

## NATIONAL SECURITY HAS A COMPLEX

To the Editor:

First, permit me to echo Phillip C. Armour's reaction about the wisdom of publishing controversial subject matter, such as "Mr. Snowden's Legacy," in Hal Berghel's April 2014 column. I find Berghel's columns provocative and stimulating.

Second, the purpose of this letter is to offer some content—and possibly insights—that may be more accessible to us computer scientists and software engineers in the context of Berghel's June 2014 column, "Leadership Failures in the National Security Complex." To put the bottom-line up front, I hope to present evidence to the readers that

- there is a parsimonious explanation for leadership's behavior, and
- there is a well-known solution to the leadership gap noted.

The column identifies a particularly American issue, one due to an emphasis on individuality (that is, possibly dictatorship versus collectivism) and the fact that many other countries have figured out better ways to experiment with this dynamic in the context of a free democratic society.

What I see is tension between a military approach and a diplomatic one; therefore the methods applied differ, as does who is attracted to each approach. This tension has been well described,<sup>1</sup> and the differences aren't cosmetic—they're fundamental and ontological.

On one hand, the military views truth as "out there," persistent and the same over all time and space—something like  $2 + 2 = 4$ . Whereas diplomats view the truth as constructed, contingent, and just in this particular time and place, expecting it to change quickly. These two different worldviews employ different methods to create knowledge. The

"out there" school uses what we consider "normal science," the traditional scientific method;<sup>2</sup> the constructed school uses impressions, conversations, observations, a sense of milieu and forces, history, culture, the arc of time, analogies, and so on to form its knowledge. Each school mocks, discounts, and devalues the other.

That said, each worldview is tuned to be effective in a context: normal science in a Newtonian world and the constructed view in a political one. If we put a military person in a diplomatic position, of course the outcome will look militaristic. It's the water the person swims in; there is no other worthwhile view in the opinion of the holder. The possible fault, then, is the placement of staff (leadership) in a setting in which it isn't appropriate for them to apply their preferred skillset and training.

Surely in a complex world such a dichotomous distinction is too simple. Yet, as Berghel points out, it's prevalent in the US. We are an either/or, all-or-nothing, and winner-takes-all culture. One antidote is of course a team in which each individual brings different ontologies, epistemologies, beliefs about human nature, and methods of creating knowledge. Alas, this goes against the individualistic, single-point-of-contact, unique authority US model.

The tension between these two views of what is true and how to create knowledge about it is age-old. One approach to addressing it that has borne fruit from time to time is the recognition of Groupthink and invoking antidotes to counter it. Groupthink is, briefly, premature agreement among various parties. One can easily visualize such a result in a room filled with like-minded individuals. Instead, to obtain the truth, fill the room with diverse-minded individuals and impose the rule that each person must be a critic and is responsible for challenging the knowledge of himself/herself and others. No advo-



cacy, strong-arming, or "politicking" is allowed. In other words, operate with direct recognition of the two worldviews and have some respect for each, minus the show of power.

In the US security and surveillance environment Berghel describes, I have often wondered how different it would be if the purpose of such surveillance were in the service of furthering diplomacy.

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## References

1. G. Burrell and G. Morgan, *Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis: Elements of the Sociology of Corporate Life*, Heinemann, 1979.
2. T.S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed., Univ. of Chicago Press, 1996.

The author responds:

Thank you for your positive feedback. I agree with you that one of the greatest problems we face in the US is the herd mentality promulgated by unreflective and irresponsible politicians. And as you say, the antidote to that is diversity of opinion. However, diversity is hard to achieve when the government relies on stealth. As Robert David Steele says in my July 2014 column: "Secrecy is a cult."

As I write this response, the ISIS crisis is in the news, confirming

your point that there is a considerable penalty to neglecting diplomacy—a point not wasted on the Bush/Cheney administration. Driven by twin neoconservative ideologies of American exceptionalism and unilateralism, and fueled by what Ron Suskind calls Cheney’s One Percent Doctrine, the George W. Bush administration launched wars where more factions came out of the conflicts than went into them. In one of life’s most discomfiting ironies, the world dealt with event-based terrorism in the past, and now it has to deal with that as well as a terrorist infantry engaged in a ground war. It is hard for me to imagine a world in which diplomacy could have achieved a less successful outcome than what we have. As H.L. Menken once said, we have to be alert to “the demagogues [who] sneer at intelligent liberty, inviting national degeneracy and ruin.”

A detailed reaffirmation of the value of diplomacy, and the consequences of ignoring it, is carefully articulated in Lou Dubose’s and Jake Bernstein’s *Vice: Dick Cheney and the Hijacking of the American Presidency* (Random House, 2006).

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## MILITARY MANAGEMENT

To the Editor:

I respect and admire Hal Berghel’s expertise in computer science and related disciplines, but his understanding of large organizations, including today’s military, is incomplete (“Leadership Failures in the National Security Complex,” June 2014).

Most military debacles weren’t due exclusively to faulty military leadership. Other factors have been flawed intelligence, ineffective communication at senior levels of government, and—most important, in my view—the leadership failures of elected and appointed civilian officials.

Who signed off on the Bay of Pigs fiasco? Who pushed the “escalate” button on our military involvement in Vietnam? Who made the final decision to invade Iraq? Many academics, including Berghel, tend to blame the military for foreign policy failures. They conveniently ignore what the President and his civilian advisors have concluded—and ordered. Has Berghel ever served in uniform? I don’t know, and he doesn’t tell us (I think he should). Military service looks a lot different from the inside than from the outside, where hindsight is not only 20-20, but completely clear of fog.

A commissioned officer who disagrees with the administration’s policy is free to obey and keep his or her mouth shut, or to resign and go home and complain. It’s a flawed and messy system, but the alternative is a military establishment unaccountable to civilian authority (advocates of the latter system should read *Seven Days in May*).

Berghel’s major reference, *The Generals* by Thomas E. Ricks, makes a convincing case that we’ve suffered from bad and ineffective generalship for many years. But Ricks deals almost exclusively with the US Army at war. An Army general does not always head the National Security Agency (NSA). And Berghel’s stereotype of “General Eyes” is badly outdated.

Few senior officers pin on a star in this 21st century military without completing at least one master’s degree from a respected civilian university. Many flag and general officers have two advanced degrees, and some even hold PhDs—just like Berghel. Computer science and cyber warfare are now in the curricula of all four service academies. Today’s military graduate schools teach courses in dealing with uncertainty and other mind-expanding subjects. They also teach leadership, not just management.

While I don’t object to appointment of a civilian to head the NSA, I doubt it would make any difference. As a former US Coast Guard officer, and as the manager of several broadcast newsroom computer projects, I’m especially sensitive to the power of effective leadership.

It’s great to have a visionary leading your organization, but they’re few and far between. Vision can’t be taught; it’s something you either have or learn—if you’re lucky. Most good leaders aren’t visionaries, at least on the scale of Bill Gates or Steve Jobs, but they guide their organizations indirectly and often very well. For example, Allan Mulally transformed Ford by changing the company’s structure, norms, and incentives.

I think Berghel would agree that heading the NSA is not like “taking the hill” or planning Desert Storm. But that’s where our views diverge: I believe that any reasonably competent general, admiral, or senior civilian with solid leadership and organizational skills can make the agency more innovative and responsive to civilian concerns by changing the structure and employee incentives. NSA employees, both civilian and military, must feel free to do what’s right and effective, and they must believe that doing so is in their personal interest (Microsoft’s former policy of grading individuals on a curve, rather than by team evaluation, stifled innovation). The NSA Director doesn’t have to be an expert in strategic warfare or counterinsurgency operations, but he or she does need to be aware of military and national intelligence requirements.

It’s a tough balancing act. Military or civilian, the director must carry out administration policy and communicate effectively with his or her bosses, while protecting employees (the vast majority of whom are civilians) from unwarranted political interference. It’s much more important that the agency chief be an

effective leader than that he or she knows all about the technical underpinnings—like advanced encryption or IP routing.

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*The author's response:*

Let me emphasize that I'm not claiming that military debacles were "due exclusively to faulty military leadership," and, as readers of my column might attest, I've never shied away from calling attention to the "leadership failures of elected and appointed civilian officials." I'm making the very specific claim that flag rank military officers aren't the optimal pool from which security and intelligence leadership should be selected, and that the selection process in use is counterproductive.

I can best address your thoughtful response with a question: Would the Normandy landings have achieved the same success if an investment banker had been in charge of Operation Overlord? Of course not. We intuitively understand that military leadership is best qualified to oversee amphibious invasions. Such is the central point of my June column: the match of skills to requirements is critical for success. That's what's missing from national security complex oversight.

To reinforce this point, and to show that my criticisms weren't directed toward military leadership as such and in general, but rather toward the misuse of military leadership for overseeing intelligence service—an endeavor for which they are suboptimally suited—let me offer the following analogy. The national security complex has suffered from severe leadership problems for most of its 60-year history. During the early part of its evolution, when the CIA evolved from the OSS in the late 1940s, national security was driven by Wall Street bankers and New York

lawyers. Many great books document these failures; some written by academic scholars (including Alfred McCoy, Chalmers Johnson, Peter Dale Scott, and Noam Chomsky) and others by journalists (such as James Bamford, James Risen, and William Blum). Any serious biographical sketch of Allen Dulles, Frank Wisner, William Donovan, Kermit Roosevelt, Jr., Desmond Fitzgerald, Paul Helliwell, and William Colby will show that their distorted corporatist world view, fueled by special interest lobbies and political hawks, got the US into the direct support/complicity of heroin warlords (Operation Paper in Burma), the overthrow of democratically elected heads of state for the benefit of corporate interests (Operation Ajax in Iran, Operation PBSuccess in Guatamala, the 40 Committee's Track II initiative to overthrow Salvador Allende in Chile), repeated assassination attempts on Fidel Castro (Operation Mongoose), the Bay of Pigs fiasco, and so on. As you point out, the latter debacle wasn't solely attributable to the military—but Operation Northwoods was!

We can assess the long-term outcomes of such misguided efforts by their direct consequences: creation of heroin states and regions (the Golden Triangle, and now the Golden Crescent), the Vietnam War, the brutal dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, an unstable Central America, and some really bizarre CIA-inspired money laundering schemes (Castle Bank and Trust in the Bahamas; Nugan Hand Bank in Australia).

These noteworthy geopolitical blunders were produced primarily from the Ivy League-educated bankers and lawyers set mentioned above, augmented by sundry hawkish journalists, politicians, and pundits, known as the Georgetown Set, and, of course, the military.

My criticism of Dulles-era

national security leadership failures doesn't imply criticism of an Ivy League education, banking, or the practice of law. Rather, it's an affirmation that they fall short as qualifications for an appointment to national security leadership positions. It is my claim that these backgrounds are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for suitability to the task of overseeing a nation's national security interests.

The same is true of my criticism of feckless military leadership, which, in recent decades has also been ill-suited for handling complex national security and policy issues. As with the bankers and lawyers of earlier times, the military leadership has underperformed in terms of national security interests and foreign policy.

Things could be worse. I'm confident that L. Paul Bremer, Michael D. Brown, and Donald Rumsfeld could have done just as much damage to our nation's global credibility as Michael Hayden, Keith Alexander, and James Clapper. But mission-critical policy wonk selection shouldn't be a race to the bottom. The US has the talent, but the selection process works at cross purposes with national interests.

For those who have further interest in this topic, I recommend three recent books: Thomas E. Ricks's *The Generals*. Melvin Goodman's *National Insecurity—The Cost of American Militarism*, and Paul R. Pillar's *Intelligence and U.S. Foreign Policy: Iraq, 9/11, and Misguided Reform*.

CIA insider Robert David Steele's analysis in the July 2014 Out of Band column is also relevant to this topic.

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