I'll just point to a quick example: the recent events in Lafayette Square with General Milley accompanying Donald Trump across the square for the photo op in front of the famous historical church, holding the Bible. Milley later apologizes for that, but what that episode shows us in a microcosm is sort of the lack of preparation that the norms provide for dealing with civilian politicization of the [00:10:00] military.

The last reason we should really be paying attention to this is we're coming to this moment of reckoning with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. We've seen remarkable social mobilization against engaging in conflicts like that. People are starting to ask questions, you know, why did this happen? One of the answers to those questions is civil-military relations and some of the norms and the way they undermined strategic assessment and the relationship between the military and political leadership in making key decisions in those wars.

Morgan: [00:10:35] What are the big policy implications? What are the big policy takeaways having understood these paradoxes in the existing norms of civil-military relations?

Brooks: [00:10:45] Yeah. I think one of them is that we need to really rethink what the sort of basis or foundation of military professionalism should be today. While Huntington's ideas are really dominant, there's been [00:11:00] both before and since other conceptions of professionalism. Huntington comes out of a debate, and he wins that debate, but we need to revisit and rethink that. Part of that needs to involve a more constructive engagement and understanding of the military's role in politics. Understanding that, this sort of hear no evil, see no evil approach to politics is really not serving either the military in maintaining its nonpartisan ethic or the country in ensuring its success in its armed conflicts overseas.

Morgan: [00:11:38] Fantastic. Well, Risa, I only have one more question for you and that is, are you ready?

Brooks: [00:11:44] Am I ready?

Morgan: [00:11:45] To go off the page.

Brooks: [00:11:48] (Laughs) I am ready.

Benn: [00:11:54] If you enjoy listening to Off the Page, you'll enjoy reading our quarterly journal, *International Security*, which is edited and [00:12:00] sponsored by the Belfer Center at Harvard Kennedy School and published by the MIT Press. To learn more about the journal, please check out belfercenter.org/is.

Morgan: [00:12:06] Joseph Votel is a retired four-star general in the United States Army. He previously served as Commander of U.S. Central Command and U.S. Special Operations Command. He is currently a nonresident senior fellow here at the Harvard Kennedy School's

Belfer Center, and he is also the president and CEO of Business Executives for National Security. General Votel, welcome to the podcast.

Votel: [00:12:31] Thanks. It's great to be with you.

Morgan: [00:12:33] We're particularly lucky to have you here as a retired four-star general and someone who's served for 40 years, and I imagine these issues of civil military relations are something you've thought deeply about over the course of your career. I'm curious, having read Dr. Brooks' article, can you tell us a little bit about your reaction to the piece, whether it rung true or what elements of it you've experienced and you feel are either accurate or [00:13:00] perhaps contrary to your experience?

Votel: [00:13:02] Yeah. Thanks. Well, first off, as I said, it's great to be with you. I really enjoyed it reading the article on a very interesting topic that's particularly relevant right now. I mean, that caught my attention. As you mentioned, as someone who had the opportunity to be a combatant commander and operate at a pretty high level within the Department of Defense and within our government, I definitely, definitely understood everything that's been discussed in there.

I really do agree with Dr. Brooks' conclusion that, you know, it may be time to look at a different model for this. As I went through this, I'm not sure I really had an opinion on that as I began to read the article, but as I got to the end of it, I think I agreed with her conclusion that there may be a better model that we need to be looking at.

Morgan: [00:13:50] You know, when we were thinking about this conversation, we were thinking there are potentially multiple ways to talk about the state of civil-military relations in the United States [00:14:00] today, one at the level of the relationship between the military and civilian leadership, the other between the U.S. military and American society. Then, of course, [there's] a conversation about intra-military norms about politics and civil-military relations. I thought it would be good potentially to start with, what is the current state of politics within the military? To what extent are those coming through the military being trained to understand these issues, but also what is the current understanding of what is appropriate behavior in the forms of politics in the military?

Votel: [00:14:35] That's an excellent question. As we enter into an election year (we've been through a variety of these), I think there's lots of reminders along the way that we generally don't use the uniform, we don't use our position and rank to try to take positions associated with particular candidates or particular parties. That certainly is something I think that virtually everybody in uniform is exposed to. [00:15:00] Officers through their various commissioning sources come with different degrees of knowledge on the topic, and of course there are opportunities through the course of your career to really take a little bit of time to think about those kinds of things.

I think the challenge comes is this is not necessarily a day-to-day topic. I never found it to be that way. It's certainly something that we thought about as I got more senior and operated at higher levels, and I have talked with my contemporaries about it occasionally, but it's not an everyday topic in terms of the things that are going on. I think there's a general belief in

uniform in the military that, you know, we try to comport ourselves in a way that portrays ourselves as unbiased, as even-keeled, if you will, not beholden to one particular party or viewpoint over another. That we try to stay focused on providing the best [00:16:00] military advice, and you know to some extent remain within the lane. And that's the way the intra-military politics is. Those officers who have strayed outside of that have generally incurred to the wrath of some of their contemporaries on that, they have been characterized or viewed as being political or taking political positions. I think that's kind of the state of how I would look at it in uniform, how I looked at it when I was in uniform.

Brooks: [00:16:29] So just to sort of add a little to that question or provide additional perspective, I really respect and see lots of evidence for this commitment to sort of a nonpartisan ethic. I do think that is really deeply ingrained and something that, especially people who are making it, you know, general officers and flag officers, are really thinking about that as they move through their careers at different times.

Having said that, I think that there's [00:17:00] probably opportunities to think and do more on that and to think about what that means and practice and how that translates into particular incidents or events. One way to think about being nonpartisan or staying out of sort of partisan competition—the goal should be, or a goal is to minimize your effect on sort of controversies within the civilian space, whether it's policy debates or whether it's partisan competition, partisan campaigns, minimizing through one's statements and actions the effects on those things and that's how I would think about what being nonpartisan apolitical in the positive sense would mean.

I think that that's not controversial, right? What I would add to that is that how that's interpreted sometimes is to me that one should not act, that one should try to disengage and withdraw. Sometimes, and I wonder if you agree with this, General [00:18:00] Votel, it might require actually engaging with politics and actually taking action to have the effect of minimizing one's impact on politics. For example, Chairman Milley's recent apology for his being in the picture at Lafayette Square with the president was an overt action, a decision he made to help push the military, and him in particular, out of politics. Sometimes, I worry that nonpartisan and staying out of politics means neutral and quiet, neutrality means quiet inaction, but it really requires sort of political engagement and political acumen to really maintain that position.

Votel: [00:18:46] I agree with you on what you're saying. I think you said it probably better than I did. I like that idea, the concept of minimizing effects, that's what I'm implying in my comments, that you conduct yourself in a manner that, you know, your [00:19:00] professional responsibilities don't become beholden to any particular political influence and you do try to minimize the impacts.

I think the challenge though, for people like me, I certainly felt this challenge, I think it certainly exists today and has existed for a long time, is that a well-defined very black and white definition of apolitical is very difficult to apply here. The military, and particularly senior officers, operate in a political environment. There is no doubt about that. We are nominated. We are confirmed. We are nominated by our president. We are confirmed by Congress. That is a political process. The Department of Defense is part of the executive

branch that is led by a president as the commander-in-chief, who is an elected leader that is, you know, a representative of a particular political party. We testify in Congress. Part of that is an aspect of adversarial questioning where you have both sides questioning, angling to support their political [00:20:00] viewpoints in that, and the challenge for the military leader in that is to walk that fine line and to be respectful of the institution, but do it in a manner that, as you said, minimizes the impacts. That does that mean you're going to participate in policy discussions and that happens, that's part of it when you do this.

Of course, war is an extension of politics by other means. I mean, that is the Clausewitzian definition of it here. We have to recognize that you are operating in an environment that is political. Within that, I think it is trying to not be biased to a particular political point. It is about how you comport yourself in that and how you work your way through the interaction between military and civilians on this and how you, in your words, minimize the effects of the political environment on the military advice that you are providing.

Brooks: [00:20:51] Yeah, absolutely. I can imagine that requires a lot of introspection and thinking at certain times, how to [00:21:00] navigate politics. One of the goals of the article or one of the things I was hoping would come out of it is the idea that this shouldn't be the kind of thing that [is] sort of left at the margins to be thinking about, especially when you're a senior officer. Developing that sort of judgment and acumen and awareness of one's role in domestic politics, the military as an institution's role in domestic politics, and the way that military activity sort of interacts with and is influenced by domestic politics, those are things that are central to really doing one's job thoroughly and well. As an outsider, those seem to be very important things. My goal is to say, we need to think more about this.

Maybe I'll just add one other thing that I really appreciate about what you just said. I'm coming to the point where I think that we need to start from the assumption that the military is a political institution and military leaders are [00:22:00] inevitably, whether they choose to or not, actors in domestic politics. It's only by acknowledging that as a starting point that we can begin to figure out exactly how to act and what the sort of standards of good ethical behavior is. If we start from this idea that the military can be kind of sterilized from politics and sort of is removed from it, that's just going to get into a whole lot of problems and avoid really dealing with the hard issues. Bringing that up and sort of putting that front forward I think is really helpful in moving that conversation along.

Votel: [00:22:34] I wouldn't characterize it as being actors in domestic politics. I would describe it as more as actors in a political theater, frankly. That's kind of how I would do it, how I would think about that. But more to the point, I wanted to just comment on the idea of discussion and education and everything that goes along with this. I do think one of the areas where the military should do better in this is in kind of the education and the [00:23:00] professional discussion of this that should take place as officers move forward. It's not absent. It takes place. A lot of it takes place informally, and it comes up on a regular enough basis to do that.

I reread your article again yesterday in preparation for this. You have done a great job of laying out a variety of different viewpoints on this. I can't say that I ever had a discussion like that while I was in uniform where somebody said, "Okay, let's start off with Huntington, and

then let's talk about these other things along the way.” We just didn’t view it that way. You know, in fact, many officers will go through a commissioning source, they'll get some of this. They'll go to a staff college, you know, 10, 11 years into it, and they'll get it more of this. They'll go to the War College, you know, 18 to 20 years in, and they'll get some more of this. If they're selected for general officer, they'll get into some courses where they'll have an opportunity to have really the first big discussions that probably a lot of officers have about this particular topic. In a practical sense, that really is when they become a [00:24:00] general or a flag officer. That's where I think you see a lot of these discussions. We certainly can and should do a better job of promoting that discussion, promoting the education on this earlier and more frequently through an officer's career.

Brooks: [00:24:12] All my colleagues at PME [professional military education] institutions would be thrilled to hear you say that, because I think that a lot of us (and I'm very sympathetic to what they do, and they feel it's very important) really believe that it needs to be done more at war colleges, for example, and at different levels of PME, but also that needs to be a starting point for a conversation and a sort of level of awareness and engagement even more broadly.

Votel: [00:24:37] This is absolutely critical. One of the great opportunities I was always afforded, particularly as a four-star commander, whether it was at SOCOM or CENTCOM, was the opportunity to get out and go talk to the students at the war colleges, all the war colleges, Naval, Air Force, Army, the National War College, as well as going out and talking to general officers as they went through some of the unique [00:25:00] education, whether it was a capstone course or the PINNACLE course or the Joint Warfighting course.

One of the topics that I tried to talk about was this idea of how you communicate to the civilian leadership, about how it is that you provided advice to them. We spent a lot of time talking about the importance of developing relationships, about the importance of developing communication techniques and recognizing how the people, particularly the civilian leaders that you're communicating [with], how do they receive information? You know, I worked for several secretaries of defense. Each of them received the information differently. It was my obligation to understand how that was so that I was communicating effectively to them. Once I figured that out, then, then I was better serving them and I was better serving my organization, but it's absolutely critical.

I know in your article, you cited one of my good friends, Bill Rapp, who has done extensive research and discussion on this. When he was the commandant of the Army War College, I think [he] had a very refined, [00:26:00] well-developed way for talking about this with students. We need more of that. We need more of that institutionalized in our processes.

Morgan: [00:26:06] This conversation is fascinating, and it brings up another side of the story, which is education in having open conversations early on with service members and officers about what it means to be political, what does it mean to understand civil military relations. That just gets at one side of the puzzle, but of course, right, it takes two to tango. And I think something that I've seen in other conversations on Twitter and other areas, the fact that civilian leaders and also American society in general itself don't have good understanding of appropriateness and inappropriateness in civil-military relations. What

does it mean to educate civilian leaders on how to have appropriate relations with the military?

Brooks: [00:26:47] I think it's really an odd thing how much folks who study and think about civil-military relations spend thinking about the military side of that equation and not thinking about the civilian side, because [00:27:00] we don't really understand exactly what, say, even civilian oversight means in any really practical sense. We have a vague appreciation for what civilian leadership is supposed to do, like listen to military advisers, not shut the door, things like that, but it's really pretty primitive. I agree that we need to definitely be doing a lot more to understand what it means to play the role of the civilian in the civil-military relations equation.

Votel: [00:27:32] Yeah. I would definitely agree with that. You see examples of this all the time, where you see people that are in the Department of Defense or civilians who have governmental experience and who have been around the military have come to understand the roles a little bit. They play, I think, a very helpful role in understanding the kind of the basis of the institutions and what the roles are in this. I think the challenge becomes as you introduce more and more appointees, political appointees, into the [00:28:00] process (again, I'm not against political appointees and that's the system, that's how it works), but it does beg for the idea that there should be—we spent a lot of time talking about education of officers, but there has to be some opportunity for education or discussion with the civilian leadership as well, in terms of their understanding of the military-civilian relationship and how they interact back and forth.

As a military man, somebody who spent a lot of time in uniform, I think we always looked at that as our responsibility. I just gave you an example. When I talked about the three secretaries that I served under as a four-star commander, I saw it as my responsibility to adapt to them. That's civilian control of the military. I think that's the right approach, but there does have to be a complementary aspect of this that encourages the civilian leadership to understand that as well and what their role in making sure that it is a dialogue, that it is an interaction back and forth over this. [00:29:00] And I'm not sure that always takes place, frankly.

Brooks: [00:29:03] Yeah, I would just add a couple things to that. One thing that I've worried about in the current period is that as a substitute for sort of better education and preparation, maybe, for political appointees, it's now becoming, or I worry that it's becoming a bit of a litmus test, that one should have had prior military service to serve in one of those roles, or even be a career retired military officer in policy roles. I don't think that that's the solution because folks who've had civilian careers who understand policy, policymaking, navigating bureaucracy, all of those things and are chosen by elected officials shouldn't be closed out of those roles because they don't have military service or that background. I do worry that that's how we're solving the problem.

The other thing I would just add is that I think from the, from the outside, you're a new civilian appointee, you go into the [00:30:00] Pentagon and you're dealing with really accomplished career military officers (not always, but in many cases). That's got to be a formidable thing. These are folks that experience—the Department of Defense has

remarkable power and presence in American society, almost, I would say, beyond what its appropriate role is. It's an important role, but it's become almost a mythical organization and entity in American society. In the microcosm of that, you're dealing with people that have that behind them, and you don't have that experience. I think acknowledging that there's this sort of structural dynamic is something that's a piece of it that I don't hear often addressed in that way.

Votel: [00:30:46] Yeah, I would absolutely agree. I think that is certainly the case. It can be very intimidating, and the institution will be very intimidating in terms of what it does. There has to be some acknowledgement on both [00:31:00] sides of that. I also agree with your comment on the fact that I don't think there is a requirement that civilians who are serving in the defense or the national security environment must have uniformed service.

Just sitting here and thinking about the people that I've served with, a number of whom have just recently stepped out of a government service, none of them had uniform service, but that did not diminish the contributions or the value that I think that we placed onto them because in many cases they had good experience, either in the Department of Defense or over in Congress, serving on some of the oversight committees over there, or, you know, in some cases down in our combatant commands where they understood well what was happening and understood the environment that they were operating in. I don't think that it is a requirement, that good people can seem to have a way of figuring it out and understanding the environment in which they're operating.

Morgan: [00:31:54] So moving the conversation a bit more closely to how the military engages [00:32:00] broader society itself, it seems like social media acts as an informal platform for military and civilian engagement. How do things like Twitter and Facebook complicate existing norms of civil military relations in politics?

Votel: [00:32:12] I won't describe this perfectly here, but this ambiguous nature of the virtual environment adds confusion to people about the accountability that is associated with this and the officialness that goes along with this. And I think for a long period of time, we looked at it as some other domain that wasn't official, that didn't really constitute anything. I think you've seen people have used that space in some regards to make political comments or support something here or like this person's political viewpoint here, thinking there was a not be any many repercussions of that. And of course, I think what we've now seen is that certainly everything that's on the internet and things posted or liked or anything else all have the ability to be recalled and [00:33:00] be held accountable for it. I think a better understanding of that is important.

I think if there's one thing we've learned over the last four years of this administration, it's the role that something like tweeting takes. I would say we were probably a little bit more dismissive of that in 2016 than we probably were by 2019 or 2020, in terms of the role that that was playing in communicating to the American people and the implications that had on us. Something that we thought was, you know, kind of this ambiguous virtual environment really does take on a lot more official aspect. And that I think is something that we've probably had some difficulty coming to grips with.

Brooks: [00:33:38] For some Americans, this is the only way they're ever interacting with the U.S. military. And if they see partisan speech, contemptuous words, how are they interpreting that? They're thinking, "Oh, look, the military is on so-and-so's side." It's actually pretty urgent that that be taken up and addressed and dealt with.

Morgan: [00:33:59] What do we think about the [00:34:00] role of retired officers in making more formal public statements on politics and national security issues, for example, not in social media, but you know, in more respected media outlets, more formal public statements?

Votel: [00:34:12] I've written several times and you know, there generally has been a tradition that we don't do that that's somewhat viewed as a violation of that. I'm not so sure I subscribe to that. I don't immediately associate a public commentary with the violation of some kind of professional ethic. In my example, I'm the President and CEO of Business Executives for National Security, so I'm in this area. I'm associated with the Belfer Center. I'm associated with the Middle East Center. I'm associated with the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. I'm associated with the Center for Ethics and Rule of Law at University of Pennsylvania Law School. This is an area of some interest to me; I've tried to, tried to stay in that.

I think what's important though, is that at least, and I'll just speak from my example, in my writing, [00:35:00] I've tried to exercise, I think in my view, a level of care for the things that I'm writing about, meaning that I'm avoiding personal attacks. I'm trying not to critique fellow colleagues or former colleagues, people that have followed behind me. I'm trying not to make things harder for the military to do their job. I'm trying to focus on adding clarity, information, or understanding to what are oftentimes very difficult, complex, ambiguous topics. And so, and again, I'm just talking about myself, but my point is that I do think there's a place for former military officials to write, to communicate, to talk. I think a lot of it comes down to how they do it, as is the case in many things. I do think it is a healthy part of the process.

Brooks: [00:35:44] I think one of the strongest arguments for sort of having retired officers speak about issues is that they have experience and insight through their long careers, and they can contribute to public debate. And that can be [00:36:00] enriching, especially if it's done appropriately or in a very self-conscious way as you described. That can be really positive.

I think that there are two sort of potential pitfalls to keep in mind, though. One is just sort of the larger context in which the military has such remarkable social esteem that so few other institutions do these days. The effect is that it's not just contributing to a dialogue sometimes when a retired officer makes a comment, but that it really becomes this sort of privileged voice, like everyone listens to it. That could be a real concern, because then if you do that, then you're also shaping political debate in a way that you might not have intended to. And the other thing [which] I think this is a real danger (and it's somewhat contradictory to the point I just made, but I'll make it), which is that increasingly what retired officer says just becomes sort of caught [00:37:00] up in the news cycle and becomes fodder for partisan acrimony.

Votel: [00:37:04] Yeah. I agree with you. it's certainly something that has kind of gone through my mind in the several things that I've written, you know, how will this be perceived? For me, my way of doing that was kind of going back and making sure I had some rules in place that I was going to follow, as I did this, that I think that I could live with. Again, if somebody is going to come back in and attack and that's fine, I have a thick enough skin. I've been accused of worse here, and I can deal with all of that. (Everyone laughs).

I would just add, you know, you brought up the media, and I tried in my time as the CENTCOM commander and to some extent as SOCOM commander to have a very positive relationship with members of the press. I think that I did. I actually think I continue to have a good relationship with them, but the thing that I always thought about, and I kind of touched on it a little bit in my recent article that came out on the apolitical military, is this appreciation for the role of the different institutions in our [00:38:00] democracy here, with a role of the executive, the role of the Congress, the role of the media. I really do believe we are losing sight of the important roles that each of those institutions play in a vibrant, growing democracy. Once I reflected on this, the single most important class I took (I didn't recognize it at the time) when I was at West Point was a course called American Institutions. It was actually a probationary class, meaning that it was just getting introduced into the curriculum, but it looked really interesting and it was really class taught by a guy, an officer, who really had thought a lot about this and kind of instilled in us an appreciation for the role that the different institutions in our society with our government played and how they interact between each other. I think it's a really important aspect.

Morgan: [00:38:48] This raises the broader question, which is, we're talking about the current state of affairs and civil-military relations. I feel like we've almost started from this assumption that there's crisis. Dr. Brooks [00:39:00] has brought up the important example of the number of generals who've gone on to political appointments and civilian roles, but where are there positive trends? Where's the kind of light that we're seeing here? I mean, in some ways, the fact that we're having this conversation, the fact that a piece like yours, Dr. Brooks, is being talked about, the fact that this conversation has opened and that civil-military relations is making headline news these days, but is it all going the wrong direction? Where is kind of optimism?

Brooks: [00:39:27] You know, in a crisis there's always an opportunity, right? The opportunity here is for regular Americans to be thinking about what the military is doing, and about civil-military relations and about norms and all of those things. You know, there's been a lot of exposure to those issues, and that's been just terrific.

Votel: [00:39:47] To answer your question, Morgan, directly I don't think it's all a negative trend here. I mean, we talked a little bit about General Milley's remarks at the National Defense University graduation there and his [00:40:00] effort to bring this institution back into the proper balance in the wake of Lafayette Square. To me, that's a positive sign. And he did it, and to my knowledge, he didn't absorb any particular repercussions from that. He did what he needed to do, the institutional allowed him to do that, and he moved forward.

And again, if we look in everyday life, we see the military, whether it's helping with the COVID response or doing other things like this, playing a positive role in their communities,

for their states. And I think that continues to help the institution remain the very respected institution that it is. And so I don't think that it's all negative here, and we certainly are hitting some inflection points, no doubt about it. The current environment is polarized as it is, is bringing a lot of this in the forefront. But you know, we've seen examples of where we've been able to navigate our way through that. And I think that's good.

Morgan: [00:40:52] Well, General Votel, we have a tradition here on the show, which is, we like to ask our special guest, what general piece of advice [00:41:00] would you give to young scholars, young policymakers, young servicemembers as they begin their careers or get started on the second rocket boost of their careers?

Votel: [00:41:08] A couple of different things there. First off, I think it's really important that people maintain their professional curiosity, and continue to read, continue to actively reflect on topics like we've talked about here that deal with the military or the national security profession. You now, I think we have done a pretty good job of this over time. We've certainly seen periods, at least in my service, where, you know, it was almost a Renaissance in some ways of people really going into learn about the profession and understand what it is that we do. And I think that's really important. So I think the first thing is maintaining the professional curiosity that keeps people interested in what they're doing and how they're serving the nation.

You know, I think the other thing is don't forget where you came from. Don't forget what kind of got [00:42:00] you where you are today. When you become a general officer, you know, don't get a one hard drive switched off for another. It really is about what are the values and the experiences and the relationships and all the things that you've developed up to that point, I think become just as important as you move forward. It really is about building a lifetime of experience and competence and then bringing that forward as you go. Not trying to change yourself as you take on more rank or take on more positions.

Usually, people who move forward and get into new positions generally demonstrate good instincts, and they should trust those instincts because they probably serve them well, and it's probably the reason they're moving along. And so I always encourage people to trust your instincts. If it doesn't seem right, it probably isn't. Conversely, if it does, it probably is. And so you have to, I think, learn to operate a little bit instinctually here and trust your experience. Trust what kind of got you there and trust your own [00:43:00] capabilities.

Morgan: [00:43:01] Fantastic. Well, this has been an extremely insightful conversation and General Votel, Dr. Brooks, I can't thank you enough for joining us, and thank you for joining the show.

Votel: [00:43:10] Thanks. It was great to be with both of you.

Brooks: Thank you.

Julie Balise: [00:43:15] Off the Page is a production of *International Security*, a quarterly journal edited and sponsored by the Belfer Center at Harvard Kennedy School and published by the MIT Press. Our program is produced and edited by Morgan Kaplan, the Executive

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