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Bridging the Military-Civilian Divide: What Each Side Must Know About The Other—And About Itself

by Bruce Fleming

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While many treatments of civil-military relations focus on the exchange between appointed and elected officials with their uniformed senior military officers, this book examines the gap between American military culture and the civilian society it serves. The author is no stranger to the critique and provocation of the military establishment. While not inside the profession of arms, Dr. Bruce Fleming has the unique perspective of a civilian academic with long-standing engagement in a sector of the US military. Fleming has served over 25 years as a tenured professor of English at the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis. An author of several books and recipient of writing awards, in this work he tackles thorny issues in a pedantic style that belies his passion for the subject. Fleming's opening line offers, "It's critically important in a democracy to encourage open thinking about how to improve its military." This statement rings true after more than a decade of conflict and the transition to an era of uncertainty for America's security forces.

Fleming crafts the book in an organized and deliberate manner to support his case that the US military-civilian gap does indeed exist. He then goes on to explicate the factors that allowed the gap to widen in the twenty-first century. A scholar well-versed in philosophy and literature, Fleming provides a primer on values and virtues, commonly touted as differentiating factors between military members and civilians in American society. He counters that belief with, "the military as a whole has no separable virtues, morals, or religion. All it has is technical virtues, pragmatic morality, and generalized, nondivisive religion." Because of mutual misperceptions of each other's roles, society has provided the military with the aura of monopolies and a degree of autonomy (in some cases, with undue deference) in how it conducts business. Fleming offers that the role of the military is that of the hammer to be wielded by the hand of democracy. He cautions that, too often, the military perceives itself as responsible for directing when, where, and how the hammer's blow is to be struck. In doing so, the military forgets it is not the hand of civilian disposition.

Readers may come away from this book like a punch-drunk fighter. Fleming provides a series of blows—jabs, hooks, and haymakers—that may or may not connect, but have the military reader ducking. What is the nature of war, virtue, religion, and human sexuality? And why should these questions matter to our military? He skewers the sacred cows of military virtue and

values, which have permitted the military to maintain its self-image as being above and superior to that of American society.

Naval Academy students in Fleming's classes must leave feeling uncomfortably confused but invigorated by the challenges to the taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs integral to military culture. Readers external to his classroom experience might incorrectly charge Fleming with being racist, sexist, homophobic, and anti-Christian.

The author does not deny the need for diversity but is at odds at how the military goes about achieving it, especially for the service academies. He is against establishing policies and de facto quotas to ensure correct representation of the general population at the various academies. He is especially critical when the administration denies applicants who are more qualified the opportunity to attend. In the same light, he asserts the very nature of warfare and the inherent masculinity required to prosecute war effectively does not support women in the ranks since they significantly impact the male bonding process. Allowing openly gay members, he holds, would have the same adverse effect. In these instances, Fleming is decidedly not politically correct as he contests changes in the military that mirror changing attitudes in the general society. Many service academy graduates will raise an eyebrow as the author unabashedly targets their sports program, which he believes allows less qualified student-athletes into the academies.

The weakest sections of the book are Fleming's accounts of conflict with Naval Academy leaders. While he presents these incidents as illustrations of his themes, military readers may discount them as whining or attempts to get back at his superiors (this is part of their culture). Discerning readers will acknowledge such incidents occur with administrators who function within bureaucracies and others who may see themselves as institutional stewards.

Bridging the Military-Civilian Divide is necessary reading for military leaders at company-grade and above. The tendency within the military will be to dismiss out of hand the questions and challenges posed by Fleming. That would be a mistake. It is essential that members of the profession of arms are able to intelligently engage in a discourse and have a clear understanding of the profession and its role in service to the nation.