

An Interview with Dennis Blair

What lessons have you personally drawn from the decade of war in Iraq and Afghanistan?

Blair: The decade of war is really two decades of war—from the time the Cold War ended in about 1989 through the disappearance of the Soviet threat and the involvement of the United States in a series of individual military actions. What I’ve learned is that we need to do a better job thinking these conflicts all the way through before we engage in them. Because it turns out that we are relearning an old lesson, which is the use of military force is only a part of improving a situation and protecting American interests in a particular country or region. Too often, we think that a military victory itself will cause the desired result. In fact many other factors come in to play; economic development, social development, government improvement. These are not accomplished by the U.S. alone, and certainly not by American military force alone, but often with allies and other partners, and with other civilian capabilities. I think we have not thought them through carefully as to the end state that we are trying to achieve. Next we need to be realistic about the resources that are required; military, civil, and other. I’m afraid these are old lessons that need to be relearned, not new lessons, but they certainly have been borne out as some of the shortcomings of the interventions we have made in recent years. I would add, by the way,

Dennis Cutler Blair is the former United States Director of National Intelligence and is a retired United States Navy admiral.



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that I am not one who says our military interventions since 1989 have all been disasters. I think on the whole they have made the world a better place; bad people who were around then aren’t around now, from Manuel Noriega to Saddam Hussein through Slobodan Milosevic and others; so it is not that our military interventions have been wasted. On the contrary—but we need to make sure that we get the maximum possible benefit from them and intervene in a smart way.

You have just published an impressive book on the role of the armed forces in democratic transitions.¹ What inspired you in that effort?

Blair: It was my personal experiences. I served in the Pacific in 1998 through 2002 and watched Indonesia in particular go through a transition from an autocratic government to a

democratic system of government; and watching the Indonesian armed forces both partially lead that effort and partially be dragged along with it. I realized that I could have done a better job when I was Commander in Chief of U.S. Pacific Command (CINCPAC); that I could have been better informed about civil-military dynamics in that country. I could have played a stronger role in my interaction with the Indonesian armed forces. The Philippines were also going through troubles at that time – there was the so-called EDSA II Movement, similar to the one that ousted Ferdinand Marcos years earlier, and I realized thinking back over it that senior military officers – in fact all military leaders, can contribute to helping other countries move towards democracy. At a minimum they can keep from gumming it up in our military relations.

Often our military relations are one of the more powerful bonds we have with other countries yet we do not use them as effectively as we should for this purpose. In addition I guess finally that promoting democratic development is probably the single most important long-term thing that the U.S. can do to make the world the kind of place that we, the U.S. and our friends, would like to live in. So that was the impetus for the book.

Now that you have surveyed historically a lot of other transitions in addition to those in the Pacific, is there any common trend or were there decision points that you found amongst those various examples that can tilt the quality of the armed forces engagement in one direction, say towards democratization or the other direction toward military autocracy?

Blair: I found there were several keys. I should say first that the role of outsiders – and military officers who work with other countries are definitely outsiders – is secondary to what is going on within the country itself when big movements are under way in countries that are experiencing a change in governance. So we shouldn't delude ourselves that we can sit there like a master puppeteer

and manipulate what is going on in these countries. However, what we can do is understand what is going on in the countries and have a much finer understanding of the role that the armed forces are playing within these countries; which generals and admirals are playing positive roles moving their countries towards democracy, and which are really playing negative roles and supporting dictators that are oppressing their people. We can cooperate better with other countries that have military contact with them. The U.S. has the most extensive engagement program worldwide, but other countries have historical ties that can be very important for individual countries. I think we also have to understand the roles that the armed forces play within their societies in these countries, which are quite different from what they are in established democracies. Understanding all of this – basically trying to help a country move to a more democratic system using the military to military bond that we all have who serve in uniform. I think our armed forces can play, if not a decisive, certainly a positive role. The one bar that you hear about is the notion that somehow we need these other countries for strategic military purposes and therefore we should not push them too hard on what kind of government they ought to have. This was certainly true in the Cold War; anybody who was a friend of ours against the Soviet Union was not looked at too hard in terms of its government. The modern equivalent of that situation are oil-producing countries or countries that are supporting the U.S. against terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda. What I found is that this is an over-simplistic contradiction. In fact, we can do both; we can work for gradual transition to democracy at the same time that we cooperate with these countries on common objectives, which are their objectives as well as ours.

Can I ask you to parse one part of the statement that you just made? You said that we should be sensitive to the different roles that militaries play in other countries vice

our own country. Could you elaborate that a little bit? What are some of the different roles played by militaries in our partner countries?

Blair: To an extent that we no longer grasp – since our independence history is 250 years in the past now – many of these countries won their independence in recent years through military force, and their armed forces feel they have a responsibility for how their country moves. It was true in virtually all the countries in Latin America for example. They obtained their freedom by military revolutions. In addition in many cases the armed forces are the best functioning, most organized, most advanced organizations within a country and therefore have both power and prestige. They feel a sense of responsibility for what goes on in their country, and have independent sources of power and prestige. These armed forces are in a much more powerful position in their countries than we are in ours. It is no good to simply say to them, “Subordinate yourselves to civilian control and give away power. Establish a ministry of defense. Give up all of your factories and other forms of economic enterprises that you run.” That advice will fall on deaf ears. You have to appeal to the military leaders’ sense of patriotism, the good side of their sense of responsibility for where their country goes, and convince them. And it’s not a difficult sell that both their armed forces, they personally, and their countries are better off under a more representative democratic system.

In your forthcoming book you refer to, and I quote, “Influencing the guys with the guns.” What kinds of skills should our armed forces try to develop and convey to foreign counterparts to influence the guys with the guns?

Blair: I think we have the skills on the influencing side. When you are with a military counterpart from any other country you have a lot in common. You probably joined your armed forces

for roughly the same sorts of reasons. If you are navy officers, you have bonds, if you are an army officer you have bonds with an army officer. There is a certain sympathetic understanding just by the nature of being in the same profession. The key is to turn that influence and sometimes even friendship into convincing the other person that in the long run for himself, his service, and his country, a democratic system of government is the best. The underlying advantage that democracy has over a dictatorship from a military officer’s point of view is that democracy will not order you as a military officer out into the streets to gun down your fellow citizens, to support a government that is disliked by most of its citizens; and that is something that military officers just don’t want to do, as it goes against their basic ethic. On top of that, there is a series of ways that have been worked out for armed forces in democratic governments to play a respected, honored, and personally satisfying role without being in charge. We can point around the world to the waves of democratic development which have moved most of the world in that direction and talk to our counterparts in other countries and say, “Get on the tide of history, do the right thing for your country in the right way.”

How can we avoid the kinds of mistakes that have been made in the past, where for example the U.S. supported military leaders that became dictators?

Blair: I don’t think we are going to ever hit 100% in that category, or that every single military leader in a dictatorship will become a democracy advocate. However, I think we can be smarter if we look at it as a question, do our intelligence work, compare notes and know who these people are. In my own experience in Indonesia it was pretty clear that there were two factions within the Indonesian armed forces; one led by General Wiranto that was committed to democratic reforms; and one led by General Prabowo that was not. It turned out we had a lot more contact with General Prabowo

than we did with General Wiranto, but what was needed was a recognition of which leader was better for the long-term goals that we thought were right in Indonesia, and to back that one and not the other. It is also a case of doing both things at one time. For example take the recent experience in Mali – although I don't know all of the inside details. Apparently we trained a lieutenant colonel battalion commander and a very confident counter terrorism force and it turned out that he and most of his battalion conducted a coup against the government. We did the tactical training fine but either we didn't evaluate, educate, or talk with him about these larger questions which I think should be carried along with all of the activities that we do. I think we need to be smart about identifying and then backing the people that we think are going to be good for their country in the long-term and certainly not support or even block those who are not.

In your book you point out and describe quite a few different mechanisms of military to military relations and tools available for promoting democratization of armed forces; confidence building visits, exchange programs, training and education, joint exercises, just to name a few. In your experience and in your analysis are there any that have worked more effectively than others or any that we should focus on as opposed to others?

Blair: I think the one that has had the best long-term payoff has been the presence of international students in our higher military education institutions, whether they are here at the National Defense University, the service war colleges, or at the staff colleges. The experiences of officers who come over and actually live in this country are an extremely important way to maximize influence. In the book I point out some ways that we can improve these experiences, but the basic idea is good. At the other end of the spectrum, [we need to influence] the actions of the armed forces during a government crisis in another country

– Egypt was a recent example when it was pretty clear that President Mubarak was leaving and that the Egyptian armed forces were going to allow him to go. At that time there happened to be a high-ranking Egyptian military delegation here in Washington for meetings. So naturally the meetings with their counterparts included advice from American officers that they [Egyptian military leaders] needed to take the side of their own people, not the side of the dictator, and so on. However, my experience is that when you get to one of these crises it is rare that you have the right people with the right contacts in the right jobs to talk with counterparts. For instance, in my own case, as the Indonesian crisis was well underway when I became the Commander for PACOM, I didn't yet have a personal bond with General Wiranto, General Prabowo, or with any of the others. I was trying to get to know them at the same time that I was trying to work with them. However, in the armed forces of the United States, there are many people who have friends in these countries and they maintain friendships over the years. I think we should form virtual joint task forces at the time of a crisis to bring in officers who know counterparts now in key jobs where the crisis is. My recommendation is – and I was able to do a little of this when I was on active duty, but much more can be done – to find the people who do have the contacts, the knowledge of the country but are often in other jobs at the time. Bring them on board. The task force can be headed by a Combatant Commander or by a team here in Washington or whichever way we want to do it, and use those contacts both for information and for influence. On both ends of the spectrum, I think we can up our game, if we realize that this is important and think about how to do it.

Going back to the role of the war colleges and National Defense University for example, is there anything that the joint professional military education system should be doing and anything that it should be developing to

make the U.S. more successful in this kind of undertaking.

Blair: I think there are several things. One of them is that for all the international fellows – and this is true in the UK, France, and Australia as well as in the United States – we teach civil-military relations and the history of civil-military relations in our own country context; the American constitution, the American separation of powers, etc. These may not be the most relevant models to many other countries. In fact, I would say it is probably less relevant in the experiences of countries that have achieved their independence more recently. Instead they will have different structures to get to the same point, which is the right role of the armed forces in a democracy. In our seminars with international students we should teach and talk more generally about the principles of democracy. In the handbook, I lay out seven principles that are characteristic of the role of the armed forces within a democratic country; we should talk about those in general with many examples that are not American or Anglo-Saxon; places like Korea, Japan, Senegal, South Africa, and so on rather than what we have here. That's number one. Number two is that officers from authoritarian countries don't trust what they hear in the classroom; in their own classrooms they are given a lot of propaganda and what comes from the podium is pretty slanted to reflect the current regime's views. When they sit in a classroom in one of our institutions they have this same sort of mistrust. What surveys have found they are impressed by and do pay attention to is what happens outside the wire. Many of them have host-families they are paired up with while they are here; they travel within the U.S.; and what we have learned from many surveys is what really makes an impression on them is how democracy actually works. We should emphasize this for the international students and have them meet successful ex-military officers now in business or working at non-profits, and show them this continuum of service to country that can transcend

their time in uniform. Have them talk to defense reporters who in many cases make the military uncomfortable because they write about leaks and they break stories that we would just assume not be publicized. They are a part of this role of a democratic country controlling and using its armed forces. Have them talk to members of Congress and their staffs who are on authorization or appropriations committees. I think we need to widen and deepen this understanding of the essentials of the armed forces in a democratic society in a much more structured way with our international students than we do currently.

You mentioned several attributes of a military or armed forces within a democratic society; can you elaborate on those you feel are the most important attributes?

Blair: Sure, let me talk about them; they will take different forms in different countries, but these seem to be the primary attributes of organizational relationships with authorities that cement the armed forces into their role in the democratic society. Let me start with the human dimension; in democracies the armed forces have adequate pay, they have the respect of their citizens, they have a fair system for promotion. It seems obvious, but you find in dictatorships this is often not the case; and it matters to military officers. Another important attribute is that the mission of the armed forces is external defense; it is not internal suppression. If you look at the classic example of armies in communist countries, they were explicitly tools of a political party, not of the national government. To this day the People's Liberation Army (in China) answers to the Central Committee (of the Communist Party), which is a party organization, not a national organization in China. Whenever the armed forces are used in democracies for internal missions, everything from humanitarian assistance to suppressing insurgencies, they must be under extremely careful legal and oversight constraints. They have a relatively free

hand in external missions – to attack the enemy and so on – but when they are used internally they are under a different, more careful and temporary set of measures and this is very important. In democratic countries there is a civilian Ministry of Defense that acts as a connective tissue between the high politics of a country and the actual military leaders. This is so that the armed forces are not reporting directly to the president and are not grading their own papers when it comes to budget requests and legal actions. There is a Minister of Defense appointed and confirmed in some fashion in his country that turns over all political direction into military orders and takes the military advice provided by the armed forces and makes sure it is injected into the political system. Building a competent Ministry of Defense turns out to be a more difficult task than you would think, especially in many newly independent countries that are created from scratch, but it is important to have that nonetheless. An open press that comments freely on the armed forces is really a backstop on other processes within the government. If you have a press that has experts on military affairs who are constantly running stories about it, you find that if bad things are going on within the military and are quickly exposed, things are brought to light that might not normally see the light, and that's a good thing. The role of the legislature in overseeing the military is also very important in a democracy. A legislature should not only approve a defense budget, but it should have some expertise and the time and skill to look at the military pieces (of legislation). In many dictatorships there are rubberstamp parliamentary organizations that simply approve what the government puts in; in a democracy the legislature knows what it is doing when it passes the budget and has oversight responsibilities. In addition, the legislature should at a minimum approve senior officers; they should be proposed by the executive branch, but they should have to be confirmed by some form of a legislative branch. Finally, there must be a military justice system, which is integrated into the overall justice system

for the country. You find in many autocratic countries, the military justice system is completely self-sustained and is run by the armed forces. It is not connected to the overall justice system of the country. In a democratic system the military legal system cannot be a self-contained, but must be governed by laws passed by the legislature, and have an appeal system outside the armed forces. Those are some of the major elements, and as you can tell just by my description of them, these are not things you can just snap your fingers and whistle up if you have been under a dictatorship for years or decades. In fact many of these things are the hardest to establish in a newly democratizing country, and the lack of them is often what will allow a country to slip back into a more repressive form of government for a period of time. In many cases of military democratic development there are bumps and starts for a period of years; it doesn't happen miraculously after one demonstration in the town square.

Some of the developments you are describing are cultural and social and very definitely long-term which raises the question, is this kind of effort we are discussing – military to military relations to help armed services of partner countries contribute to democratization in their own country – is that a form of state-building?

Blair: I think it is in the long run. It is a good form of state building. I'm not one who subscribes to the McDonalds theory of democracy; that no two countries that have a McDonalds have ever fought a major war. We have tremendous differences of viewpoint and good strong debates with other democracies around the world. By encouraging democracy around the world, I'm not thinking that this is going to make the role of the U.S. easy in the world, but I think we find over time that those countries that are democratic in their form of government are ones that the U.S. can work with and help us form the kind of world where all of our citizens achieve the things that are important

to them. The needs [of people] to rise according to their merits, the freedoms an individual has, the respect that minorities have, these are the things that we should be working for. I think that military relations can contribute to that long-term goal.

As you said, in many countries the military is the most powerful, best-established, most functional organization in the country. What would you think about the militaries of our partner countries engaging in other internal roles, not internal suppression, but infrastructure development, public education, public health, and those kinds of activities?

Blair: I think that when you look at the development of countries around the world, the armed forces have often played a very important role. One of the ones that I wasn't aware of until I did the research for this book was Senegal, which has a very impressive team. The general in charge of the armed forces and the president [at independence] realized that the armed forces had capabilities in construction, health, and education, and they explicitly turned them (the armed forces) to the task of improving the country. The Senegalese armed forces built bridges in remote areas where no private contractor could go. They established hospitals in areas in which the civilian universities were not educating doctors. I think when it is done as an explicit task under controls, funded by the legislature and openly done; I think it is an important consideration.

We have also seen areas in which it has boomeranged and one of those has been the Philippines. For example, the armed forces were thrown into the fight against insurgent forces around the Philippine islands and found that in many cases they were the only ones fighting the insurgencies, that local government officials were corrupt or didn't care. And this made the officers very cynical – in fact it fueled their feeling that they needed to mount coups and change the government. It is important that when you turn the armed forces to

the task of helping the country that they are not the only ones doing it and it is not done as a substitute for these other parts that the government needs to be doing. So it is important, but it needs to be done right.

Since we are talking about a form of state-building, and a range of internal engagements, when the U.S. military is engaging with their counterparts how should they divide the labor between U.S. military and the civilian agencies that have been more traditionally engaged in development and state-building such as the State Department and USAID.

Blair: That question has been a big one ever since the end of the Cold War, in these 20 years that we have been involved in combat operations, and then rebuilding operations in other countries. We have plenty of very good examples and we have plenty of pretty bad examples. I think that what we've learned is that the use of actual military forces to accomplish a particular civilian civil task should be quite limited. If you need a bridge to get to an area where food has to be distributed, that is something that the Seabees or their equivalents in other services could do. If you need to get grain to a starving part of a country, then put it on C-130s and get it there. It is pretty limited and short term compared to the development needs of even the smallest country. In fact, if you look at what can actually be done by outside groups in these areas, again the inherent capacity of outsiders to come in and actually do things is pretty limited compared to the needs of people. The real key is to build the capacity of a country to undertake these activities themselves. In addition, if outsiders do these things [initially] at some point there needs to be a transition to the people in that country doing it, and the more that is done by the outsiders the more difficult it is to make that transition. In general, you should be limited in the number of things done either by the foreign military forces or by other outside forces in a country. You should

push very hard trying to help the local sector, both government and private, to do it. What this means is that you need to have a longer time horizon. Many international efforts to put countries back on their feet are driven by getting this done in a few months or years and then moving on to other ones. It is just very difficult to build the kind of sustainable capacity for these things in that short a time. I think we need to, back to my answer in your first question, be realistic about time frames, capabilities, and their importance as we go into these situations. The armed forces can play a role, but I think their primary roles in most of these situations we have been talking about are to provide security and then to help security forces in that country provide security. These are essential so that non-military functions can resume.

Admiral Blair I want to thank you for this conversation, but before we conclude I would like to ask you if you would like to share any additional insights or any other alibies from your forthcoming book?

Blair: The single most important thing we can do in this regard is to place the support to a democratic transition up as a high priority for our military relations. If we give that direction to our Combatant Commands, to our military colleges, to our commanders who are going out visiting countries or doing exercises, to our sergeants and non-commissioned officers who are working in many countries around the world, and if we work with the other democracies as partners in this venture, then the great officers and non-commissioned officers and troops in our armed forces and those of the other democracies will go to town on it and really do it well. I think it is really a case of not being seduced by this idea that you can either have oil or you can have democracy, you can either have a good counter terrorist program or you can have democracy, but to place democratic development as a high priority is the key and then good things will follow after that. **PRISM**

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¹ Military Engagement: Influencing Armed Forces Worldwide to Support Democratic Transitions (Volume One: Overview), Dennis Blair, Brookings Press, March 27, 2013.w