

# THE POLITICAL-MILITARY CHALLENGE: AN INTERVIEW WITH RADM JONATHAN T. HOWE

*FORUM:* First, Admiral Howe, let me ask you about the process of policymaking in the State Department, specifically about the role of the Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs. In your view, what is the function of the Bureau?

*HOWE:* The Bureau is very relevant to almost all the key national security questions that we deal with today. The PM Bureau has a very diverse and rich mandate that includes most of the arms control areas — whether it be MBFR [Mutual & Balanced Force Reduction], chemical weapons, START, or INF. We are charged with coordination of the interagency process as well as development of the State Department's position. With regard to security assistance, we oversee that program in coordination with the Defense Department. It's a problem of priorities for limited resources and working with our Congress in developing our security assistance program. We have other offices that deal with technology transfer, munitions control and both policy analysis and regional security affairs. We like to have people who are experts in all the regions of the world as well as on defense issues and we try to work with the regional bureaus of the State Department in dealing with political-military problems, crises — how they're managed in the government, how we respond, etc. Therefore, we're frequently in the forefront of where the focus of activity happens to be.

We also try to assist the Secretary in looking ahead at problems that are farther downstream; we have an advantage in that we come at problems from a global perspective rather than the regional focus which may tend to be somewhat narrower. We have the luxury of looking across the world at U.S. interests. We also have an overall mandate of helping facilitate communications with both the Joint Chiefs and the civilian side of the Defense Department.

I consider one of the major requirements is to be sure that when there

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Admiral Howe received his M.A., M.A.L.D., and Ph.D. degrees from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. He has been Director of the Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs at the Department of State since 1982. Prior to his most recent appointment, Admiral Howe had held a variety of command and staff positions in the Navy, the office of the Secretary of Defense, and the National Security Council.

are differences between the State Department and the Defense Department, which are inevitable and historic, that they are differences of substance and not differences due to the failure to communicate or understand the competing point of view. We have a right within the Department of State to provide our own analysis and input equivalent to a regional bureau on a policy issue and we often find ourselves taking a position that is different. This gives the Secretary a larger range of choices, as he decides what the policy will be, in coordination with the NSC and other agencies around Washington involved in the policy.

*FORUM:* From your experience, what do you think is the role of the military in the formation of American foreign policy?

*HOWE:* In terms of formation of policy the military sees itself more as an executor of policy than as a formulator of policy. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs is on the NSC as a statutory advisor to the President. The chiefs of the services are advisors to the President on military matters, but they work through the Secretary of Defense. They look at problems more from the perspective of whether we *can* do it and, if so, *how* we do it, rather than whether we *should* do it. The Joint Chiefs of Staff usually defer to the policymakers in terms of what the needs are in U.S. foreign policy. All that being said, nevertheless they certainly do enter into the process and have definite opinions about what policies best meet national security interests. The Joint Staff and the individual services coordinate and interlock with the State Department at all levels on a whole range of issues which are as small as a nuclear-powered ship visiting a country, a movement of an aircraft carrier or the establishment of access for the Air Force for movement of our forces around the world. So on a day-to-day basis there is a great deal of interaction on a practical problem-solving basis. There are very good links and there is good coordination.

In addition there are military officers serving in various places throughout the bureaucracy and the PM Bureau is very representative of that, bringing to our policymaking a background that we would not normally find in the State Department. This has proven to be very helpful to us.

*FORUM:* What are the traditional points of tension in the relationship between the civilian and military decisionmakers in the government?

*HOWE:* I think it varies, frankly, from administration to administration, from personality to personality, and from experience to experience. These factors tend to condition how that tension will develop or how it might exist. I think in the Reagan Administration there is a great deal of respect

for the military's professional judgment. Therefore, I personally haven't seen a lot of that tension because, as I said, communication channels are open. Also, this is influenced by whether the military is getting what it feels it needs in order to do its job. And, again, in this particular period the military is of course not getting everything it wants, but there has been a substantial effort, at some political cost, by the President to provide the defense resources necessary to meet the threat as the military sees it and to strengthen sustainability and readiness. Those elements that can contribute to tensions between military and civilian leaders tend not to be as evident now as they have been at times in the past.

When you're dealing with losing situations or conflicts like Vietnam that have gone on for a long time, there tends to be tension. Also, tensions are likely to arise when a revolutionary Secretary of Defense comes in and imposes totally different ways of looking at things, as Mr. MacNamara did when he tried to orient the Defense Department into a systems analysis perspective. Trying to cut across those traditional service boundaries — providing one aircraft to do all jobs — clearly causes tension. In fact anyone who tries to change radically the current situation is likely to meet some resistance from people who are comfortable with the more traditional way of dealing with things. But I don't see that right now; I see a much more harmonious and close relationship between the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs.

My own position here in the State Department perhaps reflects a tolerance or an acceptance that military people can contribute to diplomatic and political-military problem solving that you might not have had in all situations. I'm the first director of this Bureau who is a military officer and before my appointment some looked rather skeptically at the whole idea. Nevertheless we've tried it and it seems to be working out. There is a concern, with some justification based on past events, that sometimes career people placed outside their parent agencies remain captives of narrow past experiences or retain parochial views.

*FORUM:* Do you think the Joint Chiefs of Staff effectively represent military viewpoints in helping the President and his advisors to make decisions?

*HOWE:* Yes, I do, but you've asked a very interesting question. The Chairman is obligated to represent the views of the service chiefs. We have this very unusual mechanism we created and you can criticize it, but basically he is the chairman of a corporate board. He is only first among equals. And you really have the five voting members of the Joint Chiefs. The current Chairman, and I think he is representative, is very

conscious of being sure that he represents fairly the views of the services when there are differences that exist and reports them to the President when relevant.

Sometimes the criticism is made that when you mesh those views together you get a sort of fudge coming out rather than a crisp sharp recommendation as you try to accommodate the views of the services. It is true that each service has been and remains very capable of representing its views, so that there is a rich diversity on a number of issues. Often the services approach problems from the point of view of their own interests. That occurrence should not be surprising. In the process of deliberation among the Joint Chiefs, there is a lot of filtering out and healthy give and take, ultimately leading to a sound policy recommendation that reflects an effort to identify the broader national interest.

*FORUM:* Some argue that the corporate-like organization of the Joint Chiefs might be causing a lack of innovative thinking or the willingness to take very strong stances because of the difficulty in offering strong views without a sufficient interservice consensus. Do you think these criticisms are valid?

*HOWE:* To a certain extent there is some evidence for these points. On the other hand, the Chiefs have strong views and they're not shy about expressing them. They are, however, very careful about letting these views flow into the public arena so that other people are aware that this kind of diversity exists. Frankly, I think that's where diversity can go from being constructive to destructive — that is, when sensitive policy options are revealed prematurely. Sometimes that happens or the Congress gets involved, but generally their differences of opinion are aired privately in the national security process. I think that's the right place; that's where the debate ought to be.

I'm not sure that we need a strong and visible, high-profile, out-in-front military leader. The professionals answer the questions they are asked before the Congress, but really they advise the President. That I think facilitates a more honest and more candid dialogue and the kinds of criticisms that you would want a military leader to be providing to the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of State and the President. Certainly within the retired military community there are all kinds of ideas on military issues that are expressed publicly.

To go back to what you were asking earlier, I will say that the Secretary of State has a great deal of respect for our military leadership and I think that's a characteristic of this particular administration.

*FORUM:* Each political party that comes into office probably has some preconceptions about what areas are of most concern to it and what contingencies should dominate our defense planning. Do you think that those preconceptions inevitably change our defense planning with every administration or do you think that the values that underlie the actual making of defense plans have been more or less constant?

*HOWE:* There is a certain degree of continuity, both with the problems and with the professionals. So, in other words, the problem in Central America didn't start with the Reagan Administration; it was passed on by other administrations. Maybe it began even before the Carter Administration. The war in Iran and Iraq, which is a contingency that we're working very hard on now, is a situation that we worked on very hard in 1980 before President Reagan came in. So there is a certain continuity of problems in which the American interest is fairly clear. There may be differences on how to solve the problems, but the problems themselves have existed for some time. Professional diplomats and the professional military people provide continuity as administrations come and go.

Nevertheless, each administration does make an important input in terms of emphasis, in terms of the role of the United States, and in terms of problems that we are willing to meet. You start with what is the attitude toward the Soviet Union, China, the Middle East, and so forth. That clearly is an input that affects how you deal with problems or where you might want to apply leverage or where you might want to try to shape something that doesn't already exist or even tactically how you might want to deal with external problems. A new administration does make a difference in terms of the imprint it makes on what kind of policy it wants. There are all sorts of examples of this. There is always a tendency with a new administration to introduce its own concepts of how the world is managed. One of our problems has been that now we don't have the bipartisanship that we need to have in order to project an image of stability and continuity as we deal with international issues.

*FORUM:* Do you think there are any important differences in the way this administration is organized for crisis management in comparison with your experience with past administrations?

*HOWE:* Every administration is different in the way it organizes itself for crises. It is always a tough and time-consuming problem for an administration because crises always come on top of other things you're doing and make

great demands on the principals. All that being said, there are certain elements of continuity, certain elements of difference. This administration started out with a little less emphasis on the National Security Council (NSC) staff in a deliberate effort to play down that role. We have come more toward the idea of a stronger, more active NSC with regard to coordination. When you get into crisis management you almost automatically involve the NSC mechanism. This administration has used the Vice President as a crisis manager and I think that has worked well.

A subgroup deals with crises at a lower echelon with representatives more at my level meeting to cope with and to try to anticipate challenges; it's called a CCPG (Crisis Contingency Planning Group). Then you move up to the next level which the Vice President (or the Secretary of State in his absence) will chair, the National Security Advisor will be there in addition to the other principal players — the U.N. Ambassador, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs — as well as the key White House advisors, in this administration that would be Messrs. Meese and Baker and Deaver.

You can also have the full NSC meeting, which is a very large group. We have to deal with crises on an interagency basis in layers, depending on the critical nature of issues and how well developed and how time-sensitive they are. There's a lot that's done on a secure phone involving these same players, making decisions and making recommendations to the President. I notice that there has been some recent criticism about the President's involvement. I know, for example, that he has devoted a lot of time to this sort of deliberation and to hearing various points of view and meeting on a Sunday, for example, for lengthy periods. In fact, with regard to Middle East problems Sunday often becomes a key day in crises but it has an advantage in that it is one of those few days when a lot of other events aren't intervening so that you can meet with people for more than an hour or two at a time and really sort problems out. I can't endorse enough the necessity for the principal players coming together and talking an issue through, really working and using their heads and weighing alternatives so that meetings are not pro forma reports. These problems are usually tough and require searching for solutions. There is no obvious solution; if there were you wouldn't need to have a meeting in the first place. That kind of dialogue is very constructive.

Different administrations have approached this coordination differently, yet the requirement is basically the same. In this administration, particularly resulting from General Haig's initial efforts, there has been and still is a lot of State Department leadership in interagency groups dealing with crisis issues. But that's not untrue of past administrations either.

*FORUM:* Do you think that there is any specific way in which U.S. policymakers were surprised by developments in Lebanon? If so, how could one prevent this situation from arising in the future?

*HOWE:* Lebanon is so near-term and so ongoing that I hesitate to do a current history estimate of the situation. I don't think that there were a lot of surprises about what could be the outcomes in Lebanon. We pretty well knew how complex and how difficult the situation was. There was no lack of counsel with regard to the various factions and the many factors, such as Syrian influence, that we were up against in that situation. It was very clear that building up the strength of the Lebanese armed forces, whose breakdown in recent fighting was partly due to their fragile confessional composition, was a difficult proposition. We have certainly known that the various Muslim factions and the Druze and the Christians all had to be able to get along, had to see that there was a national unifying interest in removing foreign forces and reclaiming their nation, and had to have an incentive that would be broad enough and important enough to hold them together. But knowing all that, and knowing that there are risks, you have to analyze: Is it worth the risk? Can you take this risk with the hope that you may provide some stability and give this nation a chance to survive?

So I don't look at Lebanon as a lack of understanding of how tough and complex this problem was, considering the fact that the President of Lebanon was assassinated, that the Sabra and Shatila massacres occurred — the fact that that kind of situation existed. Of course there were other factors that influenced the decision to return to Lebanon. There were enough meetings where everything was laid on the table. We had struggled with this problem for months, so it was well known what we were up against.

*FORUM:* What is your sense of how American thinking has evolved on the issue of the use of force for political influence around the world?

*HOWE:* The use of force is not necessarily an exclusively military or political question; it is always a kind of mixed equation. A military force underlines political efforts and it really is an underpinning of a foreign policy. Foreign policy would end if you ever got to a kind of World War III situation. We would have failed — failed to bring peace and stability to the world. During the current period we have a situation in which military force is one of the underpinnings of foreign policy, a very essential one, along

with economic policy and the national will and a lot of other factors as well.

But it certainly is important; if you are going to be relevant then you have to back policy with strength and it has to be credible. Paradoxically, to maintain peace you also have to be willing to use force in certain circumstances, and that extends all the way from the major to the very minor sorts of force. And it means that when you use military force to back diplomatic efforts (for example, if you send a carrier battle group to a certain area to reinforce your concern or to back an ally or to give warning to an adversary) that you not only are saying, "Don't move into this situation," but that you have the capability to respond. Having done that, you must also be willing, if an enemy is not deterred by that, to follow through when warranted.

I think that American credibility and the confidence of others in the U.S. is higher today than it has been in some periods. Now Lebanon has raised some questions in some minds, but Lebanon is a unique situation in which we were not trying to solve the problem with force and it was not the same thing. In the Grenada situation, for example, there was a lot of positive reaction, in spite of world opinion being very critical. What is said publicly by heads of state and what is said privately can be very different.

The thing that Americans don't really appreciate is how important the United States is to the whole world structure, and how dependent other countries are on us and on our will to sacrifice and stand up and help them defeat the bully. Americans also often don't appreciate other countries' fundamental respect — despite all the criticism we take in the U.N. and all sorts of public arenas — for what this country stands for and our values. They know that the United States, in this age, is an unselfish country which stands for important human values. There is a large dependence on our willingness to apply force and give backing to our friends. It clearly influences whether they are willing to stand up themselves. If they think that the United States will stand committed to them in the event of a threat of their getting mowed down by someone else much stronger and larger, then they are more likely to stand up themselves to intimidation. Even today, which is a different age than ten years ago, there is still a heavy dependence on the United States. When congressional actions or media reports create a sense that there is no political will and a deemphasis on strength, that causes a lot of people to worry, and not just in one or two nations. Many countries around the world count on the United States to be strong, to be resolute, and to be steadfast. So when you talk about political will, military force backing political will, it is very relevant to



the kind of diplomacy we are trying to carry out in this complex world to protect our interests.

It is also important to mention that we face a real challenge with regard to the use of force in this age which is not just what you commonly hear — the problems associated with the Congress or the War Powers Act or media attention (e.g., the funeral of one soldier seen in everyone's homes). That has an influence in this world of uncertain peace, this messy world that we live in now; that has an impact on some capabilities, the kinds of forces we have, and raises questions about our resolve. The question today is also not whether the United States would respond if challenged in Europe or the Strait of Hormuz, those kinds of places where we have deterrence in place. There is no one who is questioning the American will to respond to that kind of overt attack.

The real threat that we face is the more covert, subtle use of force that could tend to cause real destruction to our interests. Sometimes our friend does not share all of our values or its government has all kinds of internal problems; yet, the alternative is even worse. You can look at Iran as an example. These are always difficult situations, but clearly sometimes we have commitments to our own interests or due to historic kinds of friendships that have developed with countries that do not have strong internal stability. These are the most difficult kinds of situations we face. Added to that is state-sponsored terrorism. It's not that we haven't had these problems in the past, but today we have all sorts of complicating factors: religious fervor, for example, that has much to do with some of the uncertainty that exists in the Middle East.

For some problems, such as rescues of hostages — there are historic obligations that go back to the birth of our nation. Mayaguez was really a citizen rescue operation. Grenada was a rescue of Americans in jeopardy in a state of anarchy. We failed in Iran but the American public only criticized that we didn't do it more effectively. Those kinds of situations are not really difficult in terms of a policymaking choice, what should you do or shouldn't you do; you must protect your citizens. For the United States the most complex problems are those in which there is no clear-cut, obvious thing to do.

What do you do when an embassy is blown away, or South Korean Cabinet members are killed by the North Koreans in Burma, or you have the kind of natural problem that exists in Central America — poverty and injustice — but fed by elements from Cuba and the Soviet Union who are fomenting it and are actively arming insurgents? How do you deal with those kinds of situations? They are messy. We wish they were more clear-cut and easy to deal with. Those are the situations in which

you see some understandable resistance by Americans to using force, but where we may well have to use force. Clearly, we have to build up our friends. And this means that they have to have economic stability, political help, as well as help with their armed forces. The security assistance programs are very important to helping countries be able to defend themselves. It is a good investment.