Balloons and Brass

"Officer Politics" by Lawrence F. Kaplan, in *The New Republic* (Sept. 13 & 20, 2004), 1331 H St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005.

Amid the balloons, funny hats, and familiar hoopla at this summer's political conventions, there was one sight that should have been shocking: Retired military brass giving partisan speeches on the convention rostrums.

It's one thing for ex-officers to run for office, writes Kaplan, a senior editor of *The New Republic*. Ulysses S. Grant and Dwight D. Eisenhower made no bones about being partisan figures. But today's endorsers try to use the aura of neutral professionalism to throw the prestige of the military behind their preferred candidate.

By tradition, officers have been rigorously nonpartisan, even after retirement. That began to change after the Vietnam War, as the officer corps increasingly identified with the GOP, but it was Bill Clinton who first enlisted a top officer, retired admiral William Crowe, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Clinton hoped the endorsement would offset charges that he had evaded the Vietnam-era draft. This year, more than 100 retired generals and admirals have endorsed one or the other of the two major presidential candidates.

It's a dangerous trend, argues Kaplan, and it's the military itself that's likely to suffer the most.

"When generals take to the hustings, politicians respond by treating the military as if it were an interest group like the AFL-CIO or the NAACP," to be slighted or embraced depending on political considerations. And, Kaplan asks, how long will it be before civilian leaders start promoting top officers based on their political affiliation rather than their professional competence? At least one Clinton-era general was asked which party he belonged to. The politicization of the military will increase pressure on serving officers to surrender their status as professionals and become political yes men. It has already hurt the cohesion and commitment of the officer corps. Increasingly Republican in its orientation, the corps saw a "hemorrhage" of unhappy officers during the Clinton years.

At the same time, there's the danger that "the military may gain undue influence over decisions that, properly understood, remain the exclusive property of civilians." Some top officers, for example, openly opposed the Clinton White House on issues such as gays in the military and intervention in Bosnia.

The generals should be playing golf, not politics, Kaplan concludes. That will happen only if political leaders insist on it.

President Hamilton's America

"What If Aaron Burr Had Missed?" by Thomas Fleming, History News Network (July 5, 2004), www.hnn.us/articles/5944.html.

Once confined mostly to cocktail conversation and late-night dormitory bull sessions, counterfactual history has become a burgeoning scholarly pursuit. Here's how it works: Start with a famous historical incident, such as the 1804 duel between Vice President Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton, then speculate about what might have happened had certain events been altered. What if Burr had missed?

Here's Fleming's fanciful spin: Following that near-miss at the dueling grounds in Weehawken, New Jersey—and given President Thomas Jefferson's declining popularity in the wake of such disasters as his unsuccessful, and blatantly partisan, effort to remove Supreme Court justice Samuel Chase—the charismatic Hamilton outstrips Jefferson's favored successor, "the colorless James Madison," in the race for the presidency in 1808. Once in office, Hamilton cements his power by creating a strong navy and army. The young United States annexes Canada in the War of 1812, then consumes Florida, Texas, and Mexico—and sets its sights on South America. In the midst of this expansionist maneuvering, Hamilton acts decisively to prevent a potential