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RESTORING MILITARY PROFESSIONALISM

INTRODUCTION

In the debate over "military reform," there is a curious absence of proposals for the most essential reform of all: the restoration of military professionalism. Without it, attempts at specific improvements are less likely to be effective, for the military is a powerful institution in the U.S. political system, eminently capable of resisting externally imposed change. With such a restoration of professionalism, however, the military can and will reform itself.

Spokesmen for various wings of the "military reform movement" have urged that the Armed Services develop simpler and less costly weapons, be made to switch from "firepower/attrition" tactics to those of "maneuver," "lead" rather than "manage" their troops, put aside "parochialism" in favor of interservice cooperation, and formulate more coherent strategy. The allegation, to paraphrase David Stockman's comment on military retirement, is that the Armed Services "are more concerned about protecting their [vested interests] than they are about protecting the security of the American people." The military is thus portrayed as an institution unwilling to make necessary changes and in need of drastic reform.

These reformers are mistaken in at least one essential respect. The Armed Services may not be so much unwilling to change as unable to do so. With the exception of some individuals, the profession is a prisoner of its past. This comes not from selfish parochialism, a nefarious military-industrial conspiracy, or muleheaded stubbornness. The Services live in the same world as the reformers, but their view of that world is different in a number of respects.

ORIGINS OF THE PROBLEM

The watershed experience of today's Army was the mobilization for World War II. An austere Service of fewer than 200,000 officers and men expanded in scarcely three years to a massive force of over eight million. More than the victory itself, the mobilization was a near miracle.

George Marshall and senior leaders such as Dwight Eisenhower, Omar Bradley, and Maxwell Taylor observed that the Army had begun the mobilization with an officer corps insufficient in number and excessive in age. Vast numbers of junior and middle-grade officers had to be recruited, and many prewar colonels and generals had to be pushed aside to allow younger men to take charge. The process required a couple of years, a luxury not likely in future conflicts. To permit quicker mobilization, it was concluded, the postwar military needed a larger and younger officer corps.

From this reasoning came the all-service Officer Personnel Act of 1947, a companion piece to the legislation establishing the Department of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The law raised the number of officers proportional to overall strength, particularly in the middle and senior grades; and to enhance retention through more rapid advancement, it abolished promotion by seniority (permitting better officers to "pass over" their less qualified peers) and provided generous retirement benefits after 20 or more years of service.

It also instituted the now familiar "up or out" rules for mandatory discharge and retirement. Since 1947, for example, failure to make Army, Air Force, or Marine Corps captain (lieutenant in the Navy) in one's twenties or major (Navy lieutenant commander) in one's thirties has meant discharge. Not being promoted to lieutenant colonel (Navy commander) and then colonel (Navy captain) in one's forties spells mandatory retirement. Even generals and admirals typically "top out" in their fifties, a retirement age some ten years younger than that of executives of business corporations. Truly, the goal of a young and expandable officer corps has been achieved.

Assignment management was also formalized. It had been observed in the 40-fold expansion of 1939-1945, that broad-gauged officers rather than specialists had been able to cope better when thrust into unforeseen roles. Henceforth, the Army would provide its best officers with a wide variety of assignments. A "generalized" career would be the hallmark of success.

The career-long system of officer education, already elaborate, was expanded. Every sixth year or so, the Army's best officers would head for a resident year at their various branch centers, the General Staff College, or the War College. Historians of World War II, most notably Winston Churchill, had praised the U.S. military's school system for having nurtured "a generation of victors." The oft-cited example was Dwight Eisenhower, who,

having missed combat-theater duty during World War I, had compensated by topping his class at the General Staff College in the 1920s. Periodic resident schooling thus was confirmed as a key part of the career.

AN OVER-OFFICERED, UNDER-SKILLED BUREAUCRACY

The framers of the 1947 reforms ignored or failed to foresee a number of factors that would affect the new career system. First, the Army soon found it necessary to base half of its operational forces overseas. Second, all officers (even colonels and generals) discovered they faced the necessity of a "second career." Third, retirement at 20-plus years of service proved all too popular. Fourth, the technological revolution accelerated, along with a social revolution. Finally, mutual nuclear deterrence between the U.S. and the USSR made another massive mobilization seem unacceptably slow and unthinkably dangerous.

The high proportion of forces overseas has caused officers to rotate frequently between theaters. These moves, plus the shorter career's promotion every four or five years and return to resident schooling every sixth year, have meant that officers change jobs frequently. Compounding the problem has been the tendency of officers to pursue (and the Services to encourage) variety as proof of generalist promotability. The result has been an average tenure of only a year to year-and-a-half in each assignment, hardly time to become qualified at one task before moving on to the next.

The 1947 law, meanwhile, has allowed military personnel in their early forties to retire at one-half "base pay" (about 40 percent of total salary). Retirement by those in their late forties or early fifties (depending on rank achieved) generally is required, with pensions up to three-quarters base pay (60 to 65 percent of salary). The result has been a sharp dissonance between the classic concept of a lifetime profession in the military and a new reality that, for almost all officers, their military service is only the first of their careers.

This has prompted many to leave earlier than required (exacerbating assignment turbulence for those who remain), rather than risk retirement when they are too young and have too many family obligations to quit work, but are too old to start a genuine second career. Even for those who stay on until mandatory retirement, the keen edge of their professionalism cannot help but be dulled. It is hard to be devoted to the arts of tactics and strategy or the sciences of weapons design and force structuring, when these skills are soon to become much less valuable in the civilian job market.

Aside from its impact on professional dedication and competence, early retirement has proved to be extremely costly. It is budgeted at some \$18 billion in 1985 and calculated, given a con-

tinuation of present circumstances and no significant armed conflict, to rise to \$45 billion by the end of the century. Whether such costs are warranted, as an investment in readiness for war, is a subject of much political debate.

What makes matters worse is that rapid advances in technology, combined with the shorter career's transience, make it nearly impossible for individual officers to become expert at anything. This has frustrated not only would-be tacticians and strategists, but also those who seek excellence in modern management and technology. It has also immeasurably impaired the Services' ability to adapt to change.

Longstanding tension with the Soviet Union, meanwhile, has meant that the United States can never reduce its forces to the levels of the past. The end of Western colonial empires has required maintaining ready-to-fight forces for possible intervention in the resource-rich Third World, and the proliferation of nuclear weapons has made a massive mobilization dangerously destabilizing. Thus the 1947 Act's career system, designed to provide a reserve of broad-gauged officers ready to staff a mobilization-expanded force, has instead tended to create an over-officered and under-skilled bureaucracy.

POST-VIETNAM REFORM

Assignment transience, replacement of profession by first career, accelerating change, early retirement, and obsolescence of the career system go far to explain the problems and scandals that racked the Army during the Vietnam War. To be sure, the particularities of the conflict itself contributed. But it was clear that the Army's condition was aggravated by, rather than solely caused by, the war's stresses. The visible events were symptoms of a decline of professionalism.

This hard truth was brought home in a remarkable study conducted by the Army War College in 1970. This "Professionalism Study" revealed that traditional standards of competence, service, and leadership had been eroded dangerously. In their places had sprung up "ticket-punching" (obtaining a variety of career-enhancing jobs for the record), overreliance on superficial indicators of performance, and exploitation of subordinates to the neglect of their genuine development.

Army Chief of Staff William Westmoreland, responding to these revelations, announced in 1971 that the Army would develop a new officer assignment system. Officers would be freed from trying to be "jack of all trades." Rather, the officer with talent for command would spend more time with troops; when such an officer did serve in a headquarters, it would be in a staff role for which he was qualified by previous experience, such as operations or personnel management. The technical specialist, on the other hand, could concentrate on such disciplines as cryptology

or weapons development, without fear of forfeiting advancement. There would be, Westmoreland promised, "many roads to the top."

There was (and is) strong opposition within the officer corps to the new system. Many argued that the profession would be split into subcultures of field soldiers and narrowly specialized headquarters staffers. The former might forget that the conduct of war is subordinate to national policy; the latter might neglect the needs of the troops, by whom plans and orders must be carried out on the battlefield.

The Navy and the Air Force may be able to divide their officers, argue traditionalists, but ground forces are different. Airbases and ships provide relatively stable environments for airmen and sailors. Ground combat units, however, move through a changing and usually hostile environment; officers must create, through excellence in both leadership and management, a psychological stability for their soldiers. The destructiveness of modern warfare, vividly demonstrated in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, makes solidarity between troop units and headquarters staffs crucial. A divided officer corps could open a gulf of misunderstanding.

Furthermore, the new system might drive many fine officers out of the service. The "generalist" ideal, right or wrong (and many still say it is right) remains deeply embedded. Specialists denied a chance to command might feel robbed of the profession's most valued symbolic coin and be attracted by the tangible coin of civilian commerce. Troop leaders who failed selection for the next level of command might also be disheartened. Rather than settle for careers of staff work, they would switch to civilian occupations. Too many departures, of either kind, would have a devastating impact.

Despite its promulgation more than a decade ago, the new system has been introduced very slowly. In 1979, tenure in command was still only 18 months, in effect, still allowing a maximum of officers to "punch the command ticket." When the innovative E.C. Meyer was Army Chief of Staff from 1979 to 1983, tenure was lengthened to 30 months. This was reduced, however, to 24 months immediately upon his retirement. The rumor persists that the best generalists rather than the best leaders are being selected to command troops, and that the career specialist is still a second-class citizen.

FURTHER REFORM IS NEEDED

Even if the new assignment system were fully implemented, the factors of "up or out," overseas rotation, early retirement, and resident schooling would still create a dysfunctional degree of transience. The lurking necessity for the second career would still weaken officer dedication. System changes made thus far are only a partial adaptation to a bad set of circumstances. More basic reform is needed.

In truth, there is a fundamental incompatibility between the theory of profession and the reality of first career. The sharpest criticism coming from the military reform movement is not so much with the administering of weapons programs as with the art of visualizing the battlefield where those weapons will be employed; not so much with the design of forces as with each Service's seeming priority of boosting its own role, size, and budget. Military staffs, it is charged, lack competence in tactics and strategy, traditionally the core expertise of the profession.

The current career system, which places an excessive premium on youth, officer numbers in excess of peacetime needs, and rapid reassignment and promotion for the sake of rapid mobilization, needs to be replaced. The question remains--with what? No one would suggest returning to the other extreme, the 19th century norm of middle-aged lieutenants and elderly captains, when one semi-senile commanding general had to be sling-lifted onto his horse for parades. Nor does anyone wish to copy the portly gerontocracy that leads the Soviet armed forces. There should be a middle way, a balance between a young and vigorous officer corps and one that is stable and expert enough to lead and manage U.S. forces in peace and war.

One approach would stretch careers by only five years or so and produce a quantum leap in the readiness of U.S. Armed Services. This would include:

- 1) A continuation of "up or out" for officers² short of 20 years' service, releasing those who fail to make captain (Navy lieutenant) or major (Navy lieutenant commander) to launch new careers while still young enough to do so with relative ease.
- 2) For those who remained past 20-year eligibility for retirement, assignments should be for a minimum period, say three years, with each Service allowed to waive the minimum only for a small proportion of its officers. Each retirement-eligible officer, upon receiving an assignment, should have to contract not to retire until after the minimum, with violations penalized by reduction of subsequent benefits.
- 3) Officers who elected to retire at 20 to 25 years should receive a generous severance payment, complemented by the deferred annuity, instead of immediate pension, as recommended by the Grace Commission in 1984. Those who retired at 25 to 30 years additionally should be furnished "outplacement," to help them start second careers in middle age. Those retiring with 30 or more years should receive, in recognition of the difficulty of starting over at that age, a choice of immediate pension or severance pay/deferred annuity/outplacement. For service past 30 years, additional credit for pension should accrue (as it does not under current law). There should be no mandatory retirement, except for documented cases of poor performance, short of 35 years' service.

4) Officers who are productive but lack potential for further promotion should be assigned to important non-mainstream functions such as recruiting, ROTC teaching, Reserve and National Guard advising, and the administration of troop training centers. Carefully selected colonels (Navy captains) and generals or admirals should be assigned permanently--up to 40 years' service--to the Joint Staff, where they would apply their skills to formulating and carrying out the highest level of defense policy.

THE PROGRAM'S RESULT: INCREASED PROFESSIONALISM IN THE SERVICES

Requiring retirement-eligible officers to remain in their jobs for a minimum tenure would promote stability in the important positions typically held by colonels and generals or Navy captains and admirals. It also would reduce the rate of early retirement by these officers, moderately slowing promotion within the overall officer corps and resulting in considerable savings in salaries and retirement costs. The same combination of savings would accrue from the replacement of an immediate pension by deferred annuity for those retiring after 20 to 30 years of service. Damage to morale, inevitable in any program that slows promotion or reduces retirement benefits, would be minimized by the addition of severance pay and outplacement. Those who stay in for 35 or 40 years could devote themselves unreservedly to the military profession, for they would have little need, psychologically or financially, for second careers.

Reassigning senior officers to permanent duty on the Joint Staff would give this important body a strength and depth which it has lacked. Joint Staff officers currently serve for too short a time, are not shielded from Service pressures (indeed, are regarded as their own Service's spokesmen), and are rarely re-assigned to the Joint staff. It is widely believed, moreover, that the Services try to avoid sending their high quality officers to Joint duty.

An alternative suggested by some critics is to choose officers in their thirties or forties for assignment to a "Joint Staff Corps," with their careers thereafter controlled by that institution. This, however, is sure to collide with the American prejudice against a "German General Staff." Permanently assigning selected colonels and generals, supplemented by junior officers rotated to and from the Services, may be not only more practicable but also politically more realistic.

The Services would have good reason to support this program of reform. Reduced transience would permit a reduction in the number of officers, freeing hundreds of millions of dollars annually for improved training and readiness. Over time, savings in retirement pay could amount to billions, reducing political pressures to change the readiness-supporting features of the retirement system. Moreover, by easing officers' concern about post-service employment, the reform would focus their energies on

professional matters. Finally, in stretching out the career system and thereby strengthening the competence of military leaders and managers, the Services could better resist interference in their internal affairs. The increased dedication of their officers would warrant the greater autonomy.

Maintenance of America's worldwide national interests will long continue to require a credible effectiveness to engage in armed conflict. Fundamental reform of the professionalism of officers in the U.S. Armed Services could be the key to that long-term military effectiveness.

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