

**Opening Statement on Civil-Military Relations**  
**Chairman John McCain**  
**January 10, 2017**

The committee meets this morning to receive testimony on civilian control of the Armed Forces. I'd like to welcome our witnesses this morning:

- Dr. Eliot Cohen, Robert E. Osgood Professor of Strategic Studies at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies; and
- Dr. Kathleen Hicks, Senior Vice President, Kissinger Chair, and Director of the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Civilian control of the Armed Forces has been a bedrock principle of American government since our Revolution. A painting hanging in the Capitol Rotunda celebrates the legacy of George Washington, who voluntarily resigned his commission as commander of the Continental Army to the Congress. And this principle is enshrined in our Constitution, which divides control of the Armed Forces among the President, as commander in chief, and the Congress as coequal branches of government.

Since then, Congress has adopted various provisions separating military and civilian positions. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example, Congress prohibited an Army officer from accepting a civil office. And more recently in the *National Security Act of 1947* and subsequent revisions, Congress has prohibited any individual from serving as Secretary of Defense within seven years of active-duty service as a commissioned officer in the Armed Forces.

Of course, it was only three years later in 1950 that Congress granted General George Marshall an exemption to that law, and the Senate confirmed him to be Secretary of Defense. Indeed, the separation between civilian and military positions has not always been so clear. Twelve of our nation's presidents previously served as generals in the Armed Forces. Over the years, numerous high-ranking civilian officials in the Department of Defense have had long careers in military service. Our current Deputy Secretary of Defense, for example, served 27 years in the United States Marine Corps.

The basic responsibilities of civilian and military leaders are simple enough. For civilian leaders: to seek the best professional military advice while under no obligation to follow it. For military leaders, to provide candid counsel while

recognizing civilians have the final say. Or as James Mattis once observed, to insist on being heard and never insist on being obeyed.

But the fact is that the relationship between civilian and military leaders is inherently and endlessly complex. It is a relationship of unequals who nonetheless share responsibility for the defense of the nation. The stakes could not be higher. The gaps in mutual understanding are sometimes wide. Personalities often clash. And the unique features of the profession of arms and the peculiarities of service cultures often prove daunting for civilians who never served in uniform.

Ultimately, the key to healthy civil-military relations and civilian control of the military is the oath soldiers and statesmen share in common “to protect and defend the Constitution.” It is about the trust they have in one another to perform their respective duties in accordance with our republican system of government. It is about the candid exchange of views engendered by that trust, and which is vital to effective decision-making. And it is about mutual respect and understanding. The proper balance in civil-military relations is difficult to achieve. And as history has taught us, achieving that balance requires different leaders at different times.

The President-elect has announced his intention to nominate James Mattis to be our next Secretary of Defense. In light of his recent military experience, his nomination will require Congress to pass legislation providing a one-time exception allowing him to serve as Secretary, legislation this committee plans to consider this Thursday. The members of this committee will have to reach their own conclusions. But as for me, I will fully support that legislation and Mr. Mattis’s nomination.

There is no military officer I have met in my lifetime with a deeper understanding of civil-military relations than James Mattis. He even co-edited a book on the subject. He has upheld the principle of civilian control of the Armed Forces in four decades of military service as well as in civilian life. His character, judgment, and commitment to defending our nation and its Constitution have earned him the trust of our next commander-in-chief, members of Congress on both sides of the aisle, and so many serving in our Armed Forces. In short, I believe James Mattis is an exceptional public servant worthy of exceptional consideration.

The committee is fortunate to have with us two of the foremost scholars on civil-military relations, both of whom have a record of distinguished government service. I am eager to hear their views on this important subject.