

'Democracy needs civilian control of

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WASHINGTON -- An effective democracy requires civilian control of the military. Civilian control of the military exemplifies the principle that military force is not an end in itself but a means that the civil government can use to bring about certain political objectives. Civilian control means that tactical decisions regarding military operations in the field must serve the political and strategic goals established by the civil authority.

These observations were made by David F. Trask, the former chief historian of the US Army Centre of Military History, ex-historian at the US State Department, and currently the Director of the American Committee on the History of the Second World War.

Several undemocratic Pakistani politicians have been advocating that Pakistan's military should be constitutionally allowed to play a political role in Pakistani politics and some politicians are demanding that martial law be imposed on the Pakistani nation. However, Trask, who has also been a visiting professor at the US Naval War College, the University of Maryland and Howard University in Washington, DC, points out that the officers and enlisted personnel of democratic armed services accept the principle of civilian control as a requirement of military professionalism.

Giving an example of how the US political system preserves the democratic process in America, Trask said the constitution of the

The American public accepts military personnel for political office only if they retire from active military duty, he said.

He went on to say that the US president is commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and civilians head the US Department of Defence and the individual service branches. In World Wars I and II, civilian officials were in charge of marshalling the resources needed to conduct successful combat operations, according to the American historian. In the Cold War period, civilians ensured the development and maintenance of the forces necessary to deter the Soviet threat, Trask said. In the post-Cold War period, civilian officials will continue to head the US defence conversion effort, he added.

Trask, who is the author of several books and articles on US military history, including "The War with Spain in 1898" and "Victory without Peace: American Foreign Relations During the Twentieth Century," further explained that under American democracy, the US Congress makes fiscal appropriations for the support of the armed forces and uses its power of investigation to ensure the US military's ultimate accountability to the public will.

The US Uniform Code of Military Justice applies civilian principles to military investigations and trials, Trask said. Civilian courts -- the US Court of Military Appeals and ultimately the US Supreme Court -- have the authority to review military judicial actions, he points out.

American society abhors restrictions on civilian rights in time of war or peace and moves to make restitution should such

violations of constitutional rights occur, Trask said.

The United States eschews large standing armies and hastens to demobilise or reduce its armed forces as soon as military emergencies or threats are dispelled, said the American author and historian.

Trask, who was a professor at the State University of New York at Stony Brook for 13 years before he joined the US federal government, points out that the most important military clause in the US constitution is found in Article II, Section 2. It provides that "The president shall be commander-in-chief of the army and navy of the United States, and of the militia of the several (American) states, when called into the actual service of the United States." Given his dual roles of chief executive and commander-in-chief, the US president heads both the civil government and the military services. His powers include appointment of officers of the armed services. This arrangement ensures that the civilian chief executive stands at the head of the military chain of command; through command authority, he ensures civilian control over the making of military policy, Trask remarked.

Civilian control not only guards against military subversion, it recognises that military strategy is a servant of national political goals established by the civilian government, Trask commented.

Although the US president plays the predominant role in maintaining civilian control over American armed forces, the US Congress has a strong influence in military affairs, reflecting the principle of separation of powers.

Article I, Section 8, of the US Constitution partly states that "The Congress shall have power to... provide for the common defence... of the United States. To declare war. To raise and support armies, but no appropriation of money to that use shall be for a longer term than two years, and to provide and maintain a navy." Congress also gained the authority "To make rules for the government and regulation of the land and naval forces." These provisions preclude the US president from making war without the consent of the US Congress.

Trask says the US Constitution did not mention judicial oversight of the American military, but by 1803, the US courts successfully claimed the power of judicial review -- including the authority to decide the constitutionality of legislative, executive and military actions.

The secretaries of the army, navy and air force, who are civilian officials appointed by the US president, have strengthened the legal-institutional basis for civilian control of the US military, said the American historian. The military officers and soldiers are responsible to these civilian officials, Trask said. The three service secretaries are members of the US president's cabinet, which does not include uniformed military officials. The secretary of defence and the deputy secretary of defence, who are civilian officials appointed by the US president, run the US Defence Department and maintain civilian control over the American military.

Trask has

drawn the following three conclusions:

(1) During the protracted confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States known as the Cold War, the American nation was forced to maintain standing military forces during peace time as well as a large reserve system. This revived fears that a repressive garrison state might emerge, but these concerns again proved unfounded. Civilian control or people's rule remained unimpaired. Institutional reforms to enhance civil-military coordination alleviated difficulties because they expanded both civilian and military participation in national security affairs. Another important influence was the commitment of military professionals to the maintenance of civilian control.

(2) Predictions that a "military-industrial complex" would gain undue influence in the US government did not come to pass; countervailing influences, especially "widespread discussion of public policy that stemmed from the activities of a free press and the existence of independent organisations devoted to the study of national security affairs, prevented any such outcome. Avoidance of undue military influence during the Cold War vindicated the US practice of civilian control, showing that it was possible to reconcile democratic values and adequate national defence.

(3) As the Cold War finally faded away after the remarkable political changes that swept over the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in 1989-1992, the United States began to adjust its diplomatic and military posture to

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the new realities in a way that reinforced the predominance of civilian control.

✓ In short, the historical experience of the American people shows that they have remained committed to civilian control -- whether the American nation was weak or strong, whether the times were good or bad, and whether there was peace or war. Americans have never wavered in their belief that civilian control of the military is an essential component of government of, by and for the people, and that it strengthens national security in troubled times. Its most significant contribution is to minimise the natural conflict between the requirements of freedom and the necessity of order. The tradition of the citizen-soldier, never repudiated despite changes in the means of providing personnel for the US armed forces, helps to ensure that the values of those who serve in uniform reflect those of the society they are sworn to defend.

Every nation has a unique historical experience. Nevertheless, the thirst for freedom so marked in the American experience is universal, and the means by which any society preserves democracy is of the greatest significance to lovers of liberty everywhere. Many roads lead to constitutionalism, the rule of law and protections against the abuse of power by government officials, but certain principles are essential. One of them is civilian control of the military establishment. The complete absence of military coups and arbitrary military rule or martial law throughout the history of the United States is the measure of its utility and democracy.