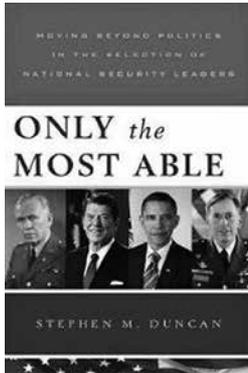


Book Review



Only the Most Able: Moving Beyond Politics in the Selection of National Security Leaders

by Stephen M. Duncan

Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 296 pp.

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Civilian control of the military has been in place since the founding of the country; its most recent affirmation—the Truman MacArthur Controversy in the 1950s. Duncan’s book does not challenge this principle, but suggests that the basis for this control is under stress. The quality of civilian leadership is inferior, and unqualified civilian leaders have the capacity to degrade and misuse the military.

Throughout history, the military has improved the quality of its leaders. The last round of reforms was at the end of the Vietnam era. Better personnel selection, evaluation, and training improved the post-Vietnam military leader. Moreover, the reforms culminated in the Goldwater Nichols Act of 1986. This act synchronized military decision-making, enabled joint operations between branches of service, and reduced micro management by the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

In contrast, there is no systematic method for selecting, training, and disciplining civilian leaders of the military. Because there is no common ethos, training and certification are out of the question. Nor has the Congress addressed the problem with effective legislation.

Duncan traces the problem back to the source; presidents and senior civilian leaders who are incapable of fulfilling their Constitutional responsibilities. Rather than attribute the problem to vague historical trends, the author is courageously specific. President Clinton, with no military experience, used flawed ascriptive criteria to appoint civilian leaders to key security posts. The most conspicuous Clinton failure was Congressman Les Aspin. In Duncan’s words: “His schmoozy, arm-around-the-shoulders style clashed with the formal culture of senior officers.” Aspin was an ineffective manager who endlessly entertained options but could not make a decision. The Aspin era ended in the debacle of Mogadishu. Eleven months after assuming office, Aspin resigned. This botched military mission illustrates what happens when the delicate partnership between civilian and military leaders does not develop: people die, needlessly.

Though Duncan’s focus is civilian/military leadership, the principle could be expanded. Civilians who manage agencies with a security mission have a special burden. When social security administrators make a mistake, checks can be recalled or reissued. When civilian managers of military agencies, emergency management agencies, or law enforcement agencies make a mistake, the results are usually irreparable with widespread negative consequences. The incompetence of a

civilian governor was responsible for delaying the deployment of the military to New Orleans, and millions suffered the consequences of haphazard recovery and rescue efforts. Another example, the deaths at Benghazi and the failure of U.S. foreign policy can be traced to failed civilian leaders—leaders incapable or unwilling to forge interagency policies ensuring the security of the U.S. Embassy.

Duncan correctly argues that the present system allows civilian leaders to remain unaccountable. Only after conspicuous, obvious failures such as Mogadishu, Katrina, or Benghazi do bad civilian leaders begin to squirm. His positive and original contribution to the literature is that civilian leadership must be and can be improved. Duncan offers a two-part solution.

The first solution is mandatory training: at minimum a two week orientation course that educates aspiring leaders to not only the importance but the complexity of their future responsibilities. Such training would be an opportunity for the Simons Center to educate civilian leaders on techniques of interagency management. The second is ongoing performance management. Civilian managers of security agencies should understand that the importance of their task requires they be routinely evaluated and held accountable to established performance benchmarks. Results of these performance evaluations would be reported to the president.

The contribution of Duncan's book is to shine the light of analysis on an area that for too long has been exempt from rigorous scrutiny. Whereas military leaders know that they are subject to rigorous performance standards, their Constitutional bosses remain exempt—free to pursue whatever ideological agenda they please. Under present arrangements, no systematic scrutiny and evaluation of civilian leadership exists. Only until the magnitude of civilian failure is sufficiently great are ad hoc evaluation processes hastily thrown into place. Duncan is correct. There must be a better way. How much worse can it get? Under the present system, civilian leaders like Hillary Clinton, knowing they are impervious to evaluation, can say: "What difference does it make?" **IAJ**