



**GENEVA CENTRE FOR THE DEMOCRATIC CONTROL OF  
ARMED FORCES (DCAF)**

**WORKING PAPER NO. 121**

## **CIVILIAN CONTROL OR CIVILIAN COMMAND?**

*Colonel Louis L. Boros, USMC (ret.)*

*CUBIC Defence Applications Group, Inc., USA*

Geneva, August 2003

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**DCAF Working Papers Series**

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# CIVILIAN CONTROL OR CIVILIAN COMMAND? <sup>1</sup>

*Louis L. Boros*

Nearly all nations recognize and acknowledge the need for national defence and hence the need for national armed forces. However, the existence of armed forces also causes problems for every government, since, as Mao Tse-Tung so aptly put it, "power comes from the barrel of a gun". One of the concerns of government, therefore, is how to ensure, that the political will remains in civilian hands. As we know, history has shown that this concern is both legitimate and well founded, since militaries have repeatedly seized control of government in many parts and nations of the world. (It has also been generally true, that military-led governments have not been exceptionally successful in running the government, regulating the economy, or solving social issues). Thus, a debate arises about the degree to which civilian leaders should control, or command the armed forces.

Democratic societies generally rely on popularly elected officials who are periodically selected (and periodically replaced), by the citizenry through the voting process. Elected officials govern and the process of elections – of voting – is intended to keep them honest. The vote exercises a regulatory function in ensuring that governmental programs generally benefit the population; that governmental policies generally reflect the views, desires and needs of the people.

National interests and international relations are of concern to every government and determination of what constitutes national interest is an incredibly complex and diverse process that includes consideration of the opinions of individuals and groups; religious preferences and prejudices; cultural individuality and diversity; economic conditions resulting from the availability (or lack) of natural resources; educational levels within the general populace; historical incidents and grievances; the methodologies for forming public opinion; technological development, ethnic

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customs, the cleanliness of streets, legitimacy of fox hunting, etc., – to produce national policy.

The elected government must not only be able to formulate policy, but must also be able to explain that policy effectively to the electorate. With the rapid development of worldwide communications, the process of molding public opinion has paradoxically become both easier and much more complicated. Easier, because a great many more people can now be reached at the same time, and harder, because now public officials must appear to be expert in all things and at all times, or risk being labelled as either ignorant, or incompetent. Both conditions are fatal to any further chance at power. All governmental officials must, of necessity work within, or rather, to satisfy the requirements of the diverse interests that define the nature and character of the nation.

### **Emergence of 'The Expert'**

Parallel with an exponential growth in the complexity of government has been a general narrowing of the scope of the individual public official. As life for the individual became more complicated, the life of the civil servant also become more complex, and at the same time more restricted through specialization. During the last two centuries a symbiosis has taken place between technological development and the need for more and more specialization. This trend is true in all governmental endeavours and applies equally to civilians and military alike.

With the industrial revolution, (a process that continues to evolve to this day), came the development of scientific social studies, including the development and introduction of statistics, the study of finding out who the “average” person is? How that person behaves? What that person wants? etc. Governments now rely on statistics to determine what needs to be done.

Increasing complexity in the scope and limits of public policy also resulted in an increase in the distance between the average citizen and his government. The need for specialized knowledge has resulted in the development throughout society, and particularly within the structures of government, of “The Expert”. The emergence of

the expert has taken place everywhere in government, including the military, where the complexity of tasks has also grown exponentially.

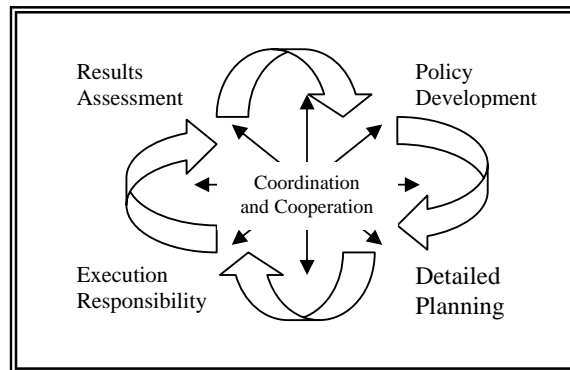
While the need for experts is generally recognized, the concept of the expert also has a considerable element of arrogance in it, since demonstrably, only the expert is possessed of the necessary knowledge, the necessary facts, upon which useful decisions are based. At the same time, as a natural outgrowth of the development of the expertise has been the emergence of a degree of arrogance among the experts, the expectation, that those without expertise, should shut their mouths.

We thus come to one of the key elements of the discussion about civilian control and civilian command within national security policy and security structures. On the one side, at least in democratic forms of government, we have the desire of the “average man” to have a say in how he is governed, and who thus elects officials to do this for him. He wants his elected representatives to determine what the government will do, what ends it will pursue. On the side, we have the need to rely on experts to ensure some control over an increasingly complex world. Where is the balance?

### **The Symbiosis of Government**

In a very simplistic fashion it can be determined, that there is a natural division of labours within the process of governing, with responsibilities divided between those who determine *what* needs to be done; those who determine *how* things need to be done; and those who actually *perform* the necessary tasks. (These can be called the concept developers, the planners and the executors). At the same time, the *analysis and assessment* of what governmental policies have accomplished, is also an indispensable part of the process of symbiotic process of government and supports the other three. There is a natural and indispensable interrelationship between all elements; there should be a balance among them.

Obviously, the internal processes involved within each of these groups, and the requirements of cooperation and coordination, are also very complex.



## Competing Groups within the Defence Establishment

In the not so distant past, most of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, were administered through a system of government, wherein a small political elite exercised all of the functions of government according to the dictates of one man, or a small group of men, located at the top of the organizational hierarchy. There was little need to heed the opinions of the populace, which in reality had little to say in how it was governed. The small leadership elite dictated national security policy development and the national security structure. In a democracy, however, regularly elected officials are vested with the authority to govern by the voters and are dependent upon the continued support of the voters to remain in power. Thus, they need to pay attention to what the average person wants.

However, regardless of the political system in force, all governments are primarily composed of government employees, rather than elected officials. Generally, the “expert” is found among the ranks of the permanent government employees (the civil servants). The process of governing involves the following general groups:

*First*, there is the electorate, which votes to choose and change its representatives.

*Second*, there are the elected officials, who represent the population at large and who are in charge of the *formulation of policy, governmental decisions and programs*. It is the role of elected officials to *direct and supervise* the activities and decisions of political appointees and other government employees, to ensure that the policies of the elected government are carried out, as decided and planned.

*Third*, there are political appointees, (who may also be elected officials), who are assigned *responsibility for the direct supervision of given governmental activities*. (This group includes State and Deputy State Secretaries, the Chief of Defence Staff (CHOD), and on occasion lower-level functionaries).

*Fourth*, there are the governmental employees throughout the organization of government, who remain in place regardless of what political party is in power; who are responsible for the *day-to-day activity required to make government effective*.

### **Missions, Functions, Tasks and Accountability**

Fundamentally what is needed to govern then, is a system that defines the *missions, functions and tasks* of the four basic groups within the structure of the government, to define:

- Who is responsible for what? (Mission)
- Who is responsible for accomplishing what needs to be done? (Function)
- What specific activity is required of every employee? (Tasks)
- Additionally, there is an assumption, that there are consequences for not performing the assigned missions, functions and tasks. (Accountability).

Most governments are organized within Ministries (or their equivalents), which are assigned specific missions, (i.e. Ministry of Defence- responsible for national military defence). Generally an elected official, sometimes a political appointee, is given the job of Minister. It is his mission to ensure that the purpose for which the Ministry has been created is carried out. To this end, he appoints individuals to key leadership positions to assist him with carrying out his duties (State and Deputy State Secretaries).

These organizationally important, politically appointed individuals are responsible for various functions within the Ministry (Administration, Planning, Policy Development, Management, etc.). (Political appointees are sometimes also placed into governmental organizations to reward them for political loyalty, a fact that very often creates a vacuum in leadership, but that is another topic).



Finally, the permanent employees, the Civil Service, (some of whom are also experts), remains in place and serves the newly appointed leaders to carry out the necessary tasks, (analysis, measurements, physical repair, preparation of administrative paperwork, development of policy papers, etc.), depending on position and location within the structural hierarchy of the Ministry.

### **National Security Policy, National Security Structure and Civil Control**

The definition of national security policy is the role of government. The elected leadership defines the underlying concept(s) of national security policy and its basic framework. Conceptual development leaves out a lot of the details that will have to be worked out later, and it does not assign responsibility for the performance of functions or tasks. The objective is to define the end state for national security within the government. The role of the experts is somewhat limited in this process, but the responsibility is firmly in civilian hands.

The determination of national security policy leads to development of defence policy, including military policy, and aims at defining the more specific goals, objectives, structure, required capability, equipment, training, education, etc., of the armed forces. Ultimate responsibility for these policies is in the hands of the political leadership, but its development is the mixed responsibility of the elected officials and their political appointees. In this process, there is some involvement of experts and civil servants, but again, responsibility remains in the hands of the elected and appointed officials.

Detailed planning to implement the national and military strategies, to define what specific steps are needed to accomplish given ends, becomes the primary tasks of the civil servants and the experts, including the development of budgets, procurement, training programs, etc. Elected and appointed officials retain the responsibility for final decision-making, and for exercising oversight of the task execution process. The role of the expert becomes definitive in this process. Many of the experts are in uniform.

## Civil Control or Civil Command

A basic tenet of democracy is, that the elected representatives of the people should retain control over the processes of government. But what does this mean in the practical sense? How do we ensure civilian control? How do we define the proper role of the civilian in the determination of national security policy and his role in the national security structure? This depends on understanding and accepting the proper role of elected officials, politically appointed officials, the experts, the civil servants and the soldiers.

Within the Ministry of Defence, the organization that is primarily responsible for establishing and maintaining the armed defence of the nation, the four groups of civilians (elected, appointed, experts and task performers), are joined by a separate, fifth group: the uniformed group, the soldiers.

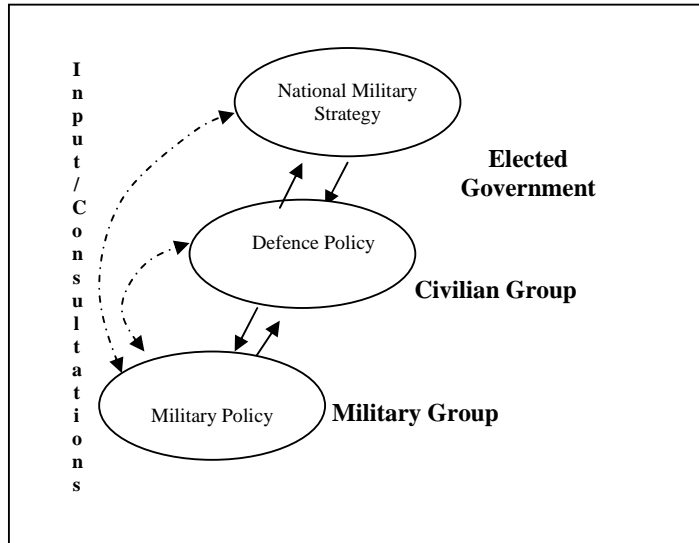
A distinction can be made, that the soldiers should be placed within the group of “experts”, but this is too simplistic, for within the uniformed group, there are distinct sub-groups that are not so easily categorized: Politically appointed officials, hierarchically appointed officials, military experts and task performers. So what is the role of the soldier? How does the military group fit into the process of determining and carrying out national security policy, missions, functions and tasks?

<b>Civilian Group</b>	<b>Military Group</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Minister (appointed, or elected)</li><li>• Politically Appointed Officials</li><li>• Hierarchically appointed officials</li><li>• The “Experts”</li><li>• The task performers</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Politically appointed officials</li><li>• Hierarchically appointed officials</li><li>• The ‘Experts’</li><li>• The task performers</li><li>• The military Commands</li></ul>

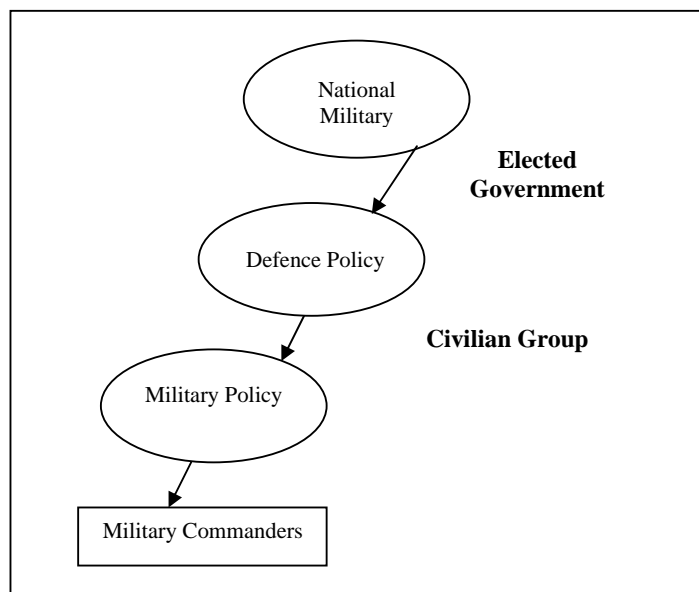
## Fear of the Military

Fundamentally, the Ministry of Defence is designed to organize, train and equip armed forces for the defence of the nation. The determination of goals and objectives

within the Ministry occurs on three levels: National Military Strategy, Political Policy and Military Policy. The first two primarily takes place within the civilian group, the latter primarily in the military group, but there is, or should be overlap between the two groups for all three activities. Ideally, the system should include:



When there is a fundamental fear within an elected civilian government that the armed forces might be in a position to usurp political power, when there is a lack of trust between the civilian and military leadership, there is a tendency to move toward a system of civilian command. In that system, the interaction between the civilians and military breaks down, internal procedures become very rigid, and the flow of necessary information effectively stops. The military is given only an executing role.



The impact of a rigid system of civilian command is to reduce the effectiveness of the armed forces and thus the military defence of the nation. When the military is not consulted, from the formulation of policy up to the determination of military action, both the element of expertise (since soldiers know how to fight, civilians rarely do) and the necessary preparedness suffers. Military commanders are prevented from obtaining the resources they need to train, equip and prepare forces to fight. By assuming that civilian command of the armed forces is necessary to ensure civilian control, – in effect, a rigid system where civilians tell soldiers how to do their jobs – most often results in a degradation of national military defensive capability.

### **Civilian Control**

In a democratic political system it is accepted, that the elected civilian leadership should have the principal role in determining the policies, goals and objectives of the government. Thus, it is clear, that *civilian control includes high-level policymaking decisions by elected civilians.*

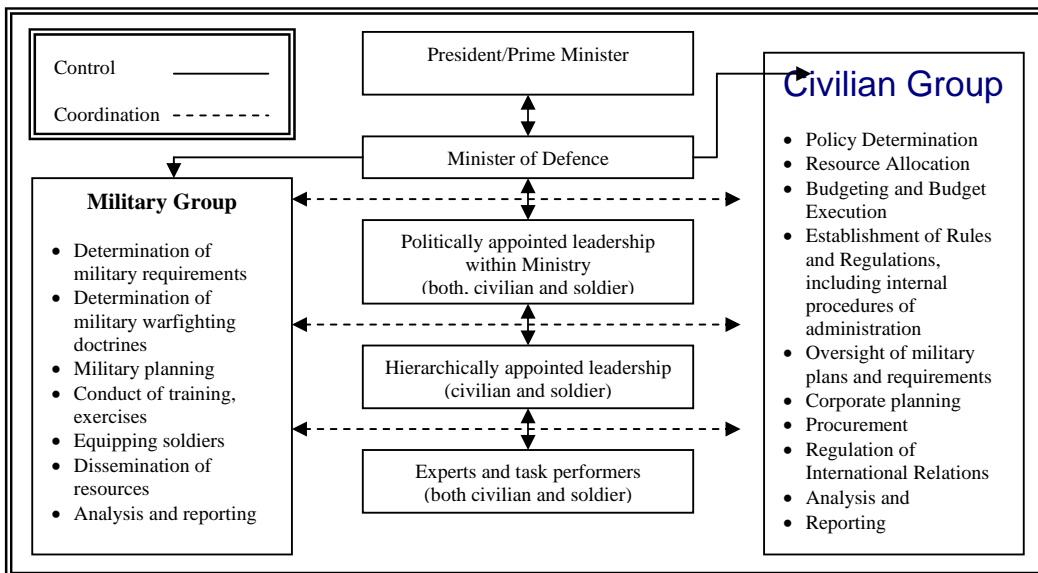
Next, it is clear that the leadership of the Ministry of Defence should also remain in the hands of civilian leaders, who are charged with the development of specific policies aimed at carrying out the tenets embodied in the national security strategy. This task, however, cannot be carried out in a vacuum, and it should be carried out with the active and coordinated cooperation of both the civilian and military groups within the Ministry. Since the principal role of the Ministry of Defence is to train, equip and prepare soldiers to fight, *the input of the military group is essential to determine what is needed and why.*

*The planning of the details required to carry out the military strategy is primarily in the hands of the military group, but is done under the leadership and coordination of the civilian leadership.* The political leadership of the Ministry has the right and responsibility for final approval of plans developed by both the civilian and military groups. *Execution of the approved plans remains in the hands of the military, but once again, the civilian group has responsibility for oversight of defense plans.*

There should be *no interference by civilians in the execution – the carrying out – of military plans.* The oversight function is exercised at a higher level. The symbiosis

between the civilian group, – responsible for policy determination, resource allocation, execution oversight – and the military group, – responsible for military planning, training, determination of requirements, distribution of allocated resources, development of military doctrines, execution of military plans, etc. – is absolute.

*Neither group can achieve the principal objectives of the Ministry – the training, equipping and preparing of the armed forces – without the active cooperation of the other.* Democracy demands that both groups cooperate to ensure the safety of the nation. Ideally then, the structure of the defence establishment should be, as follows:



## Summary

The organizational and leadership philosophy of any governmental determines its ultimate success. There are three major elements within that philosophy: The philosophy of leadership; an effective organizational structure; and trust and confidence between those who work in government. All of these elements are interrelated.

Effective leadership is dependent primarily upon recognition by the leader, that he does not know everything, that he cannot control everything. Thus, a good leader surrounds himself with competent experts, while retaining decision-making authority.

Good organizational structure is based on good organizational procedures. In the area of national defence, both the structures and procedures of government require the active, close and trusting cooperation and coordination of both civilian and military members. There should be recognition of the requirement and need for expert information during the formulation of policy. However, expert information is useless, unless there is trust in the quality of the analysis and the logic that lies behind it.

The decision making process requires clear-cut allocation of authority, responsibility and accountability. All of the processes of administration should be organized with those three factors in mind.

There is a division of labors between civilian and military leaders: Civilians are required to formulate policy, to determine the basic framework for national defence, and for the planning and dissemination of resources for the support of national defence functions. Military leaders are responsible for understanding the goals and objectives of the civilian leadership, for giving expert advice and information required to formulate those policies, and for preparing the plans and establishing the resource requirements (both people and things), necessary for carrying out those plans. They are also responsible for ensuring and supervising that the plans are in fact carried out.

Finally, there is a symbiotic relationship between all elements of national security, including the elected and politically appointed leaders, the hierarchical, functional civilian and military leaders, the subject matter experts and the members of the civil service. Due to that symbiosis, *violation of the balance between these elements will lead to a failure of leadership and reduction in the capabilities of national defence.*

What is needed therefore, is a clear and concise determination of the roles, missions, functions and tasks of national defence, and the logical, well-reasoned dissemination of both authority and responsible for the performance of assigned tasks. With responsibility, there should be strict adherence to standards. Finally, there needs to be trust between the elements of the national defence structure.

Effective national defence requires the close cooperation of elected, or politically appointed civilian leaders, of subject matter experts and the civil servants toiling in the Ministries. How the Ministry (or Government) organizes internally to determine national goals and objectives, and for the fulfilment of essential missions, functions and tasks, is dependent upon how much it trusts its employees. The internal system of coordination and cooperation defines how effective the system will be. Define the correct processes for coordination and cooperation and you define the role of the elected civilian official, the political appointee (both civilian and military), the expert (both civilian and military) and civil servants and soldiers.



Established in 2000 on the initiative of the Swiss government, the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF), encourages and supports States and non-State governed institutions in their efforts to strengthen democratic and civilian control of armed and security forces, and promotes international cooperation within this field, initially targeting the Euro-Atlantic regions.

The Centre collects information, undertakes research and engages in networking activities in order to identify problems, to establish lessons learned and to propose the best practices in the field of democratic control of armed forces and civil-military relations. The Centre provides its expertise and support to all interested parties, in particular governments, parliaments, military authorities, international organisations, non-governmental organisations, academic circles.

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