Since the late 1970s, the American public has consistently rated the military with high confidence levels compared to other U.S. institutions. In a 2017 Gallup Poll, 78 percent of those surveyed rated confidence in the military as a “great deal” or “quite a lot.” The same poll listed the role of the military (“importance of what they do”) and the perception of effectiveness (“competence, how well they do their job”) as a few of the factors for high confidence. If the American public consistently maintains such high confidence in the military, why then do critics believe that there is a growing divide in civil-military relations?

Civilian control of the military is a fundamental tenet of U.S. democracy. Civil-military relations is defined as a bargain negotiated between the citizens, civilian government authorities, and the military. Although citizens may not be directly involved in creating the bargain, it “cannot be sustained without their acquiescence.” In order for democracy to continue to thrive, it is pivotal that the public is engaged such that society maintains a healthy balance. Alternatively, “bad” civil-military relations are reflected by the dominance of military institutions in society or the politicization of the military. Some have postulated that the absence of a military coup d’état, because they drastically illustrate military dominance, is an adequate bar for determining healthy relations in democratic states, but this is a low bar at best. No one would argue that a coup is a positive measure for civil-military relations, but the lack of a coup should not equate to good health. In her piece for the Texas National Security Review, Lindsay Cohn posits that elevating troops to a level of “sacrosanctity” in public discourse and creating an environment where the military can pick and choose which policies to heed is unhealthy.

In addition to the health of civil-military relations, there are concerns about the widening gap between the military and society. Servicemembers are increasingly reporting that they feel isolated from society upon re-entry, feeling that they cannot relate, whereas non-serving citizens struggle to understand the military. “Generations at War,” a report by the Center for New American Security (CNAS), defines this as the “familiarity gap.” The growing gap between citizens and those who fight or have fought results in increasing levels of ignorance about the role and engagement of the military, despite the support and respect the public maintains for the military. Further “unprecedented support coupled with lack of familiarity creates a situation in which force can be used increasingly liberally without public oversight.” As a result, the American public is largely unaware of military decisions and operations until they...
become controversies and tragedies. For example, prior to the death of four U.S. troops in Niger in October 2017, many Americans were unaware of U.S. military involvement in Africa.\textsuperscript{30}

While research has recommended a varying range of policies to mitigate the growing divide, some have posited that education levels of the public could serve as a valid measure of health in civil-military relations and reduce the military-social gap.\textsuperscript{11} An educated public can lead to balanced relations and a more knowledgeable public engaged in military discourse. Yet, education is not fundamentally related to Americans’ confidence in the military. As reflected in the aforementioned Gallup Poll, perception motivates confidence. Similarly, a 2013 study, commissioned by then-retired General James Mattis and Kori Schake, found that most Americans supported the military but did not know or had no opinion about specific policies, issues, or how the military works.\textsuperscript{12} They further argue that the combination of ignorance and admiration for the military is problematic, could lead to unexamined risks, and leads to the public dissociating themselves from defense issues.\textsuperscript{13} This dissonance illustrates that perception of effectiveness, rather than actual knowledge, drives confidence in the military.

The narrative of war and the perception of effectiveness are major contributing factors that impact how Americans think about the military and threaten the relationship between civilians and the military.\textsuperscript{14} To foster healthier civil-military relations, we must strive to close the familiarity gap and create a more connected and engaged public willing to participate in balanced debates and discussions. A sense of personal connection must be restored. With an ever-shrinking share of Americans serving, the military must increase the transparency surrounding its operations to drive greater awareness of its role and missions.\textsuperscript{15} While acknowledging that these recommendations are not unique to this piece, they could arguably create a more knowledgeable public and reduce the shock threshold of breaking military news. Furthermore, confidence in our troops would be based on an actual understanding of their mission rather than blind acceptance and result in well-rounded critical discernment of military activities. Greater engagement with the military and debate over its role would improve civil-military relations. As Alice Hunt Friend has written, “one of the measures of that quality is whether all citizens engage in the gravest decisions our government makes.”\textsuperscript{16}

Although these concerns over public awareness and a familiarity gap lead many to question the health of civil-military relations, Mattis and Schake conclude that, overall, American civil-military relations are strong. If they are correct, perhaps our focus on increasing public awareness and familiarity of the military’s role and missions is our attempt to achieve and maintain a more en-

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gaged public. Or maybe a healthy dose of skepticism is a necessary component to maintaining the grand bargain and overall health of civil-military relations.

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9. Ibid.


13. Ibid., 288, 291.


15. The propensity to serve and those eligible to serve are decreasing. Healthy, family history, geography, class, educational qualifications, criminal background, and substance abuse are a few factors that reduce the pool of eligible Americans, resulting in about 25 percent of the American youth that are able to serve. Less than 1 percent of the population has served in the armed forces. Phillip Carter et al., “Working Paper AVF 4.0: The Future of the All-Volunteer Force,” CNAS, March 28, 2017, https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/avf-4-0-the-future-of-the-all-volunteer-force.