

What Lloyd Austin's critics don't understand about 'civilian control'

Opinion by **Dennis C. Blair**

Dec. 10, 2020 at 6:55 p.m. EST



Dennis C. Blair retired as an admiral after a career in the U.S. Navy. He served as director of national intelligence from January 2009 through May 2010.

Retired Army Gen. Lloyd J. Austin III's planned nomination as defense secretary has unleashed a spate of breathless encomiums to "civilian control of the military" that are conceptually inaccurate, insulting and, frankly, silly.

It is as though those of us who have worn the uniform and achieved senior rank are somehow stunted. It is as though, because of our service, we are incapable of understanding the wider context of the role of the armed forces in the country, whereas those who have not served are singularly capable of understanding these wider considerations.

In the first place, the phrase "civilian control of the military" is inaccurate and misleading. A more accurate phrase is "the people's control of the armed forces through their elected representatives," which could be shortened to "democratic control of the armed forces." The armed forces are the most powerful institution in the country, with well-trained troops and awesome weapons. This power must be used wisely for the defense of the country and its security interests, but not turned against the country to oppress American citizens or take over the government in a coup d'etat.

In a democracy, both law and practice ensure that it is the elected representatives of the people who control the size, structure and use of the armed forces. The elected president is the commander in chief. The elected Congress passes the budgets that fund the armed forces, and the Senate confirms the promotion of every officer. Over the years, presidents and Congresses have used these authorities often. As important, the ethos of the U.S. armed forces, taught in our war colleges and passed on from generation to generation of military officers, has been to follow the lawful (congressionally approved) orders of the chain of command.

The defense secretary is the top unelected official in the military chain of command, and this person, too, is appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate, just like military flag officers, and for the same reason. The bedrock of democratic control of the armed forces is the authority of elected officials, provided by Congress through the funding of the armed forces and appointment and confirmation of both military and civilian appointees.

The bedrock is not some mystical superiority of the knowledge and integrity of those who have never served in the armed forces.

In fact, with the exception of Gen. Douglas MacArthur, who led U.S. forces against "Bonus" marchers in Washington after World War I, it has been senior military officers who have been more aware of their duty to serve, not oppress, Americans. The recent opposition by senior military leaders to using the armed forces to maintain order on the streets of American cities is the latest in a long tradition of uniformed officers resisting the use of U.S. troops against Americans.

It has been elected presidents and appointed civilians who historically have been more ready to turn the tools of government against Americans. And even a cursory study of the past 30 years will reveal that uniformed military leaders are generally far more reluctant to advocate the use of our forces overseas than have been civilian presidents and appointed civilians, which is what the Founding Fathers would have wanted and what the mothers and fathers of the soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines who actually do the fighting and dying also want.

The charge that senior military officers are somehow warped by our military experiences, that we are somehow incapable of understanding the wider responsibilities of military forces, that we are single-minded killing machines that have to be controlled by more erudite and sensitive people — all of this would be laughable if it were not so widely accepted. Senior military officers generally are better educated than comparable civilians; they often have a wider range of experience, both in this country and internationally. And they surely know many more people, including many immediate relatives in the military, who would be put in harm's way when the time comes for deployment overseas.

The best of them, such as Austin, lead by listening, by thinking and by example, not by shouting, "and that's an order."

Democratic control of the armed forces is well established by law and custom in the United States. The defense secretary needs to be wise, experienced, dedicated and forward-looking. Above all, he or she needs character and integrity. These are the criteria by which the Senate should measure Lloyd Austin.

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KJ Johnson 3 days ago

Yeah, and the retired officers have closer ties to the military industrial complex.

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sharonm1 5 days ago

I have been taken aback by the many critics of General Austin's selection, opposition apparently rooted in the fact that he has only been retired for four years instead of the requisite seven. He may or may not be the right man for the job, but I doubt that his fitness hinges on three years difference. I found Admiral Blair's essay edifying. A trait too often lacking in today's commentary.

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ingridtullosscsep 1 week ago

The question is, can y'all put a Black man over all that stuff (you know, all those tanks and bombs and stuff). We of course you can silly.

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jimerskine 1 week ago

It's notable that it was active and retired Generals that spoke out against deploying armed forces for domestic purposes, and civilian officials that proposed those actions. And I suspect retired Generals have a better understanding of the costs of sending our troops into harms way. We've had more than a few civilian officials overly eager to send in the troops!

Is "civilian" oversight achieved if the Secretary of Defense has previously worked for a defense contractor?

Let's judge Austin for his character, perspective, experience and intelligence and his ability to work with the President and Congress.

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Editmanor 1 week ago

The argument should be over Austin's qualifications, not about whether he needs to be a civilian for two more years. He has little experience with Far East matters, which is where policy experts think most concerns will be directed over the coming years, and he has demonstrated little proclivity for scaling back the military at a time when our overly large, cumbersome branches continue committing to 20th-century technology (giant new aircraft carriers, etc.) instead of thinning troop levels, investing in unmanned warfare tools, and cutting the defense budget to redirect funds to domestic needs. For that matter, I have yet to hear why Michelle Flournoy, the consensus "most qualified" pick for Secretary, wasn't actually nominated.

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ingridtullosscsep 1 week ago

At the end of the day people, who was going to give a Black man previe to Asia....in the ARMY? But I just now realized that, that's fair game....I like it.

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vickistired 1 week ago

Ughhhh. Every bit of this piece, fully lacking in self awareness, illustrates further why civilian oversight is a necessity.

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Oaklandr 1 week ago *(Edited)*

I am not so sure the argument is about who runs the Defense Department but more about how war is declared and who are appointed to safeguard the country.

We need independent people who not only speak truth to power but willing to give up their position in the face of illegal or unwise action. Just today, on Friday, we had the White House chief of staff threaten the FDA commissioner into approving a Coronavirus vaccine or resign one day, one day before they were planning to do it anyway.

Did Stephen Hahn the commissioner resign? No, he folded. We don't want Gen. Austin to be a warrior Defense Secretary, nor one who folds from political pressure.

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Barry-NJ 1 week ago *(Edited)*

Trump was allowed a waiver. Give a waiver for Biden's choice, then eliminate the waiver option altogether for the future.

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Frank Panza 1 week ago

So, how do they measure Mitch McConnell who's demonstrated his only interest is retaining Republican control of the Government and the Courts regardless of our political traditions, the merits of any significant (and for all I know, insignificant) Democratic proposals. Does the writer think McConnell would respect the Electoral College vote next week if Trump declared a National Emergency like he did when he rejected Congress' failure to approve funds for his Wall construction, and then imposed Martial law?

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KnockKnockGreenpeace 1 week ago

Thank you for demystifying this important role.

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