

Abstract

The US Military During the Clinton Years: Resentment, Revolution, and Roles

By

Alan Cate

Military affairs during President Bill Clinton's two terms in office were marked by three major characteristics: a precipitous decline in the state of civil-military relations, the advent of the so-called Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), and the employment of military forces in often unfamiliar roles. This paper analyzes each of these phenomena, along with their legacy and implications for the present and future.

Within large segments of the uniformed military, especially among the officer corps, there existed a barely concealed disdain for Clinton. This was based initially upon accounts of Clinton's avoidance of military service during the Vietnam war. The subsequent furor--almost immediately following Clinton's inauguration--over gays in the military, along with the "Slick Willie" persona and the scandal surrounding the impeachment controversy reinforced negative impressions within a military community that is inherently more culturally conservative than society as a whole. The debacle in Somalia and the resistance by many military leaders to nation-building further contributed to animosity against the President. All this reflected an alarming erosion in the cornerstone of US military professionalism--deference to civilian authority. Further exacerbating this unhealthy situation was the administration's reluctance, perhaps in part due to lack of interest, but also seemingly due to fear of challenging the military leadership given the President's lack of bona fides, to reign in the brass.

Despite this civil-military tension, the superbly trained and equipped military forces that won lightning campaigns in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) were largely a legacy of the Clinton years. Throughout the 1990s the Clinton Department of Defense pursued the RMA, which encompasses dramatic change in technology, organizations, and doctrine. Harnessing new information technology enabled advances in command, control, and communications that gave US forces "information dominance" and "decision superiority" over any adversary. The Clinton-era military developed effective new weapons such as the Joint Direct Attack Munition and the Predator unmanned aircraft. These years witnessed the creation of forward looking organizations such as the Joint Forces Command, chartered to conduct joint experimentation and advanced warfighting experiments to validate new systems and devise innovative operational concepts. Under Clinton's aegis, Defense officials began hard, and as it turned out, prescient thinking about terrorism and asymmetric warfare, weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and Homeland Security.

Finally, operating in a new environment after nearly half a century of Cold War, Clinton's military found itself handed unfamiliar--and often unwelcome--missions. The Clinton National Security Strategy included the imperative of "shaping" the international environment, which led to the military task of conducting "engagement activities" abroad. Often reluctantly, the military--which believed its core competency was fighting and winning the nation's wars by employing overwhelming force on behalf of compelling national interests--conducted peacekeeping and nation-building in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo.

Sources for this paper include research on contemporary civil-military relations, relevant

national security publications and official Defense Department documents, memoirs and selected secondary sources.