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Fellows and the Master's Thesis Corner

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Five questions for Army War College Fellow LTC Steve Curtis: The Civil-Military Relationship and the Future of Warfare

ALEXANDRE GANTEN

Lieutenant Colonel Steven Curtis, the 2021-22 Army War College Fellow, is a career military intelligence officer in the United States Army. LTC Curtis served as a battalion commander and as a legislative assistant to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, among other roles. He has a master's in Legislative Affairs from George Washington University and a master's in strategic intelligence from American Public University.



Question 1: You have worked in Washington, both as a Defense Fellow for a United States senator and for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, how aware would you say policymakers are of realities on the ground for the troops? Are there any distinct knowledge gaps? And if so, can anything be done to remedy them?

LTC Curtis: It's pretty well documented that Congress does not have good representation from former service members. The percentage of former service members serving as Congressional staff is probably higher, but it's also not very high. This means that neither the members of Congress, nor the staff who do a lot of the advising have direct experience with defense, any more than the average US citizen does. There is a lot of knowledge that goes with defending the nation across the profession of arms, much of which is specific to each service. There is a significant knowledge gap between policymakers and how service members handle the nation's business.

The knowledge gap is an issue specifically when forming policies relating to bureaucratic elements of defense. Many Congressional members represent districts that host bases or go on congressional delegations and gain exposure to the challenges that soldiers or sailors face. But in terms of how the Army runs, plans, the acquisition process, and other processes are the areas of greatest inexperience and it is a problem for two reasons. Poor experience and knowledge inhibit Congress's ability to provide oversight. Second, limited knowledge hampers members' ability to write legislation. Instead, members of Congress and their staff end up relying on the Department of Defense to draft laws to govern itself.

Now, there is a deliberate effort by the Department of Defense to try to fix this knowledge gap, and that's why it sponsors congressional delegations and has leaders testify. Personally, I think former service members need to start running for office and working on Congressional staff.



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It would be great if more servicemembers found value and pursued this vital form of public service after their time in the military.

Question 2: Over time, the number of people serving in uniform is declining relative to the whole population. When you joined in 2003, there were 498,000 people on active duty in the US Army, compared with 486,000 today. Meanwhile, the population of the US has grown by more than 40 million people. Do you think this has diminished the civil-military relationship? Are there fewer points of contact between the military and society than when you joined?

LTC Curtis: There is a lot of literature on the growing civilian-military divide. It is ingrained in our military that we are subordinate to civilian control. It is an important part of United States democracy that is not shared globally. So, when society does not fully understand what it is asking the military to accomplish, do conflicts like Afghanistan surprise the citizenry?

A 2015 article from the Atlantic called “The Tragedy of the American Military,” discussed how the civilian-military divide is growing and how there is a level of almost detrimental support for the military.¹ People feel good about things like military discounts, military appreciation days, and those kinds of things. But the author argues that these things make it so that one can’t question the military and that we risk ceding control of it. One byproduct is people who support the military vocally, but will not allow or encourage their son or daughter to join it. That’s not healthy.

When we’re looking at why this is occurring, we would probably have to start with Vietnam. But more generally, the continuous presence of war has had a hand in that. The images of wounded veterans and stories of sacrifice and PTSD build compassion, but also fear. In the military, we are called to support the Constitution, and that potentially means laying down one’s life for it. Many people are uncomfortable with their children dying in a war. This is natural, even if the statistical odds of dying in the last war were possibly less than staying at home.

This leads to the U.S. Army struggling with hitting its recruiting goals recently, leading to a push to improve our recruiting. In particular, there are a lot of headwinds towards getting more diverse talent from underrepresented groups. There are some major issues that need to be faced: how many people can actually join the military and not be physically disqualified, or disqualified for prior conduct, or a medical reason, etc.

But there is a big Army initiative right now to improve diversity and recruiting in general. Outreach is important to achieving these goals. ROTC and JROTC are good programs, and expanding those are important. We have to expand outreach beyond typical bastions of support, like the southern states, because national security is a shared problem.

Question 3: What has been your experience of the civil-military relationship throughout your career? How integrated have you been into the different communities that have surrounded where you are stationed?

LTC Curtis: I’ll start by saying that civilian-military is a big umbrella. There is the civilian-military of Congress, policymaking, and national security. Then there are the day-to-day interactions,

¹ James Fallows, “The Tragedy of the American Military,” The Atlantic, January/February 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/01/the-tragedy-of-the-american-military/383516/>

in a store or in the community more generally. Support for the American military has been very good the entire time that I have been in the service. Since 9/11, we had a groundswell of support for the military and first responders, even if some of that has diminished over time. In the community, it has been good, and it is important that members of the military give back to the communities that house them.

On the Joint Chiefs side, a lot of 30-year general officers had the new experience of interacting with 30-year-old civil servants who had different backgrounds. The experiences were quite different, but they had good perspectives and were very smart. That opened my eyes to the value of different experiences and perspectives to improve outcomes. We cannot lose sight of the military subordination to civilian control. Yet, there is the responsibility that comes with civilian control – you have to be a good steward of the military and make good use of it.

Question 4: Carnegie Mellon University has been at the forefront of many developments in military technology, up to and including taking the lead in the Army's A4I research. As a military fellow, have you been able to witness any of these developments? And what do you view as the technology that has the most potential to change the landscape of warfare over the next decade?

"I think warfare in 10 to 15 years is going to require computer-centered analysis."

LTC Curtis: CMU has been awesome for me. I did not have a lot of exposure to the ongoing innovation and I did not realize Pittsburgh was such a hub for that innovation. I did not know about the defense initiatives here, like the AI Taskforce, the Software Engineering Institute, and the National Robotics Engineering Center.

Up until now, I would opine how the Army needed to do more to innovate, not realizing that the Army is doing more. There is a lot of investment to improve technologically, and there are a lot of really smart people behind these innovations. Just being at Carnegie Mellon, I now understand what AI is and is not. I understand what machine learning is and I understand the algorithms and coding languages behind it. I fully grasp the limitations of robots and how hard it is to imitate humans, especially in ground warfare.

In terms of what I think has the most potential change to warfare, it is automated analysis through AI. I now understand just how much of a problem for the military, big data presents. I did not understand terms like data wake, which is the data footprint that soldiers and their equipment leave. I did not realize how commercial intelligence is, with satellites and machine learning, allowing for data to be quickly assembled but exceeding human capacities to analyze it. I think warfare in 10 to 15 years is going to require computer-centered analysis. A human will not be able to go through farming, collecting, and analyzing the available data to answer questions at the required speed. It will require trust in machines for intelligence, which is going to require a culture shift for the military.

On the robotics front, we're not going to make robots to replace soldiers any time soon, but we will make ones that augment them and make them that much more effective and survivable. Still, on the intelligence front is where technology is going to shift the most.

Question 5: How has the Army changed technologically over your time in service? Moreover, as

someone who started their career as an Infantry Officer, what do you feel is the role of Infantry on the modern battlefield?

LTC Curtis: At its core, the business of the Army is to close with and destroy the enemy. That has not changed. Technology has changed how we might do that, but the fundamental objective and execution are the same. And the Army still revolves around the Infantry. Future war will require more people, not less. Human-less warfare is not something that is going to happen.

How has it changed? There is now a lot more tech that a soldier has to carry around. So, all these neat technologies have increased the load that soldiers have to carry. The amount of information available to a soldier is much greater than it once was. That's a much greater cognitive burden on infantrymen. Now they have all these inputs coming in from communications channels and computers and they have to process that at a very human, micro-level. Space is a factor as well, moving from just GPS to overhead ISR from air and space. All of this information is being pushed down to the lowest levels due to technology. This increases the capabilities at a tactical level, but also increases the responsibility there. The Army is also increasing its range, fighting over the horizon.

We have to figure out how to ease the information burden on the lower level, tell them what they need to know rather than giving them everything. There has to be a funneling that occurs. We also don't have enough analysts to do all the intelligence work. We need to get machines to augment that capability better than we are now. Oh, and find a way to lighten their rucksacks.

The opinions and ideas presented are LTC Curtis's and do not reflect an official U.S. Army or Department of Defense position.