

FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

“managed” without further Israeli concessions. Or Washington must convince its ally that, given America’s need for Arab oil, public support for an intransigent Israel will eventually fade.

Threat to the Joint Chiefs?

“The Executive and the Joint Chiefs” by Lawrence J. Korb, in *Society* (July-August 1980), Box A, Rutgers—The State University, New Brunswick, N.J. 08903.

The U.S. military’s Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) have greater “potential power” than ever before, writes Korb, a professor of management at the Naval War College. But, he argues, the JCS faces increasing threats of White House political manipulation.

The five-man JCS was established by Congress in 1947 to serve as the top source of military advice to the President, the Defense Secretary, and the Congress. Four of its members are the uniformed chiefs of the Air Force, Army, Navy, and Marine Corps. Their chairman, also a general or admiral, has no specific service responsibilities; he sits on the White House National Security Council. All five are appointed by the President. All testify before Congress.

The Joint Chiefs have always felt strong White House pressures to “go along” on thorny issues ranging from Truman’s low post-World War II defense budgets to Lyndon Johnson’s “gradualism” policy in Vietnam. Rarely have they dissented in public.

But since Vietnam, writes Korb, the situation has changed. Owing to the loss of national consensus on U.S. foreign policy and the growing complexities of modern strategic planning, the Joint Chiefs’ professional opinions have become much more sought after by Congress. In 1967, their terms of office were upped by Congress from two years to four, giving them greater immunity from White House retaliation should they publicly disagree with the President.

Thus, the civilian leadership must reckon with JCS attitudes. One example: President Carter badly needed the Chiefs’ endorsement of the 1978 Panama Canal treaty; he reluctantly gave in to their demands that the treaty reserve to Washington the right to retake the Canal Zone by force. But the White House has sought ways to keep the JCS in line. In 1978, for example, Carter picked Air Force General David Jones as the new JCS chairman (instead of Army General Bernard Rogers) because of Jones’s willingness to “change his mind publicly” on the B-1 bomber and other key defense issues. In the future, worries Korb, Presidents may appoint only “team players” to the JCS.

A highly “politicized” relationship between the nation’s civilian leadership and the JCS may bar many talented officers from rising to the top or undermine the professionalism of those who do. Moreover, if Congress and the public come to perceive the Joint Chiefs simply as puppets of the White House, they may reject the JCS’s views, even when the advice is sound, given freely, and urgently needed.