

Beware Taking Advice from Generals

What Happens Next - 04.28.2023

Larry Bernstein:

Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein. What Happens Next is a podcast which covers economics, finance, and history.

Today's episode is Beware Taking Advice from Generals.

Our speaker today is Ingo Tauschweizer who is a Professor of Military History at Ohio University. He recently wrote a biography entitled Maxwell Taylor's Cold War: From Berlin to Vietnam.

I am very concerned with relying on the advice of generals in political decision making. Generals often see military solutions to foreign policy problems and that can lead to war.

I want to handle this question in abstraction and with specific historic examples, and I've asked Ingo to speak today about General Maxwell Taylor as a case study.

Taylor was a famous war hero and later became Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff and was in the oval office advising JFK during the Cuban Missile Crisis and LBJ during the Vietnam war. Taylor recommended destroying the Russian nuclear missiles in Cuba and expanding the US presence in Vietnam.

Trump appointed three ex-Generals to very senior positions in his administration, and there is a growing consensus that generals can act as grown-ups in the room advising presidents. I want to push back against this idea because generals often choose military solutions to foreign policy problems.

Ingo, could you please focus your six minutes of opening remarks by providing background on General Maxwell Taylor because members of our audience will likely be unfamiliar with him and why he is so important.

Ingo Tauschweizer:

Maxwell Taylor was the first American General in Normandy on the night before D-Day in June 1944 when he commanded the 101st Airborne Division. He went on to command all US and UN forces toward the end of the Korean War. In 1953, he served as Chief of Staff of the Army. He was a military advisor at the White House to President John F. Kennedy and then became

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff which put him squarely into the Cuban Missile Crisis. And he served in that role until he was picked for the Ambassadorship to South Vietnam.

The first two decades of the Cold War saw him at the intersection of strategy and policy advising.

If people have heard of Taylor at all, they probably remember him not for these accomplishments, but for major perceived flaws. He's remembered as one of the hawks who brought about the Vietnam War.

As a historian of the US Army and of the Cold War, I was interested in Taylor's career and whether his experiences could tell us about the emerging national security apparatus in the US, about strategy and in the Cold War and the Vietnam War.

Taylor believed in peace from strength. He did not think that nuclear weapons alone were a sufficient deterrent, but he also thought that they needed to be made usable at levels below intercontinental war that could wipe out hundreds of millions of Americans.

Taylor really seemed to understand that strategy was more than the application of military force. That it included diplomacy, economics, even politics, and that he was keenly aware of the importance of allies.

I took four lessons from writing the book. One is that the national security mindset will guide decision makers to seek military solutions to political problems. I'm concerned that we're lacking a critical safeguard related to that. Secondly, that strategy and bureaucracy often work at cross purposes, especially when they're run through committee structures. If you arrive at policy guidance on the National Security Council, and you then have another body of rarely unified people, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, having to translate that into strategy, you arrive at a less than ideal product. Thirdly, that strategy has increasingly become the fault line between military operations and politics and policy. Whereas I think it should be the connective tissue that links them. And finally, that powerful and influential individuals who serve as key actors in various historical dramas are very important, but that their options are also limited by structures that range from bureaucracy to mindset.

Larry Bernstein:

During a political crisis, what do generals or retired generals bring to that critical conversation in the Oval Office?

Ingo Tauschweizer:

Ideally, if they can be impartial and not defined by service interests, they bring a sense of operational reality that policy makers may be lacking. If you take the discussions in the midst of the Cuban Missile Crisis, on the one hand, you may get hawkish advice like strike and take out the missile sites. But on the other hand, you also get the clear sense that this is not going to do away with all of the missiles, right? And so policy makers can follow the hawkish advice, or they can follow that maybe 5%, 10% of the Soviet strike force may survive. And you find yourself in the nuclear war. Civilian policy makers need to be able to weigh the risk against the more hawkish advice.

Larry Bernstein:

JFK's first assignment for Taylor was to figure out what went wrong with the CIA's failed operation at the Bay of Pigs. How does the Bay of Pigs disaster impact JFK's decision making process during the next major foreign policy predicament which was the Cuban missile crisis?

Ingo Tauschweizer:

This comes out of the Eisenhower Administration's process, the greater reliance on covert operations and on the CIA. It's not even that Taylor thought the Joint Chiefs advice was not particularly forthright. That they understood the pitfalls of the operation, but presented "it's not our operation to run."

So his main takeaway was that this segmentation of tasks could lead to barriers in an open and honest conversation. He came to understand that Kennedy really thrived on that that open exchange of truths rather than bureaucratically guarded statements. Taylor saw that as a fundamental problem that had really doomed the operation.

What it does is it brings Taylor into Kennedy's universe.

Larry Bernstein:

JFK concluded from the Bay of Pigs disaster that he did not get the right advice from the appropriate experts. JFK hadn't properly challenged some of the assumptions going into the CIA's Cuban operation. He hadn't asked the right questions to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. When the next major crisis happened, which was the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962, JFK decided to go down a different path of how to evaluate his options.

In his working group, JFK includes McGeorge Bundy, the former Harvard President, Robert McNamara his young enterprising Secretary of Defense, his brother Attorney General Robert

Kennedy, Vice President Lyndon Johnson, Secretary of State Rusk and General Maxwell Taylor. The so-called best and the brightest go at it. Tell us about this new process of debating policy options with massive uncertainty and the real risk of nuclear war in the balance.

Ingo Trauschweizer:

It's certainly important to note that Kennedy was more self-assured at that point. He learned that he couldn't just assume that professional advice, whether it was military or intelligence community or State Department, was necessarily the best advice. The National Security Council instinctively felt that airstrikes and an invasion would be just incredibly risky and probably not lead to a positive outcome for the US. Taylor himself comes at it from a we need to go to war perspective.

If you look at how much luck there was involved in the outcome of the Cuban Missile Crisis, not knowing about Soviet nuclear warheads in Cuba, not knowing about nuclear submarines approaching the Caribbean, there is a great element of pure chance. That contingency factor is just hard to quantify.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to focus on the advice from the military during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The CIA discover the nuclear missiles in Cuba after the U2s fly over the island. The generals assume that the nuclear missiles are not yet operational. When Kennedy asks his generals for military options, the head of the Air Force Curtis LeMay and Taylor encourage the use of an airstrike to destroy the missiles and then immediately followed by a full-scale land invasion of Cuba.

Kennedy was nervous about doing a Pearl Harbor-like surprise attack on the Cubans. JFK preferred to give the Russians a few hours' notice to get the Russian military advisors out of harms way. But Taylor said, "we don't know how long it will take to make these nuclear weapons operational. If we give the Russians sufficient warning, they could launch the nukes on the East Coast killing maybe 60 million people Americans."

When Kennedy hears that forecast, he decides against the invasion option and decides to go with a naval blockade of Cuba.

The Soviet archives have been recently opened to scholars. We now know that the Russian nukes in Cuba were already operational, and that Khrushchev had ordered the Russian military leadership in Cuba to use tactical nukes if the Americans did a surprise invasion.

The advice given by Curtis LeMay and Maxwell Taylor of a surprise attack would have likely resulted in a nuclear war. And for what? This was ex post very bad advice.

Ingo Tauschweizer:

Kennedy understands that the advice he's getting is very risky here. .

It was absolutely bad advice. There is no question about that. But Kennedy's decision isn't necessarily the right decision either on the basis of what we now understand. It's just the luckier one. In the end, Khrushchev backs down and the Soviet submarine skippers don't engage in what could have well escalated to nuclear war.

There's always a great degree of uncertainty that you're engaging in a mindreading exercise as to what the other side ultimately wants. You have hours or maybe a media landscape in the sixties where you had the better part of a week to arrive at those decisions. If this happened now you would need an instant response, right?

And the instant response probably would've been airstrikes and maybe an invasion because practically everyone in the room was in agreement with the position that Taylor, McNamara, Robert Kennedy all put forward. Taylor and the military understood the extent to which the Kennedy Brothers really wanted regime changing in Cuba, which I guess helps bring about the missile crisis in the first place.

Larry Bernstein:

After the Cuban Missile Crisis and with fighting intensifying in Vietnam, Taylor was transferred from Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff to be the US Ambassador to South Vietnam. I view this job switch to be completely bizarre as we move our most senior military man to a diplomatic position in what will become a war zone.

Ingo Tauschweizer:

The US was already partly at war. He's sent as a civilian, but his mission is to oversee the entirety of the US effort, including military assistance and the ongoing air war in South Vietnam. The Kennedy Administration is actively engaged in bombing parts of the country.

One answer then is to say, look, it's the recognition that we're already in war when Dean Rusk talks about that pretty openly. Taylor is a champion of air power but until about mid-spring 1965, he really is trying to put a stop to American ground forces with combat roles. There are, at that point, 21,000 military advisors who are working with South Vietnamese Army, Air Force and

Navy units. Taylor has serious doubts because he thinks along two lines. One is that an external force isn't going to win this war for the South Vietnamese on the ground.

Secondly, he's really concerned about how Americans picture winning. He's ultimately moved off the no ground forces position because he thinks Lyndon Johnson's made up his mind. He falls in line, but he keeps pushing the Nixon administration even after he comes back from Saigon and becomes a White House consultant to more honestly address the challenges of this war so that the American people understood the complexity of it and the unsatisfactory nature of what victory would look like.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to focus on the President's decision-making process and the role of the generals. JFK begins with the lessons from the Bay of Pigs which was we cannot delegate decisions of war to the military, the CIA or the bureaucracy. Instead, we need to get the Best and the Brightest in the room and review all the scenarios and then make the best calculated decision.

This conversation and debate approach was applied to the Cuban Missile Crisis, and it appeared to JFK that it worked well.

With Vietnam, the best and the brightest are back in action. It is the same team; they put the band back together. Except this time, it is a total disaster. We fight the wrong war, we lose, thousands die, it is a total disaster.

First question, is there something fundamentally wrong with this debate process? And second was the process flawed because the wrong people were in the room?

Talk to me about the best in the brightest and the role of the military relative to the role of civilian politicians in the decision-making process.

Ingo Tauschweizer:

You raise a very important point about formal and informal networks. One way to look at it would be to say no one had a more career politician stamp on him than Lyndon Johnson. The politics of it, domestic and foreign, are difficult to balance.

It's not like these politicians like Fulbright or Mansfield don't have a voice. It is just their voice is informal. They're not in the room at critical moments of decision. And for the more formal network, I do think that a military solutions mindset takes hold strangely not amongst the military men, but really amongst the civilians. That's perpetuated in the 21st century. So, there is

an odd inversion of what one would think that's already perceivable in someone like McNamara or McGeorge Bundy, at least up to about mid-1965.

The other side to that is this system of the sixties is calibrated towards the Soviets, and how do you not get yourself into a nuclear war? For someone like McGeorge Bundy, Vietnam is an opportunity to show the Soviets that we were tough and that this feeds into the wider deterrence picture. Dean Acheson, long retired establishment Democrat former Secretary of State who comes in as a consultant at various points says it wasn't till 1968 that he ever thought of the war in Vietnam as being about Vietnam. His advice had always been about how it fits within the wider Cold War. In that pressure cooker, I don't know how you land on sound policy and sound strategy.

On top of that, in South Vietnam in the first half of 1965 the military situation really was dismal. There is a North Vietnamese offensive moving entire combat regiments south and threatening to overrun the country. Crisis mode thinking takes over but also unfounded optimism.

The best example is that Taylor should have known full well where this was going to go because he'd been playing the winning North Vietnamese side in war games that think tanks had put on for the Pentagon in 1963, 64, that serve as a remarkably good predictor of the course of the Vietnam War. Yet he pushes for air power in an expansion of the ongoing war effort. That is hard to square.

Larry Bernstein:

Next topic is civilian control of the military. Last week on this podcast What Happens Next, we discussed the Waco debacle. Then Attorney General Janet Reno was the ultimate decision maker on whether to use force and the rules of engagement against the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas. The most senior members of FBI made a presentation to Janet Reno, and she told them that her overriding concern was to protect the children, and that if they were at risk of injury, the FBI was to stand down. At the end of the FBI's written presentation, it said that if the Branch Davidians shot at the tanks, then all bets were off. During the 6-hour assault using tanks a fire started and killed 78 people including 25 children. Janet Reno said that the buck stops with her.

What I found fascinating was that the civilian authorities were unwilling to stop the failed assault and it continued for six hours even when the objectives were not realized. It also appears that she wasn't really in control of the ongoing situation.

The Justice Department and FBI example at Waco is like the role of civilian authorities during war time. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara represented civilian authority in the Vietnam War. McNamara seems at times to have been overly influenced by the military and was not

sufficiently detached. Only later does he finally express his reservations to LBJ about the likelihood of defeat. How do you think about civilian oversight and their unwillingness to pull the plug on a failed mission once fighting begins?

Ingo Tauschweizer:

There is a distinction between domestic law enforcement and foreign war. But the Waco case is very interesting that it shows the degree of militarization of policing. I would expect civilian control there. Constitutionally speaking, it's very clear that there ought to be civilian control when it comes to war as well. The question is whether the realms of military operations and civilian policy making are separable.

My concern is that we've never had a particularly good way of linking those. If tasked with a very difficult maybe even unattainable goal like winning in Vietnam, military figures tend to retreat into what they know best which is technological operational expertise. Civilian policy makers at the time may not have fully understood that.

What I find with a lot of Kennedy's and then Johnson's advisors, is that this assumption that there are military solutions to political problems take hold in ways that hadn't been the case in the Eisenhower administration.

Maybe the problems are bigger especially with respect to Vietnam in the sixties than they had been in the fifties. My wider concern is that somehow military figures have to be involved in policy without politicizing. The question does become at what point in the Vietnam War should anyone have pulled the plug?

Larry Bernstein:

Well, I know how it ends. There's a helicopter taking off from the Hanoi embassy with people holding onto it.

Let's look at Afghanistan. It wasn't like Kabul was teetering when Biden pulled out the last helicopter. Do you think that the fall of Kabul was caused by the US evacuation?

Ingo Tauschweizer:

I wouldn't go so far. I think it hastened the inevitable because, even compared to the Vietnam War, the buildup time of an Afghan state and government is remarkably long. I guess you do signal to an enemy like the Taliban that if they can only hang in there for a few more months or

years, maybe we'll leave. That is highly problematic, but you have other concerns in the world too.

There is a bipartisan consensus by 2020 that this is not a situation that we can sustain for another 20 years. Does it look like the American withdrawal brings the whole political edifice down? Sure. Even within the Biden administration, there's been some regrets about the abruptness. But what is a reasonable timeframe for this involvement? In both cases, Vietnam and Afghanistan, the clock had run out.

Larry Bernstein:

What do you think of the role of ex-military men in senior positions in the White House? Donald Trump had three guys in there: McMaster, Mattis, and Kelly. The place is overrun with senior ex-military guys.

Some argued that they would act as grownups in the room to help make better decisions.

Ex post, did the generals foster good decision making and why was there so little use of the military to solve political problems during the Trump Administration?

Ingo Trauschweizer:

Those four years, one didn't move to the brink because of what had proceeded going back to 9/11 and the long war on terror. Maybe some crises, let's say Iran or North Korea, would've triggered much more muscular diplomacy and the threat of military action if not for a general tiredness. Not just in a president who seemed to have somewhat isolationist leanings but also in the public.

But two things about the adults in the room narrative. It was telling me and worrying to what extent the American people along a spectrum that couldn't agree on whether the sky was blue on any given day, could agree on military figures being well suited to that.

It speaks to how poorly we think of politicians more generally and how little we trust in civilian policy makers. It is a political identity question. But at the same time, the individuals in question, have been moderate, not hawkish, guided by their own experiences with war and in both General Mattis and McMaster's case, the intervention into Vietnam that had been his doctoral dissertation back in the 1990s.

Larry Bernstein:

Next topic is military disrespect of civilian leadership. General MacArthur's didn't think Truman was up to the task. Curtis LeMay thought JFK lacked both the maturity and the acumen to manage the Cuban Missile Crisis.

I heard a story that Trump asked the Joint Chiefs for an invasion plan for Venezuela, but they never provided it because they feared that he would act on it. I am not sure that it is a general's job to refuse a presidential request like that.

President Obama fired General Stan McChrystal who was running the war in Afghanistan because he told a Rolling Stones reporter that Biden was a light weight. What do you think of the military's lack of respect for civilian authorities?

Ingo Trauschweizer:

It's highly troubling. There is a system of civilian oversight of the military that is baked into the very DNA of the country. It's probably one of the few things that most people could agree on being very clear in the Constitution and being an important part of American political culture. In some ways, insubordination or personal agendas running counter to national interest or running counter to presidential directives is also a through line through American military history.

MacArthur is tricky because MacArthur always played politics around strategy. He probably looked at Truman as a lightweight and a relatively untested president. MacArthur had locked horns even with FDR, who he did not consider to be a lightweight. I still think there's a fine line between the advice you want and the dissent you can't have.

Every time an active-duty officer goes to Congress to testify about the budget or particular crisis they're being goaded by their own staff or by members of Congress who ask questions to cross that line because you need fodder for policy change or just for good PR. I think that tension is part of the system.

To get back to your earlier question about more active duty or retired military officer in the recent years serving in critical roles, we seem to have abandoned the fundamental principle that there ought to be a cooling period of some years for perspective.

Larry Bernstein:

For sure. I enjoy reading biographies of great American generals. We had a podcast with Allen Guelzo on his recent biography of Robert E. Lee. I read American Caesar about General MacArthur and now your biography of General Maxwell Taylor. And what surprised me is that

all three of these generals during their career oversaw managing West Point. Why were these men selected for that task and how did they change the institution?

Ingo Tauschweizer:

Lee's imprint is one that they would probably like to erase more than anything. MacArthur was brought in as a young dynamic reform minded officer, in the aftermath of World War I to an academy that needed to be moved into the 20th century. Taylor was brought in primarily because he was the most intellectual and diplomatically astute of the younger combat generals of the Second World War.

When MacArthur came in, the academy was an engineering school, and MacArthur moved the needle some. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, there ought to be more emphasis on the humanities, with history and foreign languages as the US had clearly become a world power that could not walk away from a global system. Taylor reforms the curriculum, moving towards a little more balance between engineering and the world side, and the question how you would command an army largely made up of draftees, how do you persuade people to follow you if they're not career soldiers?

Larry Bernstein:

What are you optimistic about as it relates to the American military?

Ingo Tauschweizer:

There's a lot to be optimistic about. The way the all-volunteer force has developed over the 50 years, at an operational level in its ability to apply military force and military technology is unmatched. There is also within the leadership of the armed forces, more awareness that military solutions to political problems are unlikely. The question is to what extent the right people giving good advice will be heard at critical times. And we seem to live at a world that we can define by one crisis or one war after another.

So, the optimism is that if we don't focus on the Vietnam and Afghanistan episodes but focus on many crises that have been resolved diplomatically or maybe with the threat of force. There is actually a good amount of evidence for an international system that's maybe a little more stable than it sometimes seems.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks to Ingo for joining us today

If you missed last week's show, check it out. The topic was a history of the American Railroad. Our speaker was Patrick Allitt who is a Professor of History at Emory University, and he is currently writing a new book entitled *Keeping Track: A Concise History of American Railroads*.

The railroad had an enormous impact on the development of the American frontier and revolutionized personal travel and the movement of commodities. As the first major American industrial organization it redefined labor-management relations.

I would now like to make a plug for next week's show with Ashoka Mody who is a Professor in International Economic Policy at Princeton. He is the author of the book *India is Broken: A People Betrayed, Independence to Today*.

I hope to learn about whether India's democracy is functioning properly and what are the risks of authoritarianism there. In addition, I want to hear about the failures in public health and education and how that relates to India's underperformance relative to China and its other Eastern Asian neighbors.

You can find our previous episodes and transcripts on our website whathappensnextin6minutes.com.

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Thank you for your continued engagement, good-bye.