

The Defense Wisdom Deficit in Latin America: A Reply to Thomas C. Bruneau

David Pion-Berlin

The University of California, Riverside, United States

Resumen

Este artículo responde al trabajo de Thomas Bruneau (FASOC Vol. 19, N°1) sobre el conocimiento en defensa que deberían tener los políticos para institucionalizar el control civil, priorizar políticas, escoger misiones y garantizar la efectividad y eficiencia militar. Mientras para Bruneau esto ocurre en un nivel normativo, argumento aquí que la práctica es diferente. Los políticos regularmente asignan misiones a las fuerzas armadas y escogen entre objetivos militares y no militares de acuerdo a consideraciones políticas de tipo pragmático, lo que no necesariamente se condice con un conocimiento específico en defensa. En este trabajo se argumenta que los políticos no ponen atención al criterio de eficiencia o eficacia y poseen bajos incentivos reales para aprender sobre defensa. Permanecer ignorantes sobre defensa supone pequeños riesgos de seguridad, y aprender del área provee nulos beneficios electorales.

Palabras Clave: Fuerzas Armadas, relaciones civiles militares, Gobernabilidad y democracia.

Abstract

This article responds to Thomas Bruneau's claim that politicians must have defense knowledge to institutionalize civilian control, to prioritize, to choose missions, and to ensure military effectiveness and efficiency. While it concurs with Bruneau on a normative level, empirically it differs, arguing that politicians regularly assign missions to the armed forces and choose between military and non-military objectives according to pragmatic political considerations, not according to an understanding of defense. Politicians do not pay attention to effectiveness or efficiency criteria and have no real incentive to learn about defense. They can ignore defense because doing so poses few security risks, and becoming savvy on matters of defense does not provide electoral benefits.

Keywords: Armed Forces, Civil-Military relations, governance and democracy.

In a recent article in the journal *Military Review*,¹ I argued that civilians in Latin America have not and will not become sufficiently knowledgeable about defense matters. They lack defense wisdom because they have no incentive to learn about the subject. Politicians gain no electoral advantage with voters by making defense a priority because military spending does not generate large amounts of civilian employment or economic growth. Moreover, nations of the region do not face serious national security threats. In this more relaxed security environment, voters and politicians alike perceive less risk to ignoring defense issues. Yet civilians must exert political authority over the military because it remains a self-interested corporation whose needs must be addressed. With a few exceptions, civilians have successfully done so by adroitly managing the military politically. And they have been able to achieve civilian control over their militaries despite considerable gaps in defense-related knowledge. For all these reasons, I called for an intellectual separation between the political management of the military on the one hand and the knowledge-based management of defense on the other.

In response to my article, Thomas Bruneau wrote an article in this journal titled, “Civil-Military Relations in Latin America: The Hedgehog and the Fox Revisited.”² Bruneau agrees that civilian politicians will never know as much about defense as military officers. But he suggests that they must have some understanding about the subject to ensure that the military do what they are required to do, “not only in terms of submitting to civilian control...but also in successfully fulfilling the current very wide spectrum of roles and missions assigned to the diverse security forces in Latin America.”³ In other words, he argues that it is not enough for politicians to achieve civilian control. They must also insure that militaries fulfill their roles and missions and do so in a cost-effective manner. Thus the author suggests that we think in terms of a trinity: control, effectiveness and efficiency. It is essential that defense-related, civilian-led institutions be fortified to “embed expertise” so that this trinity is achieved routinely and in perpetuity.⁴

In essence, if we accept the trinity, then the civilian task seems to be more challenging. Politicians must (1) determine what roles and missions to assign to the military, (2) make tradeoffs between investing in defense vs.

¹ Pion-Berlin, David. 2005. “Political Management of the Military in Latin America”, *Military Review*, January-February; 19-31.

² Bruneau, Thomas C. 2005. “Civil-Military Relations in Latin America: The Hedgehog and the Fox Revisited”, *Fuerzas Armadas y Sociedad*, Año 19 (1); 111-131.

³ *Ibid*, p. 113.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 126.

non-defense sectors, given a scarcity of resources, (3) budget military tasks efficiently, (4) assess how the military performs once a mission is underway, and (5) institutionalize their gains. The key issues then are these: how much defense knowledge have civilians actually needed to carry out these tasks? Even with this level of knowledge, have they been and/or can they be successful? And most importantly, what would motivate them to achieve success in the first place?

In one respect, the differences between Professor Bruneau's position and mine are modest. He has set a relatively low "knowledge bar" for civilians to clear. As he says, "Considering the very large spectrum of roles and missions that Latin American armed forces are currently engaged in, it seems only logical that civilian policymakers possess a *bare minimum of knowledge* about national security and defense" (emphasis added).⁵ It would be hard to disagree with the normative goal that civilians gain some level of defense wisdom. As a general rule of thumb, governmental officials should, ideally, have some familiarity with whatever policy it is they are trying to promote. If however, the challenges posed by the trinity are as formidable as they seem, one wonders whether the "bare minimum" will suffice, *if* indeed defense wisdom is necessary. Thus given the challenges laid out by the author, the issue of how much defense wisdom is enough remains very relevant. On one point however, we completely concur: the *balance of competence* will still lie squarely in favor of the armed forces even with incremental increases in civilian defense understandings.

The problem is less normative (where I find myself mostly agreeing with Professor Bruneau) than empirical. The work that Professor Bruneau and his colleagues have conducted through their *Center for Civil-Military Relations* is important and admirable. Undoubtedly, civilian and military figures alike are better off for having taken the courses offered at CCMR, applying what they have learned to their daily experiences within defense ministries, legislative committees and elsewhere. My purpose has not been to diminish this enterprise and its goals, but rather to explain why it will be an uphill climb to get there. As I have enumerated before and do so again below, civilian politicians and average citizens do not have a proper set of incentives to invest time, resources and expertise into the defense realm. As such, defense learning never becomes a national priority.

On an empirical level, Dr. Bruneau and I differ. My first observation would be that all governments in Latin America regularly make tradeoffs between military missions and non-military objectives, and between defense

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 129-130.

and non-defense spending. But they have done so largely without regard for military effectiveness or efficiency. They have ignored the trinity, and have not paid a price for doing so. Military programs, training and installations have been eliminated and personnel payrolls trimmed based on macroeconomic criteria, pressures from international lenders, and the political priorities of diverting resources to other areas. Policymakers have demanded these cuts without immersing themselves in the details, such as budget curtailments and their effect military strategy, force readiness, deployment, training, education, etc. They have not appointed civilian defense specialists to oversee the implementation of these cuts. Neither have congressional defense committees looked at defense budget allocations or implementation in any detail.

Rather civilians have, by and large, left these details to the armed forces alone.⁶ This has provided substantial autonomy to many militaries in the allocation of resources and thus the implementation of projects. But while many militaries get to slice up the “budgetary defense pie” as they wish, they do not get to determine how large the pie will be. That allocation remains firmly in civilian hands.

Democratic leaders have been able to largely ignore effectiveness and efficiency because in an age of dwindling resources and competing priorities, defense is no longer a priority. Defense can no longer command the policymakers’ attention as it once did, and voters do not hold the politicians accountable for defense ignorance. Besides, the risks to not focusing on defense are much lower than in the past. The nations of the region are at peace with each other, and diplomacy has settled most of the outstanding territorial disputes between neighbors (with Colombia and Venezuela being the obvious exception). Hence, it is very difficult to justify an increased attention to how diminished resources are divvied up, nor is there preoccupation that a failure to address military needs will leave these nations vulnerable to external attack.

In Argentina for example, the budget cutters within the Economics Ministry hacked away for years at defense, leaving the military without adequate supplies, training, and mission readiness.⁷ Yet at the same time, political leaders worked energetically to forge bilateral accords with Brazil and Chile that settled all boundary disputes between those three countries. Those agreements lowered the threat levels for Argentina and accordingly

⁶ RESDAL. 2005. *El Presupuesto de Defensa en America Latina: La importancia de la transparencia y herramientas para el monitoreo independiente*. Ser en el 2000, Argentina. 21.

⁷ Pion-Berlin, David. *Through Corridors of Power: Institutions and Civil-Military Relations in Argentina*. Penn State University Press, University Park, Pennsylvania. 107-140.

reduced the risks to shrinking the military down to size. Defense spending was no longer a priority, but the military accepted this reality, and do so to this day. Rather than rattle sabers, the Argentine military simply adjusted their operations to fit within budget. In other words, the logic was flipped on its head. Resources were not allocated based on strategic defense priorities, but rather strategic defense priorities were set (and scaled back) based on budgetary resources, which in turn were guided by overarching political priorities. Civilians need to set their own national priorities, situate the military within those, and then exert the political will necessary to fulfill them. In all of this, little in the way of defense wisdom was and is required.

Generally speaking, I would surmise that it does not require much, if any defense expertise for civilians in Latin America to assign roles and missions to the military. As Bruneau admits “the evidence shows that civilian policymakers not only manage the armed forces, but also decide on their roles and missions...whether or not they are well informed.”⁸ It does take sound political judgments. Where can the military best be used to achieve national policy objectives and enhance one’s personal and political party standings with voters? Where would it be ill advised to use the military based on these same considerations? These questions are answered every year by Latin American politicians with minimal understandings of defense.

As I have said elsewhere, the decision of politicians to decide whether or not to employ the military in certain tasks is a pragmatic one, made on the basis of common sense and common information. For example, police find themselves inadequately staffed and funded to take on street gangs in Central America, and so the authorities ask the military to lend a helping hand. A failure to do so invites electoral risks with a public yearning for greater protection from crime. In 2002-2003, civilian agencies could not expeditiously deliver sufficient volumes of famine relief to impoverished Argentine towns on their own, and so the government directed the military to do so.⁹ Absent military participation, Argentine authorities would have faced the near scandalous prospect of watching hundreds die in the land of wheat and cattle. Politicians seek military help in development assistance in Ecuador, counter narcotic programs in Brazil, and disaster relief in Honduras and Guatemala. In each case, political pragmatism dictated that civilian leaders made the decisions to deploy their militaries for unorthodox assignments such as these.

⁸ Bruneau, Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

Once a political judgment is made that the military could, in theory, be deployed in a given situation, politicians will then rely on their commanding officers to tell them how prepared the military is to take on such an assignment, what the degree of difficulty is, and the risks associated with it. In other words, the military is in the best position to tell their overseers about their own state of readiness; civilian defense expertise is not called upon.

Then once the mission is underway, military performance becomes an issue, raising Bruneau's concern with effectiveness. Here, he is probably right that *some* defense wisdom on the part of civilians would be useful. Defense experts could better evaluate the data they get from their commanders on mission progress, and compare it to countervailing information from alternative sources. But in practice, civilian leaders in Latin America seldom have such knowledge and instead rely on the military for its own assessments. In all fairness, it should also be acknowledged that presidents and their advisors even in the advanced industrial states routinely gauge mission performance by trusting in the views conveyed to them by their commanders on the ground. U.S. President George Bush repeatedly says that he trusts fully and directly in his generals for appraisals on how the war is proceeding in Iraq, whether more or fewer troops are needed, and when they could be withdrawn. U.S. officials tend to shy away from micromanaging the war, and they seem to have given the military a very long leash with which to operate.

How essential is it that democratic leaders institutionalize the oversight and monitoring of military conduct? Samuel Huntington believed that a professionalized military would do as it were told, more so without civilian prodding. He abided by the notion of a strict division of labor—leaving military tasks to the officers and soldiers, and civilian tasks to the politicians.¹⁰ Contemporary theorists cast doubts on this theory, concurring with Bruneau that some form of civilian oversight and constructive meddling in military operational affairs—if we can call it that—is advisable, even necessary.¹¹ Again, as a *normative* goal for Latin America, one could hardly quibble with Bruneau. Why not institutionalize qualified civilian oversight if you can do it and pay for it? It may well help to fully solidify democratic civil-military relations. There are two issues here. The first is how effective institutionalized

¹⁰ Huntington, Samuel. 1957. *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Mass.

¹¹ Cohen, Eliot A. 2002. *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen and Leadership in Wartime*. The Free Press. New York; Feaver, Peter D. 2003. *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Mass.

oversight can be. The second and more important one regards the political costs and benefits for civilian politicians to undertaking such initiatives.

Practically speaking, only some of the most advanced industrial societies succeed at these tasks, and they do so unevenly. In the U.S., with its abundance of resources and its huge, skilled civilian defense staff, the military has nonetheless been able to occasionally undermine civilian policies via bureaucratic foot dragging, end runs around the administration, exaggerated claims and information withholding.¹² The military may wish to avoid fulfilling civilian plans, and they have the bureaucratic and informational capacity to do just that. While some U.S. civilian defense specialists may be a match for their military counterparts, on average, military personnel have the edge. They have the edge because they have devoted more time to mastering their technical trade, because they are closer to the combat operations themselves, and because they have secrecy provisions at their disposal. Even the smartest civilians within the most well furnished defense institutions of the Pentagon can be and are outmaneuvered by a military that holds so many cards up its sleeves. The military advantages are always relative, not absolute; but they are real, and they impede civilian efforts to institutionalize total control. The key question is this: if, with all the great assets at their disposal, civilian overseers in the United States still suffer a knowledge deficit with respect to their military, what could we expect from civilian politicians and their minimal staff within impoverished Latin American states?

Civilian leaders face certain costs in deciding to monitor the military more closely to ensure policy compliance and mission effectiveness. The convention is that the costs of civilian micromanagement are severe because civilians are inexperienced. Thus their interventions are likely to be counterproductive-perceived by the military as harmful meddling in its internal affairs rather than constructive engagement.¹³ This observation has been made for advanced democracies and thus certainly has relevance for Latin American democracies.

Civil-military specialists surmise that notwithstanding their defense wisdom deficits, civilians bear fewer costs to overseeing defense when the stakes are high. When countries face threats to their national security, when they are at war or when war looms on the horizon, civilians can better justify interventions into military affairs.¹⁴ Put another way, politicians could least afford to disengage when the risks to the country were greater, because if

¹² Feaver, Peter, *op. cit.*, pp. 68-69.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

strategic and/or tactical errors were made, civilians would be held responsible and the political costs would be heavy, even catastrophic. Thus, during these times, civilian leaders have an incentive to become familiar with defense issues and to closely watch what the military do.

But that is precisely why the incentive to monitor and oversee defense affairs is absent in Latin America. Threats to national security are very low. No nation in the region has faced the prospect of external war for some time. Only Colombia confronts a viable armed insurgency from within, and the rest face low-level threats from narco-traffickers, arms merchants and criminal gangs. The militaries are usually not on the front lines of these battles (with Colombia being the exception) and so there is less urgency attached to civilian oversight. In this context, civilians calculate that the risks to allowing the military to mind their own behavior are negligible.

If the costs of civilian inaction are minimal, are there nonetheless political benefits to be reaped from paying attention to defense affairs? The electoral payoffs to effective oversight and monitoring are almost always meager, and so politicians seldom face pressures from voters to focus on defense. As I argued in my article *The Political Management of the Military in Latin America*, military installations and defense contractors provide very few civilian jobs, and are normally concentrated in select areas. For that reason, defense spending is not a huge pork-barreling opportunity for most politicians.¹⁵ Only a very few lawmakers stand to gain by diverting expenditures to or becoming more informed about defense. By contrast, in the United States with its sprawling military industrial complex and dispersion of military bases in every state across hundreds of counties, most legislators stand to gain from defense knowledge.

If any electoral rationale exists at all for becoming “defense wise” it lies in the fact that currently ten Latin American countries grant active duty officers the right to vote. Politicians wishing to curry favor with voting soldiers would have an interest in becoming more defense-savvy. Unfortunately however, defense wisdom produces at best a negligible electoral return because of the small size of nearly all Latin American militaries. For these 10 countries, on average, active duty officers constitute less than 0.7 percent of all registered voters.¹⁶

¹⁵ Pion-Berlin, David, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

¹⁶ The countries which permit soldiers to vote are Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela. Data is found in Rial, Juan, 2005. “Las normas jurídicas y las organizaciones de la defensa”, en RESDAL, Atlas Comparativo de la Defensa en América Latina. Ser en el 2000, Argentina. 28-29.

What of incentives that originate from outside the nation state? The issue comes up in Thomas Bruneau's brief comments on Colombia, Central America and Europe. He accurately points out that in Central America and even in the highest risk environment of Latin America –Colombia– there are still serious weaknesses in the institutional basis for democratic civil-military relations. By contrast, in Eastern and Central Europe, reforms have advanced considerably further. Democratic civilian presidents and their defense ministers and staff have spearheaded successful efforts to subordinate, modernize and professionalize the armed forces in countries such as Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary. These officials have paid attention to Bruneau's trinity. But that begs the question, what motivated them to do so?

There were great political incentives for these leaders that originate from their region. Acceptance into NATO meant the ultimate form of lasting security for nations that had for so much of their history suffered insecurity by way of invasion, occupation and domination by hostile foreign forces. The voting public of these countries yearned for security and were strongly in favor of NATO. Between 1993-96, upwards of 70 percent of Poles favored NATO entry and at times as many as 80 percent of Hungarians did as well. NATO entry also meant favorable terms when it came to cost sharing for common alliance expenses. These included the costs of infrastructure improvements (communications, air defense systems, training ranges, etc.), payments for the alliance's headquarters, and construction and maintenance of petroleum pipelines. While Germany, the U.K. and the U.S. combined paid for 60 percent of these costs, Poland's share amounted to just 1.3 percent, and Hungary's just 0.3 percent.¹⁷

In this light, East European politicians gained electorally by enrolling in NATO. They had significant incentives to overhauling their defense systems to bring them up to speed and make them interoperable with the more advanced NATO members. Likewise, they were motivated to employ skilled civilians in the defense sector. Commenting on this theme, the former President of Poland said, "It would be hard to imagine participation in NATO decision-making processes and the Alliance's day to day operations without preparing highly qualified civilian and military personnel for service in institutions within Poland and within NATO structures."¹⁸ It would be difficult to imagine a Latin American president making a similar statement about civilian defense service.

¹⁷ Congressional Budget Office. 2001. *NATO Budget Sharing After Enlargement*. <http://www.cbo.gov/showdoc.cfm?index=2976&sequence=4>

¹⁸ Kwasniewski, Aleksander. 1997. "Poland in NATO: Opportunities and Challenges", NATO web edition, Año 45 (5) Sept.-Oct. www.nato.int/docu/review/1997/9705-02.htm

Latin American politicians do not face the same set of powerful incentives. There is no parallel to NATO. The United States has never shown interest in creating a hemispheric alliance that would integrate *and give parity to* Latin American forces. Before and during the Cold War, the U.S. bestowed upon itself the mission of guarding the hemisphere from external threats while relegating its Southern partners to more minor, domestic security functions. Now in the post-Cold War age of global terror, the U.S. once again sees itself in the vanguard, imploring the Latin American states to perform subsidiary roles. But even if Latin American states could tolerate being minor partners in such an arrangement, where are the material incentives to do so? Washington has focused most of its military assistance on Colombia, leaving very little for the rest of the continent. To the contrary, the U.S. has recently withheld military assistance (including IMET) from several Latin American states as punishment for failing to immunize U.S. soldiers from potential prosecution before the International Criminal Court. Where else would funding originate from? It would not come from the Organization of American States, which has yet to agree on a formula to create its own regional security force that would bear some resemblance to NATO. The fact is, there are no internal or external material incentives to motivate civilians to institutionalize their oversight of defense or to spearhead the reform and modernization of defense forces. For that reason, when and if reform and modernization are ever realized, they will not come about as a result of civilian leadership.

To borrow part of Bruneau's metaphor and to risk a pun, the fox hedges. He (the civilian politician) is cagy enough to know that he cannot sell defense as a priority item to a skeptical public. The public will not seek to purchase it directly because as a public good, defense is seldom used. The public will not buy into it because it perceives the risks to defense inattentiveness as minimal in the current climate of peace between states and low level threats within states that seldom push the armed forces to the front lines. And it will not be convinced because it sees few returns in the form of defense jobs or economic stimulation, nor does it see inducements coming from Washington. If voters don't buy into it, it is hard for politicians to do so. And if political leaders do not lead on defense, civilian personnel will not follow them into defense ministries, at least not in any great numbers.

The fox, however, is also savvy enough to know the value of political skills, or at least he should be. He has to manage civil and military affairs in a way that minimizes the risks to his tenure as president, that solidifies his support bases, that achieves policy goals, and that ensures continued military subordination. We are reminded of the primacy of politics over defense wisdom when we view the Ecuadorian case, one alluded to by Bruneau himself. In

December 2004 Ecuador's President Luciano Gutierrez cobbled together a slim majority in Congress to evict 27 of 31 Supreme Court justices on very shaky constitutional grounds. Many in the opposition saw this eviction as a thinly veiled effort to reward former President Abdala Bucaram for his opposition to articles of impeachment against the president which had been drawn up but which had gone down in defeat on November 16th. Bucaram was in self-imposed exile to avoid corruption charges back home—charges which many thought the new panel of justices would drop. Sure enough, on March 31 of 2005, the new Supreme Court president, Guillermo Castro, voided all charges against Bucaram, and the former president returned to Ecuador on April 2nd.

On April 15, 2005, in response to widespread protests over that decision, President Gutierrez abruptly retired the entire court and declared a state of emergency to restore public order. That only swelled the ranks of demonstrators and fueled the anger of a public now convinced that Gutierrez had assumed near dictatorial powers. The military then suddenly withdrew its support for Gutierrez, refused to repress the protesters, and the Ecuadorian congress voted on April 20, 2005 to depose the president.¹⁹ Gutierrez was escorted out of the presidential palace by the military, not on his own accord.

Bruneau notes the irony in the fact that Gutierrez had been a colonel in the army who had led a 2000 coup against former president Jamil Mahuad. But the greater irony here is the fact that as a military man, all of Gutierrez's considerable defense-related knowledge could not keep his own officers in line nor save him from a disgraceful fall. Politically, the president had acted unwisely, alienating the public, the congress and ultimately the armed forces themselves. It was his lack of political acumen—not any deficit in defense wisdom—that spelled disaster for him in the civil-military realm.

In sum, I applaud Thomas Bruneau for taking up my challenge to think differently about civil-military relations. In devising the trinity of civilian control, military effectiveness, and efficiency, he has made a very useful contribution to our theorizing about an important topic. If civilians can get sufficiently up to speed on defense issues so as to better manage military affairs, I would welcome it. But I have my doubts that this goal will be achieved in an environment that fails to create incentives to acquire such knowledge. Until the proper incentives can be found, we might have to settle for the political management of military affairs in the Latin American region.

¹⁹ *Washington Post*. 2005. "Ecuadorian Congress Ousts President." April 21.

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David Pion-Berlin

pion@ucr.edu

Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Riverside, in the United States. He received his doctorate from the Graduate School of International Studies, University of Denver, in 1984. He has published widely on the issues of civil-military relations, security, and human rights. Most recently, he co-authored, with Craig Arceneaux, the book *Transforming Latin America: The International and Domestic Origins of Change* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005).