



Uncivil-Military Relations

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Uncivil-Military Relations: Politicization of the Military in the Trump Era

JIM GOLBY

Abstract

This article provides a comprehensive framework that scholars can use to assess civilian efforts to politicize the military in democratic regimes. Extending existing research, I develop a framework to assess politicization through “civilian activation” based on four criteria: frequency, gravity, messaging, and political context. Drawing on new data that measures the frequency of civil-military news coverage from 1981 to 2020, a collection of past presidential statements about the use of military force on domestic soil, and a compilation of civil-military conflicts from 2016 to 2020, I apply these criteria to assess civilian activation during the Trump administration. My initial analysis suggests that politicization by civilian activation during Trump’s tenure was both unique and alarming; nevertheless, there are few indications that the incentive structures that encouraged Trump’s behavior have abated. This framework may provide a fresh way to categorize civilian behavior and reframe civil-military norms to help arrest their decline.

Donald Trump’s tenure was a tumultuous time for American civil-military relations. Although most scholars agree that the 45th president politicized the military as much as—if not more than—any commander in chief in recent memory, this claim remains largely subjective and untested. Scholars lack a comprehensive conceptual framework of politicization that can distinguish between different civilian and military behaviors that can be detrimental to a healthy civil-military relationship in a democracy. Consequently, politicization of the military remains a much-discussed but often mispronounced and little-understood concept in the literature.

I attempt to fill this gap by providing a more complete framework scholars can use to assess efforts to politicize the military in democratic regimes, focusing especially on the civilian side of the relationship. Scholars to date

primarily have explored the military's role in politicization, but civilian leaders can—and often do—court or co-opt all or part of the military for their own partisan or electoral gain.¹ Extending existing research, I distinguish between two categories of politicization. The first is *civilian activation*, which I define as attempts by civilian leaders to co-opt the military for personal, partisan, or electoral gain. The second—and more traditional form of politicization—is *military activism*.² Military activism involves individual or collective efforts by the military to inappropriately influence policy outcomes or provide political advantage to a party, candidate, or group.

I develop a framework to assess politicization via civilian activation based on four criteria: frequency, gravity, messaging, and political context. I argue that these criteria provide scholars and policy makers a more comprehensive and rigorous framework with which to assess the actions civilian leaders take to politicize the military in democratic regimes. Drawing on new data that measures the frequency of civil-military news coverage from 1981 to 2020, a collection of past presidential statements about the use of military force on domestic soil, and a compilation of civil-military conflicts from 2016 to 2020, I apply these criteria to assess civilian activation during the Trump administration.

My initial analysis suggests that politicization by civilian activation during Trump's tenure was both unique and alarming; nevertheless, there are few indications that the incentive structures that encouraged civilian activation have abated. Civilian behaviors by elected leaders need urgent reexamination. My criteria—frequency, gravity, messaging, and political context—provide a comprehensive framework to categorize civilian politicization and reframe civil-military norms to help arrest their decline.

Military Activism Is Not the (Only) Problem

For good reason, civil-military relations theory focuses on politicization primarily as a military phenomenon, especially in the context of democratic or democratizing regimes.³ Civilian control of the military is necessary for democracy to exist, let alone flourish, and military power can be a key impediment to both democratic transition and the endurance of democratic governance.⁴

Suggestions that civilian leaders themselves might pose a challenge to civilian control have been common but often brief and underdeveloped. In his classic work, *The Soldier and the State*, Huntington asserts that the “basic problem in defining civilian control is [this:] How can military power be minimized?”⁵ But the answer he proposes is paradoxical. His solution is not, in fact, the reduction of military power. Rather, it is the maximization

of military professionalism within an apolitical officer corps under a system he calls objective control. Huntington argues that civilian leaders can encourage this development but recognizes they often do not. He writes that “the achievement of objective civilian control, however, has been hampered by the tendency of many civilian groups still to conceive of civilian control in subjective terms. . . . They continue to insist upon the subordination of the officer corps to their own interests and principles.”⁶

Huntington offers little more to help us identify problematic civilian behaviors, even though he argues that states should try to draw a bright line between political and military functions. Other scholars have followed his lead to develop a rich literature on political activism by military officers and the special dangers it can pose. Samuel Finer, for example, proposes a useful typology that distinguishes between “military influence” and “military pressure or blackmail.”⁷ More recently, Risa Brooks has identified a comprehensive list of tactics military leaders can use for activist purposes in a democracy. A growing body of literature has documented trends of increasing political activism by both active and retired generals and admirals, especially in the US case.⁸

Elsewhere in this special CMR edition, Risa Brooks makes a compelling case that scholars who study civil-military relations in the United States have much to learn from the broader comparative literature.⁹ This body of research has developed sharp insights about the ways that authoritarian—and perhaps even democratic—leaders can “coup proof” their regime to protect against the effects of military politicization. Moreover, recent scholarship by Polina Beliakova develops the concept of “erosion by deference,” a phenomenon under which civilian leaders often unintentionally weaken civilian control and strengthen the military’s power in politics by delegating “policymaking prerogatives to the members of the military profession.”¹⁰

Elected leaders in democracies sometimes behave in ways that *intentionally* weaken democratic civilian control of the military to advance their own personal, partisan, or electoral interests. At the extreme, civilian leaders can even attempt to politicize the military as part of an effort to overthrow a democratic regime and retain personal power using a self-coup or “autogolpe.”¹¹ Nevertheless, civilian attempts to politicize the military in a democracy may—and usually do—fall short of such extreme measures.

Although this form of politicization requires at least the tacit cooperation of all or part of the military, it is distinct in that civilian leaders must actively court or co-opt military leaders or groups to their cause.¹² Consequently, I describe this type of politicization not as military activism but as politicization by civilian activation. Civilian leaders may, of course, attempt

to use politicization by activation without military cooperation, but the success of this approach depends on a willing military partner.

Politicization by civilian activation does not strive to pit civilians against the military; rather, it attempts to build a civil-military coalition to help civilian leaders expand or retain their political power. Civilian activation thus shares a similar logic to—and many characteristics of—coup-proofing attempts that Erica De Bruin describes as counterbalancing. In a democratic context, many civilian behaviors designed to politicize the military may at first appear relatively benign. Over the long term, however, political activation likely weakens democratic accountability, harms military strength and effectiveness, and undermines the proper functioning of governmental processes. The next section proposes a framework to better identify and understand the impact of politicization by civilian activation.

Politicization by Civilian Activation

Assessing the health of a nation's civil-military relationship can be a frustrating and difficult exercise. Measurement challenges abound, and the difficulty of operationalizing relevant concepts as variables for large-N, cross-national analysis is significant. Although exciting new research in the subfield is exploiting new methodological techniques, much civil-military research focuses on binary or simplistic measures of coup occurrence.¹³ Coups are important phenomena to understand, but the variation in civil-military power dynamics that fall short of coups is vast, and even the strategic logic of different coups can vary significantly.¹⁴

Politicization, whether by civilian activation or military activism, is no different. In fact, assessing both the extent and the consequences of politicization can be exceptionally challenging. Even identifying when politicization by civilian activation occurs can be a daunting task. Elected political leaders often provide alternative explanations to legitimize or excuse their behavior and to provide themselves plausible deniability. We can neither observe their intent nor definitively know whether norms should prevail in specific situations, especially in circumstances where competing values conflict with one another.

But surely political scientists trying to identify politicization can do better than lawyers who apparently remain satisfied to recognize pornography “only when they see it.”¹⁵ Indeed, previous work by Samuel Finer, Risa Brooks, and other scholars has already created useful typologies to help us better understand military activism and assess its attendant risks.¹⁶ In that spirit, I offer a definition of civilian activation as well as four concepts to help identify and assess its extent in practice.

Civilian activation is an attempt by civilian political elites to court or co-opt the military for personal, partisan, or electoral gain. Ultimately, politicization by activation can be difficult to identify with certainty, but four concepts can help us better understand its occurrence and extent: frequency, gravity, messaging, and political context.

Frequency

Even rare incidents of politicization by civilian activation can have serious consequences. Nevertheless, the frequency of statements or behaviors designed to draw the military into partisan, electoral, or personalistic political fights is likely an indicator of whether politicization represents opportunism in response to extreme circumstances or whether it is a more intentional effort. Although political elites sometimes find that all or part of the military is sympathetic to their goals, the act of courting a military ally or normalizing politicized behavior often takes sustained effort in a democracy.¹⁷ Eroding the strength of nonpartisan norms and values opposing political violence usually occurs over time as well, though the initial acts can sometimes be explosive.

Gravity

The most important factor when assessing the extent and severity of politicization by civilian activation is the activity's consequences. Except in cases of direct physical threat to the government or its citizens, however, even the gravity of politicized actions can be difficult to recognize. Indeed, one criticism facing scholars who have advocated for civil-military norms that restrict the involvement of retired generals and admirals in campaigns—including me—is that these actions continue but have not created more visible harm. While my research suggests these actions do have tangible, though sometimes difficult to identify, impacts on the practice of democracy and civilian control, there nevertheless is value in distinguishing between those actions and norms that are more threatening or less threatening to democratic practice.

To better identify the gravity of civil-military breaches, I propose the two-by-two framework presented in figure 1. This framework consists of two dimensions, one distinguishing between an action that is symbolic or coercive and another differentiating between foreign and domestic behaviors. These two dimensions create four somewhat malleable boxes that I identify as “Sword and Shield” (Symbolic-Foreign), “Potted Plant” (Symbolic-Domestic), “Wag the Dog” (Coercive-Foreign), and “Repressive Force” (Coercive-Domestic).¹⁸

Symbolic	Sword and Shield	Potted Plant
	Wag the Dog	Repressive Force
	Foreign	Domestic

Figure 1. Types of civilian activation

Activities in both coercive boxes represent significant danger for a democracy, with the domestic use of “repressive force” more directly threatening to a nation even though diversionary wars can have devastating consequences for the target state and unintended secondary effects on the democracy. Based on existing research, however, it is less clear that civilian activation using senior military officers as “potted plants” is, in fact, worse than their use as “swords or shields” in foreign policy debates. Existing research shows that statements by military officers tend to be more effective in shaping foreign policy decisions than they are in shaping perceptions about domestic elections.¹⁹

The question of how closely these four boxes are connected is unclear. We do not know whether acts of symbolic politicization increase the likelihood that a leader will attempt to use coercive threats or force for personal or partisan reasons. We also cannot predict how the public or the military will acquiesce to a leader using these tactics. Of course, executive leaders and other political elites often have wide legal authorities that they can abuse. When combined with the types of messaging discussed in the next section, it can make civilian attempts to court or activate military activism difficult to recognize.

Messaging

How civilian elites talk about the military in public can sometimes help us identify overt attempts to activate politicized military support. Even so, their ability to mask their intent using subtle language or imagery makes it difficult to decipher when behavior is innocent and when actions have nefarious intent. Particularly when the democratic norms supporting a non-partisan military are strong, civilian leaders have an incentive to make their efforts to activate military support as benign and nuanced as possible—at

least at first. In this way, civilian elites can retain plausible deniability. They can argue they are not attempting to pull the military into politics while still trying to benefit from association with a popular military or from support from within the ranks. Consequently, civilian activation involving the use of overt public statements and actions to draw the military into partisan or electoral politics will usually indicate a more severe threat—or at least extreme ignorance of the value of democratic norms. When civilian elites no longer feel even the need to veil their attempts to politicize the military, it is a signal of danger.

Political Context

Scholars assessing the extent and severity of politicization by civilian activation should also consider the political, societal, and cultural contexts in which civilian elites' words and actions occur. Since the early 1990s, there has been a recurring debate about whether civil-military relations in the United States are "in crisis."²⁰ Scholars have rarely defined what they mean by *crisis*, leaving wide latitude for disagreement.

For my purposes, I think of a civil-military crisis as an open door for the use of the military for "repressive force." More precisely, I define a *civil-military crisis* as the circumstances under which the only impediment to the coercive use of the military for domestic partisan or electoral purposes is the self-restraint of civilian elites or military leaders. Self-restraint is not the same thing as saying that norms create an obstacle to repressive force. As Hugh Liebert and I have argued elsewhere, norms are more than individual self-restraint: they rely on shared values and beliefs about appropriate behaviors *and* on the belief that norm violators will be caught and face credible punishment for their actions.²¹ This definition rests on the assumption that some leaders with power can be trusted to show restraint some of the time but that no leaders with power can be trusted not to abuse their power all the time.

When assessing the political context in which civilian activation occurs then, scholars should focus on whether this type of politicization is accepted among the political elite, broader society, and military culture. Do the members of these groups, individually or collectively, possess both the will and the tools with which they can credibly enforce punishment for politicization by civilian activation? If they do not, civilian elites face a permissive environment and an open door. In other cases, where shared values and norms are strong and threats of punishment are credible, the door for civilian activation may be locked tight. Under these circumstances, we should see few leaders even attempt a nudge. But in many cases, the

door may be slightly cracked, tempting ambitious civilian elites to test how much resistance they will face if they try to widen it just a bit.

By more precisely defining *civil-military crisis* as I have, I hope to encourage more constructive and thoughtful engagement on the merits of my argument and fewer knee-jerk reactions asserting that a democracy's civil-military relations are not in crisis. It is far more useful and productive to develop prior indicators of civil-military threats to a democracy when the door can still be locked than it is to describe the conditions that allowed someone to barge through the door after the fact.

Assessing the Trump Era

As noted at the outset of the previous section, it is unlikely that any one of these indicators will be of much value when used in isolation except in the most egregious cases. However, by analyzing each of them in relation to one another, I hope this framework might bring more rigor to debates about the threats that politicization by civilian activation poses in democratic states.

Next, I offer a brief assessment of President Donald Trump's civilian activation attempts in relation to those of other modern presidents. Admittedly, the empirical record available remains spotty. This analysis is somewhat speculative and will need to be corrected as the historical circumstances of Trump's unusual term in office become clearer. Even so, by applying my framework for politicization by civilian activation to this case, I hope to demonstrate its utility and provide a more rigorous account of Trump's civil-military record than has been done to date.

Frequency

To assess the frequency with which President Donald Trump attempted politicization by civilian activation, I used LexisNexis Academic Universe to collect data on national news coverage.²² Although I collected these data using an established method from the political communications literature, they should be treated somewhat skeptically. US media consumption has changed significantly, even since 2010, with a strong plurality of Americans now obtaining their news from online sources.²³ Even so, they represent a plausible initial measure of the quantity of substantive news coverage devoted to civil-military relations since the beginning of the Clinton administration. National news coverage of civil-military conflict is not necessarily the same thing as civilian activation. Nevertheless, I use it here as a measure that is easily comparable across administrations while also encouraging future researchers to develop more sophisticated measures that might better capture this concept (table 1).

Table 1. Media sources analyzed

Media Source	Start Date	Years Available	Average Number of Articles per Year
Fox	26 November 1997	23	3.1
NBC	1 January 1997	24	1.5
CBS	1 February 1990	31	1.3
CNN	1 January 1990	31	1.9
USA Today	3 January 1989	32	2.2
ABC	20 January 1981	40	1.5
Wall Street Journal	20 January 1981	40	1.6
New York Times	20 January 1981	40	3.6
Washington Post	20 January 1981	40	2.7

Note: Searches were conducted from the first date available through 20 January 2021. The last column shows the average number of articles found only for the first two key word searches depicted in figure 2.

Figure 2 displays the results for both keyword searches, with the results of the searches focused on US civil-military relations or civil-military conflict depicted in the top panel and searches for the narrower term “civil-military crisis” or “civilian-military crisis” on the bottom. The results across both sets of search terms are largely consistent, with the same ranking from most to least articles for Trump, Clinton, Bush, and Obama.

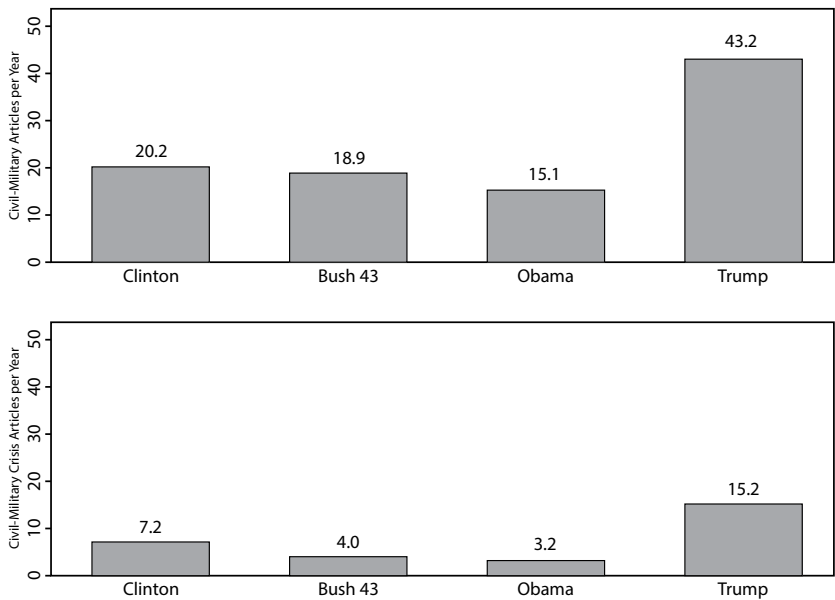


Figure 2. Average number of civil-military articles per year, by administration

Mentions of both “civil-military relations” and “civil-military crisis” during the Trump administration were more than twice as high as they were during Clinton’s tenure, the second highest. It is notable, however, that the Clinton total represents at least a slight undercount since data for two sources was not available until well into his tenure. These early years in the Clinton administration were especially conflictual, including high-profile fights between Clinton and Colin Powell, then the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Clashes involved the controversial “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, civil-military conflict over the political decisions related to the Battle of Mogadishu in Somalia, the appointment of several general officers Clinton’s opponents characterized as politicized, and Clinton’s highly publicized jog with Gen Barry McCaffrey after a White House staffer allegedly insulted the general.²⁴ Moreover, there were several extraordinary instances of active duty military officers inappropriately demeaning or criticizing Clinton in public. The most notorious case involved Maj Gen Harold Campbell, who was forced to retire after he described Clinton as “draft-dodging,” “pot-smoking,” “womanizing,” and “gay-loving” during a 1993 speech to a military audience at an Air Force base in the Netherlands.²⁵ Indeed, it was during this period that Richard Kohn’s article in the *National Interest*, “Out of Control,” popularized the phrase “civil-military crisis” among scholars of American civil-military relations.²⁶ Given that only two of nine sources were not available during a small portion of the Clinton era, however, it seems extremely unlikely their inclusion would more than double civil-military news coverage or cause Clinton to pass Trump.

George W. Bush and Barack Obama engaged in civilian activation at times, especially when using senior military officers to sell the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan or military audiences as convenient backdrops for high-profile speeches. Nevertheless, these data match the popular intuition that neither administration saw the steady drumbeat of stories recounting attempts by either president to politicize the military that occurred during the Trump administration. Nor did either Bush or Obama grab headlines with insults directed against serving or retired senior officers in the way that Trump did during the 2016 presidential campaign, when he proclaimed during a debate that the “generals have been reduced to rubble” or suggested that he knew “more about ISIS than the generals do.”²⁷ These insults—and others captured in the more than 43 civil-military stories written each year during the Trump administration—almost surely would damage civil-military trust, but they might not represent a serious risk on

their own. In the next section, I assess the gravity of civilian activation that occurred during the Trump administration.

Gravity

A full assessment of all the incidents involving politicization by civilian activation during the Trump administration is too ambitious a task for this article. Arguably, however, there is at least one incident that might potentially fall in each quadrant represented in figure 1, though evidence about Trump's intent in taking these actions remains incomplete and inconclusive. Table 2 displays a partial list of cases of civilian activation that Trump instigated, or participated in, during his presidency.²⁸

Table 2. Partial list of civil-military incidents during the Trump administration

Date	Civil-Military Incident
1 Dec 2016	Trump appoints Mattis as secretary of defense (and other retired generals to key posts)
27 Jan 2017	Trump signs controversial immigration order in Pentagon's Hall of Heroes
6 Feb 2017	At MacDill Air Force Base, Trump tells military audience they supported him during election
20 Feb 2017	Trump selects active duty lieutenant general H. R. McMaster as national security adviser
28 Feb 2017	Trump invites wife of deceased Navy SEAL William "Ryan" Owens to State of the Union
28 Feb 2017	Trump blames senior military leaders for death in special operations raid in Yemen
15 May 2017	McMaster defends Trump's disclosure of sensitive intelligence with Russian officials
22 Jul 2017	Trump urges sailors to lobby Congress on health care and other topics during troop visit
26 Sep 2017	Trump calls NFL players kneeling disrespectful to the military and veterans
4 Oct 2017	Trump places responsibility for Niger raid on military leaders
20 Oct 2017	Retired general John Kelly defends Trump's call to spouse of US soldier who died in Niger
18 Jan 2018	Trump asks Mattis and Joint Chiefs for military parade
16 Aug 2018	Retired admiral William McRaven publishes op-ed criticizing Trump's leadership
26 Oct 2018	Trump orders 5,200 active duty troops and 2,000 National Guard to southern border
2 Nov 2018	Trump says military should shoot rock-throwing migrants
18 Nov 2018	Trump attacks McRaven on Fox News; suggests he should have caught bin Laden faster
20 Dec 2018	Mattis announces resignation in protest, giving two months notice
23 Dec 2018	Trump demands Mattis instead depart by 1 January 2019
26 Dec 2018	Trump signs MAGA hats for US troops during troop visit
30 Dec 2018	Retired general Stanley McChrystal criticizes Trump as immoral and dishonest
1 Jan 2019	Trump tweets that McChrystal is a "Hillary lover!" that was "fired like a dog by Obama"
2 Jan 2019	Trump falsely claims he fired Mattis and criticizes Mattis on Afghanistan
7 May 2019	Trump pardons Army lieutenant Michael Behenna, who murdered an Iraqi prisoner
28 May 2019	Airmen on the USS <i>Wasp</i> wear "Make Aircrew Great Again" patches to Trump speech
30 May 2019	Trump denies knowledge of request to keep USS <i>John S. McCain</i> out of sight during troop visit
4 Jul 2019	Expanded use of military equipment and troop participation in July 4th parade
12 Oct 2019	Trump tweets "We train our boys to be killing machines, and then prosecute them when they kill!"

Table 2 (continued)

Date	Civil-Military Incident
29 Oct 2019	Trump tweets attack on Alexander Vindman after testimony; calls him "Never Trumper"
15 Nov 2019	Trump pardons Mathew Golsteyn, reverses the demotion of Edward Gallagher
23 Dec 2019	Trump invites Eddie Gallagher to Mar-a-Lago for election fundraiser
1 Jun 2020	DC National Guard supports as police violently clear Lafayette Square; helicopter intimidation incident
1 Jun 2020	Trump conducts photo op at St. John's church; Gen Mark Milley joins him
2 Jun 2020	20,400 National Guard troops from 28 states arrive in DC; 82nd Airborne positions 700 troops outside DC
3 Jun 2020	Retired admiral Michael Mullen, Mattis, and other retired military leaders criticize Trump
3 Jun 2020	Secretary Mark Esper states he does not support using the Insurrection Act
10 Jun 2020	Trump rejects Pentagon plan to rename military bases named after confederate generals
11 Jun 2020	Gen Mark Milley apologizes for attending photo op with Trump
15 Aug 2020	Marine guards featured on camera during Republican National Convention
7 Sept, 2020	Trump accuses generals of advocating "endless wars" for personal financial gain
14 Sep 2020	More than 200 retired generals and admirals endorse Trump
12 Oct 2020	Trump runs ad featuring Joint Chiefs chairman Gen Mark Milley without permission
25 Nov 2020	Trump pardons former Army lieutenant general Michael Flynn
1 Dec 2020	<i>Washington Times</i> ad urges Trump to declare martial law and have "military oversee a re-vote"
17 Dec 2020	Flynn asserts Trump can declare martial law and use military to rerun election during News-max interview
18 Dec 2020	Flynn visits Oval Office and allegedly previews plan, but Trump rejects it
6 Jan 2021	Trump speaks at stop the steal; mob attacks the Capitol to disrupt certification of election results

There are, however, many almost indisputable cases where Trump used senior military leaders or other military personnel as "swords or shields" to attack his political opponents or to defend himself or his administration from criticism. During the 2016 Republican National Convention, for example, retired lieutenant general Michael Flynn served as Trump's sword, criticizing Hillary Clinton and presiding over chants of "Lock Her Up" from the crowd.²⁹ Trump also used senior military leaders as a shield following raids in Yemen and Niger during which US military personnel died in early 2017, distancing himself from the decisions that put military personnel in harm's way and laying the blame on military leaders.³⁰ The former president took a similar public tact over time as he increasingly became dissatisfied with the Afghanistan policy he endorsed in August 2017.³¹

Similarly, there are several high-profile cases of Trump using senior military leaders or personnel as "potted plants" for domestic political purposes. These instances were designed specifically to bolster public support for the president or his policy decisions by associating them with military symbols or personnel. During Trump's first visit to the Pentagon as presi-

dent, he signed executive orders related to his controversial immigration policies in the Pentagon's Hall of Heroes, using military imagery to further legitimize his policies.³² Perhaps most notably, Trump also asked the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen Mark Milley, to follow him across Lafayette Square on 1 June 2020. This occurred just after the area had been cleared with force by a combination of federal agents and local police with the support of National Guard personnel so that Trump could participate in a photo op at Saint John's Church.³³ General Milley apologized for participating in the event several days later, stating, "I should not have been there. My presence in that moment and in that environment created a perception of the military involved in domestic politics."³⁴ Trump also granted clemency to several service members accused of war crimes and then used them to support fundraising efforts.³⁵ Although these were the highest-profile events that fall into the "potted plants" quadrant, they are far from the only such incidents. Indeed, Trump frequently referred to "my generals" and "my military" while also expressing the "love" he believed soldiers felt for him.³⁶

In addition to this symbolic politicization, critics also accused Trump of using, or threatening to use, the military for coercive purposes against US citizens. Several controversial cases of coercive uses of the military warrant careful consideration. One is Trump's October 2018 decision to deploy active duty military personnel to the southern border. Others are the 1 June 2020 deployment of National Guard personnel in Washington, D.C., and Trump's subsequent consideration of the Insurrection Act.

Trump's decision to send approximately 5,200 active duty soldiers and 2,100 National Guard personnel to augment Customs and Border Protection (CBP) personnel was contentious, with critics accusing him of "using the military to concoct a threat that will galvanize Republican and swing voters days before a highly contested election."³⁷ Military deployments designed to distract or generate approval right before an election, or "wagging the dog," are notoriously hard to identify and even harder to prove. Absent inside information or access to historical records, reaching a definitive conclusion about this case is probably premature. There are, however, strong reasons to suspect Trump may have used—or at least magnified and publicized—the southwest border deployment for electoral purposes rather than for pressing national security aims.³⁸ Although Bush and Obama both authorized election year deployments, Trump's actions differed in important ways: timing, threat level, scale, and composition.

Unlike previous deployments, Trump's border mission—originally named Operation Faithful Patriot before Secretary Mattis later removed

the label due to its “political overtones”—occurred in the last month before an election that Trump referred to as a “referendum” on his performance in office.³⁹ Trump ordered the deployment on 26 October, less than two weeks prior to the 6 November 2018 congressional midterm elections.⁴⁰ Ostensibly, the threat at the border was the arrival of caravans of hundreds or, in some cases, thousands of civilians fleeing gang violence or poverty in the Northern Triangle of Central America.⁴¹ Although Trump claimed that terrorist groups may have infiltrated these groups on numerous occasions, there was no publicly available evidence to substantiate those claims.⁴² Moreover, according to reporting in late October, US Army North’s own assessment was that only approximately 1,400 of the 7,000 migrants in southern Mexico would ever reach the US southern border.⁴³

Given the expected threat and anticipated numbers, it is unclear why a deployment of more than 7,000 total troops—with another 7,000 designated as a “surge force”—was necessary. The decision to send active duty troops rather than only National Guard personnel, as Bush and Obama had done before, may have reflected either the lack of capabilities within the CBP or the desire to move troops visibly and quickly. But the size, scale, and composition of the deployment were considerably different than previous border missions, which had been billed as stopgap measures until the CBP could recruit and train additional personnel. Although there is no definitive proof that Trump engaged in this activity for purely electoral purposes, at a minimum he exaggerated the threat and used the deployment as a primary part of his political messaging prior to the 2018 midterm elections, a topic I discuss in more detail in the next section.

Trump’s flirtations with the Insurrection Act and advocacy for aggressive tactics by the National Guard and federal agents he dispatched to Portland were threatening and potentially coercive, especially when directed at US citizens. Unlike the case of the 2018 border deployment, however, there is some question whether Trump possessed the legal authority to invoke the Insurrection Act and use either National Guard or active duty troops to support domestic law enforcement during the Black Lives Matter protests over the summer of 2020.⁴⁴ Although the Posse Comitatus Act does place limitations on the use of federal troops for law enforcement missions, however, scholars agree that few practical obstacles stood in Trump’s path had he decided to invoke the Insurrection Act.⁴⁵

Perhaps the clearest uses of military personnel for potentially repressive purposes occurred on 1 June 2020. Both the involvement of National Guard personnel to assist in clearing Lafayette Square before Trump’s photo op and the use of a National Guard helicopter to intimidate protestors crossed

a clear line into coercive violence. Although there is little evidence that Trump directly gave orders that led to either of these specific events, multiple reports suggest this approach was the result of a compromise after the president proposed even harsher measures.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the bulk of existing evidence suggests Trump did attempt to activate the military to “wag the dog” on the border and for “repressive force” against protestors, though he faced opposition in the latter case that may have prevented Trump from going even further. As I discuss next, Trump’s public messaging suggests that the former president was inclined to use military personnel even more aggressively in Washington, D.C., Minneapolis, and Portland.

Messaging

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to conduct a comprehensive comparison of Trump’s civil-military rhetoric to that of his predecessors, this section illustrates Trump’s approach. The former president’s messaging on important civil-military issues often differed in substance and tone when compared to other modern presidents. Moreover, even his most ardent supporters argue that Trump’s brash rhetorical style distinguishes him from other American politicians.⁴⁷

The overt way that Trump talked about members of the military as part of his political constituency is one of the most distinctive aspects of the 45th president’s approach to civil-military relations. Trump’s comments during the January 6th “Stop the Steal” rally that occurred just before the mob attacks on the Capitol are one clear example. After calling “third world” elections more honest than the US election, Trump pleaded, “And I’d love to have, if those tens of thousands of people would be allowed, the military, the Secret Service, and we want to thank you, and the police, law enforcement. Great. You’re doing a great job. But I’d love it if they could be allowed to come up here with us. Is that possible? Can you just let them come up, please?”⁴⁸

Even in a charitable reading of Trump’s speech, a call by the president to have military members join him at a partisan, political rally—particularly one dedicated to overturning the election he alleged had been stolen—would have been remarkable. This statement was hardly unique. Although Trump’s rhetoric was unusual in many ways, my analysis focuses on the three areas in which Trump’s civil-military rhetoric differed the most from that of his predecessors: border deployments, domestic missions, and military partisanship and voting.

Table 3 displays illustrative comments by Trump and previous US presidents when speaking about similar—though not identical—topics.⁴⁹

The third topic, military partisanship and voting, is not listed in the table because there simply is no corresponding precedent in the modern era.

Table 3. Presidential comments about domestic uses of military force

Topic: Border Missions	
President	Illustrative Comments
Trump (2018)	"We are going to be guarding our border with our military. We cannot have people flowing into our country illegally, disappearing and, by the way, never showing up for court." "I will tell you, anybody throwing stones, rocks, like they did to Mexico and the Mexican military, Mexican police, where they badly hurt police and soldiers of Mexico, we will consider that a firearm. They want to throw rocks at our military, our military fights back. We'll consider—and I told them—consider it a rifle."
Bush 43 (2006)	"One way to help during this transition is to use the National Guard. So in coordination with governors, up to 6,000 Guard members will be deployed to our southern border. . . . Guard units will not be involved in direct law enforcement activities. . . . The United States is not going to militarize the southern border."
Obama (2010)	"I have also authorized the deployment of up to an additional 1,200 National Guard troops to the border to provide intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance support . . . until Customs and Border Protection can recruit and train additional officers and agents to serve on the border."
Topic: Racial Protests or Riots	
President	Illustrative Comments
Trump (2020)	"I can't stand back & watch this happen to a great American City, Minneapolis. A total lack of leadership. Either the very weak Radical Left Mayor, Jacob Frey, get[s] his act together and bring[s] the City under control, or I will send in the National Guard & get the job done right." "These are people that hate our country. We are telling them right now that we are coming in very soon. The National Guard. A lot of very tough people. These are not people that just have to guard the courthouse and save it. These are people who are allowed to go forward and do what they have to do." "These THUGS are dishonoring the memory of George Floyd, and I won't let that happen. Just spoke to Governor Tim Walz and told him that the Military is with him all the way. Any difficulty and we will assume control but, when the looting starts, the shooting starts. Thank you!"
Ike (Little Rock, 1957)	"The troops are there, pursuant to law, solely for the purpose of preventing interference with the orders of the Court . . . This challenge must be met with such measures as will preserve to the people as a whole their lawfully-protected rights in a climate permitting their free and fair exercise."
LBJ (1967, Detroit)	"I am sure the American people will realize that I take this action with the greatest regret—and only because of the clear, unmistakable, and undisputed evidence that Governor Romney of Michigan and the local officials in Detroit have been unable to bring the situation under control . . . The Federal Government in the circumstances presented had no alternative but to respond."
Bush 41 (1992, LA Riots)	"It's been the brutality of a mob, pure and simple. And let me assure you, I will use whatever force is necessary to restore order. And now, let's talk about the beating of Rodney King because beyond the urgent need to restore order is the second issue: the question of justice. . . . What you saw and what I saw on the TV video was revolting. I felt anger. I felt pain. I thought, How can I explain this to my grandchildren?"

A comparison of Trump's public messages about his controversial border deployment and his predecessors' statements for similar deployments

suggests a striking difference. As the quotes in table 3 indicate, George W. Bush and Barack Obama took a far more measured approach when discussing the border threat, emphasizing the temporary nature of the deployment and the limitations placed on the military's activities. Trump's overt statement that he intended to militarize the southern border stands in stark contrast to Bush's approach. Moreover, his controversial statements about loosened rules of engagement against rock-throwing migrants diverged significantly from both previous missions and were never implemented after internal pushback from civilian and military leaders at the Pentagon.⁵⁰

Trump's comments about the use of the National Guard or active duty military for protest and riot support were even more inflammatory, especially when placed in historical context.⁵¹ Presidents Dwight Eisenhower, Lyndon Baines Johnson, and George W. Bush all invoked the Insurrection Act to federalize the National Guard or to deploy federal troops during their presidencies. In their public statements, however, each man distinguished between legitimate peaceful expression of rights and mob violence; emphasized the unity of the nation; and noted reluctance to act, emphasizing that they were doing so only in the face of dire circumstances. During his public comments about domestic protest and potential use of the military under the Insurrection Act, Trump took a more belligerent and divisive tone while displaying no evidence that he was reluctant to use the military on domestic soil.

Trump's brash messaging style on issues related to the military represented a striking change from other recent presidents. Although presidents often use military audiences as the backdrop for policy speeches, few have made overt partisan references in front of military audiences. Presidents have, however, trumpeted policies aimed at the military or veterans. Obama, for example, highlighted veteran- and military-focused policies his administration planned to prioritize the first time he addressed the Veterans of Foreign Wars in 2009. He also rolled out his new Afghanistan policy at the United States Military Academy at West Point before an audience of cadets in 2009.⁵² And since at least Ronald Reagan, all presidents have expressed their love and gratitude for the military in somewhat hyperbolic language.

Trump continued this trend of voicing his affection for the military, but he also was not hesitant to express his belief that the military loved him back or that the military was a key partisan political ally of his. During his first visit to MacDill Air Force Base in February 2017, Trump began his remarks by stating, "We had a wonderful election, didn't we? And I saw

those numbers, and you liked me, and I liked you. That's the way it worked."⁵³ Whereas previous presidents often pandered to military or veteran audiences in nuanced language, Trump instead jumped over the line and claimed their support. This change was a significant one and represented either a misunderstanding of, or complete disregard for, norms prohibiting partisan political activity by uniformed military personnel. Andrew Exum, a Pentagon political appointee during the Obama administration, stated, "[Trump's actions are] part of a pattern. Whether it is the Memorial Wall at the C.I.A., or the Hall of Heroes at the Pentagon, he is using institutions that have previously been walled off from politics to generate political support for some of his more contentious policies."⁵⁴

Social and Political Context

The frequency, gravity, and messaging involved in Trump's attempts to politicize the military represent an escalation of trends, even though such strategies had been developing for several decades.⁵⁵ But the political and social circumstances in which Trump engaged in these actions facilitated his behavior while also ultimately guaranteeing that he would not be able to politicize the military in more nefarious or dangerous ways.

Trump recognized, perhaps before others did, that conditions were set that might allow him to activate the military in ways that might benefit him politically. Although the door was not wide open, Trump noticed a crack and decided to push. This crack was formed by mutually supporting political, social, and military trends. On the political front, partisan polarization and negative partisanship had increased the likelihood that elected political leaders and citizens would judge Trump and other political leaders based on partisan politics rather than on whether they were upholding American democratic values or civil-military norms.⁵⁶ A growing body of research has demonstrated that partisan considerations often overrule these normative concerns. Consequently, Trump was able to avoid sanction for his civil-military transgressions because his co-partisans in Congress and conservative media protected him even as Democratic elites called for active and retired military officers to constrain Trump's policies as the "adults in the room."⁵⁷

At the same time, elevated public confidence in the military relative to other federal institutions made the military an attractive political target. It also made members of the public more accepting of military involvement in partisan and electoral politics, at least when the military appeared to be supporting their own party's political goals. In this context, President

Trump enjoyed wide latitude to push the limits of civil-military convention with little fear of pushback from members of his own party.

General Milley's participation in the photo op on June 6th and the images of National Guard personnel supporting the police who cleared Lafayette Square did trigger opposition from another group, however: retired military generals.⁵⁸ The public backlash Trump faced from retired admirals and generals following these events was unprecedented. Several days later, Trump's own Secretary of Defense, Mark Esper, also expressed his opinion that it would be inappropriate and unnecessary to invoke the Insurrection Act or use active duty troops to support law enforcement.⁵⁹ It is unclear whether, or how far, Trump would have pushed efforts to use the military domestically absent this opposition.

As the election approached, both Trump and Biden attempted to use both active duty military personnel and retired officers and veterans as potted plants to support their presidential campaigns.⁶⁰ Despite intense pressure from all quarters, however, Milley and other senior military leaders on active duty kept a relatively low public profile while also reinforcing the military's commitment to uphold its nonpartisan norm and not interfere in the election.⁶¹

The perception that the former president might use the military to intervene in the election process became even more pronounced as the inauguration approached, however. After Trump pardoned his former national security advisor, retired general Michael Flynn, Flynn stated in an interview that the president could use the military to rerun the election. He also expressed these ideas directly to President Trump, though there are no indications that the president entertained it as a serious possibility. Nevertheless, all ten living secretaries of defense—both Republicans and Democrats—signed an unprecedented joint letter on January 3rd that warned against use of the military to interfere with the election results.⁶²

Looking Ahead

Politicization of the military by civilian activation unfortunately looks likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, the framework presented here—centered on the concepts of frequency, gravity, messaging, and political context—will provide a more rigorous tool for assessing the dangers civilian activation poses.

Several important questions remain unanswered or underexplored. Although I attempted to demonstrate the utility of this framework by analyzing civilian activation during the Trump administration, it remains uncertain whether the criteria I described are independent or interactive.

In Trump's case, these four concepts seem to be highly correlated. Additionally, a better understanding of whether and how the types of civilian activation described in figure 1 relate to one another could give scholars and practitioners greater insight about how to define civil-military norms in clear and enforceable ways. If coercive types of politicization are separable from symbolic types, scholars might focus on how to refine civil-military norms in ways that best avert these types of behaviors. If increased symbolic activation ultimately leads to greater coercive activation, however, scholars might need to educate the public about how these small incidents can cumulatively pose substantial threats. Rebuilding civil-military norms that support democratic values is an urgent task.

Further theoretical development and empirical analysis would also help us understand how civilian activation and military activism are related. Although there is often a great deal of uncertainty, savvy military and political leaders are likely to pay close attention to the signals from other elites and from broader society. As I noted earlier, Trump sensed the door was cracked and decided to push. However, it appears he may have overestimated the willingness of senior military leaders to go along with his plans. Future research could attempt to broaden these concepts for application to other democracies for comparative analysis to help us better gauge when civilian leaders might sense an opportunity to attempt to forge a political alliance with the military.

Although the initial analysis I presented suggests that Trump's politicization was unique and troubling, there is little evidence that the social and political conditions that gave Trump the opportunity to push the door open in civil-military relations have fundamentally changed. In fact, the door may have inched open even farther. The longer-term trends of negative partisanship, low confidence in civilian leaders and overconfidence in the military, and weakening norms within the military itself likely will continue unabated. Even the public opposition from retired generals and admirals that appeared to constrain Trump may help normalize military activism in lasting ways. This type of criticism can be especially damaging to the trust necessary for effective civil-military cooperation.⁶³ Absent a concerted effort by political and military leaders to recommit to democratic values and reestablish weakened civil-military norms, the framework for civilian activation described in this article may unfortunately become even more applicable in the future. 

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Notes

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