

**Veterans of Foreign Wars**  
**Department of Vermont**  
**Patriots Pen of the Year 2019-2020**

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## Protected Yet Free

1977. Tension hung in the air in the village of Rakhine, Myanmar. Word had spread that soldiers were scrutinizing documents, often with appalling consequences.

Malawi Harun fled. "I had my documents," he said, "but even when you did, they would find something wrong.

"I Unlike Myanmar forces, a democratically elected president controls the American military.<sup>2</sup> Through the principle of civilian control, the military practices restraint. It respects and values the people's authority and thereby safeguards our democracy.



The framers of our Constitution worked to ensure civilian control. After victory against Britain, our founding fathers had little interest in emulating the European system. Britain had a dictatorial monarchy from which the colonists escaped. Our founders separated military responsibilities from political roles, placing the authority for defense in civilian hands.<sup>3</sup>

Subsequent to the Civil War, Congress dictated that the American military focus on external conflicts instead of policing its own people.<sup>4</sup> But it takes more than a Congressional act to prevent misuse of power. A lifetime of civics education makes this possible. It teaches our soldiers at all levels to respect the separation of powers. This prevents dictatorships and overthrow of the government.

In elections, our military does not promote a particular candidate or agenda. Every four to eight years a peaceful transition of power takes place, a ritual preserved for 230 years.<sup>5</sup> As civilians we should not take this for granted; many people receive no such benefit. As George Washington once said "The peaceful transition of power is what will separate this country from every other country in the world. "<sup>6</sup>

I walk everywhere, to and from school, downtown, anywhere I can. This freedom has had a wonderful impact on my life. I can lose myself in my own thoughts without being stopped by an armed soldier questioning me. The American military respects our civil liberties and doesn't deprive us of our rights. They keep us safe but respectfully stand away from the public unless needed.

America is exceptional because we have a military that grants our people independence. America is excellent because our leaders and common soldiers alike cherish this idea. America is great because, in doing so, our troops support our democracy. I never have to worry about the day a knock on my door will take away my family. Unlike 90-year-old Harun, who spent his life fleeing that same knock, I am protected yet I am free.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Wells, Matthew. "'My Heart Cries': For One Rohingya Refugee, a Dream of Home That May Never Be Fulfilled." Vox, Vox, 9 sept. 2019, <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/9/3/20837372/rohingyarefugee-myanmar-bangladesh-camp-violence>

<sup>2</sup> Huntington, Samuel P. *The Soldier and the State*. Vintage, 1964.

<sup>3</sup> Garamone, Jim. "Why Civilian Control of the Military?" United States Department of Defense, American Forces Press Service, 2 May 2001, <https://archive.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=45870>.

<sup>4</sup> Elsea, Jennifer. "Posse Comitatus Act and Related Matters: A Sketch." Naval History and Heritage Command, Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, 20 Nov. 2017, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/p/possecomitatus-act-and-related-matters-a-sketch.html>.

<sup>5</sup> "Presidents, Vice Presidents, & Coinciding Sessions of Congress." US House of Representatives: History, Art & Archives, <https://history.house.gov/Institution/Presidents-Coinciding/Presidents-Coinciding/>.

<sup>6</sup> George Washington's Mount Vernon, <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digitalencyclopedia/article/spurious-quotations/>.

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