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# LEADERSHIP FOR TOMORROW'S ARMY: AN AMERICAN GENERAL STAFF SYSTEM

by

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**T**he United States Army is the keystone of the American national security arch. Curious though such a proposition may appear in this era of wonder weapons—billion-dollar missile-firing submarines, giant nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, spy satellites that detect single vehicles from miles in space, and intercontinental missiles with probable errors in the tens of meters—*it is so*. As will be argued later in this paper, our national strategy, including the principal roles for both naval forces and strategic air power, is inextricably coupled to the posture of our conventional and tactical-nuclear ground forces.

The American Armed Forces have, quite properly, no function in or for themselves. They are but instruments of the national purpose, which is stated in our Declaration of Independence as the triad "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." Our national security policy has been consistent with that larger purpose. We have maintained military forces and, when necessary, applied them against adversaries to protect the physical safety of our populace and property, the unfettered operation of our democratic institutions, and the social and economic opportunity of our citizens.

In the process of waging World War II, we became indisputably the predominant

military force on the globe. From 1945 until our withdrawal from the Vietnam War, we were universally acknowledged the most powerful state of all time. Other nations might (and sometimes did) make mischief against our interests and take advantage of our traditional reluctance to exercise our great strength, but none dared risk a showdown with the United States of America. For a quarter of a century, the *Pax Americana* was the principal factor of the international system.

That era is over.

**N**ow the United States is second in the world in size and strength of armed forces. We are still, to be sure, potentially the world's strongest military power, for we have a large populace, a highly skilled and talented people, vast natural resources, by far the world's largest and richest industrial economy, and an agricultural self-sufficiency that is the envy of all mankind. But we have consciously chosen not to maintain the world's greatest armed forces, preferring to devote a greater part of our resources to improving the quality of life for our people.

That is not to imply that we have totally neglected our national security—far from it. We are maintaining a larger Army than we

had at the beginning of World War II, a Navy of comparable strength, and an Air Force of unprecedented destructive potential. Our military posture is perhaps not so strong as that of our principal potential adversary, the Soviet Union, nor is it sufficiently flexible and deployable (or credible, given our post-Vietnam mood) to reliably counteract aggression by other, smaller countries against their neighbors. Nonetheless, it is powerful enough, in the calculations of our national political leaders, to deter armed violence directly against the United States or indirectly against territory or resources considered vital to our interests. This is a national security policy of calculated risk.

### THE ARMY'S STRATEGIC ROLES

An examination of the elements of that calculated risk is necessary to understand the Army's purpose and its role as keystone of the national security arch.

Obviously, one of the Army's jobs is to deter (and, if necessary, to resist) an invasion of the United States itself or our Caribbean and Pacific territories. It is also very nearly a sure thing that Army forces would be sent to resist overt intervention by a powerful unfriendly state in an area deemed vital to our national security. But the term "vital" is definable only after the fact. For example, a national decision was made, for better or worse, that the continued independence of South Vietnam was not vital. To determine in advance what areas will be vital is far more difficult. Such decisions are probably never absolute, but depend on a multitude of factors—not only geography, but also the international climate at the time, the perceived capabilities and intentions of the threatening state, events leading to the specific crisis, and the momentary angle of our national mood's internationalist-isolationist pendulum.

There is only one geographical area now unequivocally considered vital—Western Europe. Because of its human, industrial, and symbolic value, domination of this area by the Soviet Union would constitute an intolerable and proximate menace to our

security. Further, given the political and economic stability of the Western European nations, the most dangerous threat by the Soviet Union and its allies is the threat of military attack or, perhaps more likely, political "Finlandization" through military pressure. The deterrent, therefore, must include credible readiness to respond to armed attack.

Deterrence exists, if it exists at all, not in the mind of the deterrer but in that of the deterred. How, then, can American ground forces, even combined with those of our European allies, deter the enormous, modern, already-largely-mobilized forces of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact? The answer is simple but nonetheless not widely appreciated. NATO's ground forces are strong enough—large, well-armed and well-equipped, organized and trained, and supported by their intelligence services with at least the minimally necessary early warning—to resist defeat long enough to both permit and demand reinforcement from the continental United States. The act of reinforcement, *even if unsuccessful*, would create such a massive confrontation between American and Soviet air and naval forces that general nuclear war would almost surely result. Alternatively—still in the mind of the deterred—initial Warsaw Pact success might lead to the defender's use of tactical nuclear weapons, thus crossing the "nuclear threshold" and opening the door to escalation into general war.

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The key element is time, for if the Warsaw Pact were able to defeat or bypass American ground forces quickly, one might imagine (putting oneself in the Soviet leadership's collective mind) US hesitation to engage in mutual destruction of the Russian and American cultures for the sake of an Army already bagged by a Warsaw Pact blitzkrieg. Thus, arguments for a "tripwire" defense are sheer nonsense. Our forces in Europe must be large and strong. In like manner, the oft-discussed distinction between deterrence and defense is grotesquely illogical. Without the ability to defend, clearly perceived by the political enemy, there can be no deterrence.

**E**uropean deterrence is not the Army's only role. There are many other areas of the world to which our government may someday need to send armed forces. Such intervention could conceivably take a variety of forms—advisors, military missions, counterinsurgency, limited war, and so forth. After our recent sobering experience in Vietnam, one can perhaps discount the deploying of combat troops on behalf of a faltering regime against truly indigenous insurgency. That still leaves many potential conflicts (and several existing ones) between countries with the United States backing one side and the Soviet Union backing the other. True, it is no longer a "bipolar" world in the sense of monolithic Western and Eastern blocs, but somehow the opposite sides in recent Third World disputes seem always to be or to become clients of the two superpowers. The pattern is too consistent to be ignored.

There is a third role for the Army, in addition to those of deterrence and intervention already discussed. That role is conventional, protracted war. If, rather than a short-warning blitzkrieg, the Soviet Union should threaten Western Europe in a long drawn-out period of gradually increasing tension, the United States would probably expand its armed forces and mobilize its economy for defense just as it did in 1940-42. Conversely, if a Soviet blitzkrieg, perhaps forswearing tactical nuclear weapons, were to

seize Western Europe without triggering general nuclear war, the American response would surely be an unprecedentedly massive mobilization. That neither prospect is currently taken seriously by American political leaders is clearly evidenced by the disrepair of our Selective Service System, the declining state of our Reserve components, the near-absence of a civil defense program, and a lack of planning for converting industry rapidly to wartime production. As stated earlier, this is a national calculated risk; priority is given to improving the quality of life for the American people. In regard to those resources which are allocated to security, priority is given to deterrence and intervention rather than protracted war.

### THE ARMY OFFICER CORPS

What sort of military leadership is needed in such an international environment and national mood?

The Army, as noted earlier, is an instrument rather than a guiding force of national strategy. No responsible leader, military or civilian, would wish to rescind this constitutional limitation. To be sure, our highest military officers do render advice to civilian political leaders, not only on strictly military subjects but also on the national security aspects of other policy matters. It would be a dereliction of their duty not to so participate in the governing of the country, but their participation is still that of instrument rather than controller of power.

It would also be a dereliction for those leaders not to prepare themselves, their staff officers, their subordinate commanders (and staffs), and succeeding generations of military leaders, commanders, and staff officers to perform the complex missions which the Army might be assigned. In sum, the officer corps of the Army must be prepared to participate in the formulation and implementation of a wide range of national security policies, not only in the current strategic situation but also in all foreseeable future situations. True, the Army has to set priorities, within limited resources, for its most likely near-future role, but its

officers, individually and collectively, must be professionally ready for a wide variety of incredibly complex tasks.

How is such professional readiness to be achieved? The traditional solution has been military education within the Army's school system. Between World Wars I and II, the US Army had scarcely 150,000 members—with officers only a tenth of the total—scattered in posts of regimental or smaller size across the United States and its territories. With no opportunity to handle actual large formations, officers pored over maps at their branch schools, at the Command and General Staff College, and at the Army War and Industrial Colleges. There they practiced maneuvering divisions and corps, supplying combat theaters, and mobilizing industry for wartime production. The subsequent American experience in World War II clearly demonstrated the value of that interwar investment in officer education.

Our country faces an even more hazard-filled world in the years ahead. The international situation will demand forces-in-being at an unprecedentedly high state of readiness. It will also demand an officer corps—and a system of officer professional development—of even greater excellence than that which laid the groundwork for the victories of World War II.

That point cannot be too strongly emphasized. Budgetary limits may determine the strength of the Army, the number of divisions, the rate of development of weapons systems, and the overall size of the training base. Budgets need not—must not—restrict the professional excellence of the officer corps. It is an asset which one does not “mobilize” in times of emergency. It is either developed over long years or it is simply not there when desperately needed. Those who do not understand this are either ignorant of or deliberately choose to ignore the stern lessons of history.

#### **THE CLASSIC SOLUTION: A GENERAL STAFF CORPS**

One possible method for optimizing officer expertise within limited resources is by the

establishment of a “General Staff Corps.” This organizational device, employed most notably by the Prussian (later German) Army during the 19th and 20th centuries, was emulated by many other countries. It has been totally adopted by the Soviet Union. (This is not to imply that we should imitate our principal adversary, but we ignore the logic of his policies at our peril.)

The classic General Staff Corps operates as follows. At a relatively early stage of officers' careers (8 to 12 years of service, 30-plus years of age), a small minority (fewer than one in five) is selected to attend a general staff college. The selection process, highly competitive, is based on both service record and professional examination. Judgment of the service record is, as in our own Army, weighted to favor troop experience, to emphasize the importance of functioning successfully in a “muddy boots” environment. The examination, however, is explicitly biased toward intellectuality, requiring the officer to demonstrate not just knowledge of the multifaceted profession of arms but also the ability to organize and articulate that knowledge. Clarity of written expression is thus given extremely high priority. This priority is driven by the lessons of military history—which is rich with examples of ill-conceived plans, and of well-conceived but ill-written orders, that resulted in disaster on the battlefield.

Once chosen for the general staff college, the officers participate in two to three years of intensive study of their profession. Only a minority of the selected minority stay for the full term. Some are simply returned to army duty after a one- or two-year segment (also determined by a competitive process); a few actually “flunk out.” Those who stay for the maximum length find themselves studying and writing in ever-higher areas of international relations, national security policy, and “grand strategy.”

Those officers who graduate from the full-length course (perhaps 1 in 20 of the year-group originally considered) are subject to yet another selection process—to vacancies in the General Staff Corps itself. Thereafter, their careers are managed with precision: They are

assigned only to specific "key" slots throughout the army and developed by service in progressively more challenging jobs. A brigade-level headquarters will get not more than one of these officers, a division headquarters two or three, a corps headquarters not more than a half-dozen. (It should be noted that armies with such General Staff Corps typically maintain staffs of one-third to one-half the size of the corresponding echelon in the US Army.)

There is, obviously, a great deal of "pre-selection" in this arrangement. In practice, however, General Staff officers have no monopoly on promotion to higher rank. Promotions to major and lieutenant colonel are far broader than General Staff selection, and even promotion to colonel is somewhat broader. Moreover, a large proportion of promotions to colonel and to the general officer grades is reserved—by design perhaps, but in practice whatever the cause—to specialists in critical military and technical skills and in the art of troop command. And, of course, there are General Staff officers who "burn out" in the exacting practice of their trade, although the earlier rigorous selection process makes such occurrences rare.

Typically, General Staff officers (and officers with General Staff schooling) are expected to stay until retirement in their late fifties or early sixties, even if not raised to general officer rank. After the investment which their country has made in them, and which they have made in themselves, commencing a "second career" in their late forties or early fifties would constitute a gross waste of an invaluable military asset.

#### ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

There would be many advantages to the US Army's adoption of a General Staff Corps. First, the Army would have *higher quality staff work* at all of its echelons. Not only would the General Staff Corps officers themselves better organize staff activities and better prepare staff papers, they would also impose the same standards upon their subordinates and set the example for their

peers. The quality of organization and writing of staff papers would gradually rise all over the Army. A continued influx of General Staff Corps officers would insure that the process was sustained and kept up-to-date.

Second, the Army's ability to articulate its policies downward and its positions upward would be greatly enhanced. The hallmark of the General Staff Corps officer, in all armies so organized, is the ability to analyze problems, organize facts, arrive at well-founded decisions, and *summarize clearly the logical process* orally or in writing. As with better quality staff work, the ability to articulate would improve throughout the Army (and by the Army in the councils of government).

Third, the Army would better concentrate its limited resources. More intensive education and more meticulous assignment management for fewer officers would be an application of *mass and economy of force* to the officer personnel system. From a resource management aspect alone, a General Staff Corps would make eminently good sense.

Finally, the efficiencies generated collectively by a General Staff Corps *would win wars*. The elements of combat power (and, at higher echelons, national defense power) include not only manpower, weapons, training, ammunition, and the like. An efficient decisionmaking process is also surely a vital element. In sum, good staff work is a multiplier of combat power.

**T**he arguments against a General Staff Corps also warrant careful examination. They are very persuasive. First, the "elitism" of a General Staff Corps might be inconsistent with the democratic nature of American society. While there are already elites in the Army, they are elites of rank, achieved by long years of performance testing on the career ladder. Early selection of a minority to elite status would be more efficient, but this advantage might be diminished by consequent destruction of the motivation of the majority. Besides, the current promotion, school, and command

selection process already constitutes "examination by performance," and each list already a signal to those not selected that they did not "make the cut."

Second, a General Staff Corps might overemphasize "intellectualism." There are, it is said, many fine combat leaders who "aren't good at taking exams." The best current indicator of potential is performance, especially service with troops. Moreover, emphasis on reading and writing might encourage officers in those lonely pursuits, to the detriment of more military-relevant group activities.

Third, a General Staff Corps might foster "militarism." That is, the very advantage proclaimed by the system's advocates—a superb level of professional expertise—might isolate the experts from the values of the society they were developed to serve. The alleged complicity of the German General Staff in the destruction of the Weimar Republic and the rise of Nazism is often given as an example. Since "knowledge is power," and because experts tend to promote their own specialties, pressures might rise to use military power in situations where other means would better serve. Instead of preserving peace through deterrence, the Army might become a force propelling the country toward war.

Finally, a General Staff Corps might result in excessive "conservatism." Eventually, General Staff officers might form a doctrinal subculture, a "group-think." So long as the unified thought process remained open to internal dissent and debate, it would be capable of conceptual brilliance and unified articulation and action. However, if it became dominated by an erroneous concept, its very unity might lead to military disaster.

### AN AMERICAN GENERAL STAFF SYSTEM

The Army needs the advantages which a General Staff system would provide. At the same time, given predictable reactions to any program smacking of "elitism," current attitudes toward "intellectualism," and public apprehensions concerning

"militarism," any attempt to establish a classic General Staff Corps would probably fail. Even if the attempt succeeded, it might produce divisiveness which neither our Army nor our country can afford in the perilous times ahead. Furthermore, the danger of doctrinal "conservatism" is a considerable one. The wrong kind of unity could be worse than divisiveness.

We should, therefore, strike a compromise, one which will sharply improve the professionalism of the officer corps while avoiding the potential weaknesses and excesses discussed above. That is, we should enhance the professional development of a selected minority of our officers, in numbers and specialties appropriate to the Army's needs for general-staff-trained officers. For the remainder, we should provide that staff training needed by all field grade officers. Then we should assign both categories to the various commands and echelons of the Army appropriate to their various requirements. In other words, we should adopt somewhat of a General Staff *System* without formally establishing a General Staff *Corps*.

The following is a description of how such a system should be organized and administered.

The number to attend the Command and General Staff College (CGSC) annually should be determined by "backward planning" from Army-wide requirements for field grade positions involving "general staff" skills. There is currently no hard figure for this number, but a cursory review of typical staffs indicates that 15 to 20 percent of their field grade officers' duties involve "general staff" work. The mix of specialties in each CGSC class would be determined by the same analysis of requirements. Conversely, the Army's inventory of CGSC graduates in various specialties should be allocated to major commands in proportion to those requirements. A similar method should be used for the Army War College (AWC), which can be viewed as paralleling the second year of general staff training in the classic General Staff system. In order that Active Army officers remain familiar with the vital role played by the Reserve

components, each CGSC and AWC class would continue to have Reserve component representation.

Officers to attend CGSC should be selected in a way similar to that used today—by a board. The standard would be “best qualified,” with the terms of qualification different for each specialty. Some of the attendees would then have “management of the battlefield” as their principal substantive topic and as their vehicle for learning general staff techniques. Other attendees’ courses might be heavily weighted toward logistics or other combat service support. Some might even attend other Army schools or civilian institutions for part of their educational experience, if that were deemed best for their particular specialty.

**A**nd what of the other field grade officers of the Army—don’t they also spend most of their service on staffs? This question points up one of the anomalies of our current system, in that we send 40-plus percent to CGSC, while excluding the majority from any resident staff training at all! It is true that we admit another 20-plus percent to a nonresident version of CGSC, but it should be noted that this course contains fewer than half the instructional hours of the resident version. Moreover, the majority not selected for the resident course are thereby labeled—whether we like to admit it or not—as “lower half.”

What would make more sense would be to recognize that all officers need some training in staff techniques and all officers need to understand the integration of tactics and logistics on the modern battlefield. So *all* officers should attend a combined arms and services staff school (CAS<sup>3</sup>) of perhaps 8 to 10 weeks in length. The CAS<sup>3</sup> material would form part of the core curriculum of CGSC, thereby promoting a common doctrinal understanding throughout the Army.

Assuming that reduction in the size of the CGSC class would free up not only dollars (essential for approval of the program in this era of constrained resources) but also faculty, facilities, and housing, CAS<sup>3</sup> could also be

taught at Leavenworth. Every field grade officer in the Active Army could then be Leavenworth-trained, and the Combined Arms Center would more than ever be the Army’s wellspring of combined arms and services doctrine. Nonselection to CGSC would no longer label an officer a “second class citizen”; there may be a stigma in being lower half, but hardly one in being in the 80-percent majority. Advantages would also accrue to the unity of the Total Army; a nonresident preparation and examination could be made a Reserve components prerequisite for promotion to major, and completion of a nonresident version of CAS<sup>3</sup> prerequisite for promotion to lieutenant colonel.

Where would we get the faculty expertise to conduct such an educational experience? It is probably not to be found in the “near-peer” faculty-student relationship currently found at Leavenworth. Far more suitable is the Army War College system of senior colonel faculty and small-group teaching methods. In fact, we might consider adopting—at both CGSC and AWC—a faculty of “colonels emeritus,” men who missed becoming general officers but who have extraordinary expertise in tactics and/or strategy, logistics, defense policy, and so forth. The retention of these officers (to get them to give up a civilian “second career”) would probably require tenure beyond current retirement maximums, perhaps by five years or more. To believe that these officers will “stack arms” in such responsible positions is to sell short the strength and depth of our professionalism.

How would the products of this CGSC, and a similarly narrowed and intensified AWC, be employed to best effect? As stated earlier, each major command would be allowed its “fair share” of the Army’s inventory of such officers, *by specialty* (including command-selected CGSC graduates). How the commander would further allocate these officers within his staff and to his subordinate commands would be up to him; there should be no attempt to specify that general-staff-trained officers serve only in certain slots. The individual commander knows best the needs of his command.



**T**here is a final objection to adopting even the moderate, partial solution recommended above. It is that the Army's personnel management system is already in such a state of flux that to introduce further change could only do harm. The Officer Personnel Management System (OPMS) is still neither widely understood nor truly accepted. The "up or out" system eliminates still-productive officers at an awkward age, too young to retire but too old to launch a genuine "second career." The officer evaluation system is regarded with a high degree of cynicism by a large proportion of the officer corps; the same attitude exists with regard to the career management and counseling process. Finally, the extreme turbulence in officers' careers—scarcely a year and a half average in each position—seriously degrades superior-subordinate relationships and genuine professional competence. Is there any point in adopting something so exotic as a "General Staff System" when more basic problems cry out for resolution?

The answer is *yes*. These other problems are all being actively addressed by the Department of the Army. Their solutions will take considerable time, for change must be applied cautiously to programs which affect the professional morale of the officer corps. But system change which is badly needed and which can be applied with obvious benefit—as is the case with that recommended herein for the officer education system—should not wait.

Moreover, the changes recommended will in large measure compensate for weakness in the personnel management system. Selection

to CGSC in proportion to the Army's need for general staff skills in various specialties will further OPMS, as will assignment of CGSC graduates in proportion to various commands' needs for general-staff-trained specialists of various kinds. The more intensive educational experience for fewer officers in CGSC and AWC will provide an opportunity for closer observation and more valid evaluation of the Army's best officers at crucial stages of their careers. The common doctrinal training provided all officers in CAS<sup>3</sup> will somewhat make up for the diminution of superior-subordinate tutelage caused by the current situation of turbulence, and the excellence of both CAS<sup>3</sup> and CGSC will enable all field grade officers to be more effective faster in their positions. Finally, by coincidence, the end of 20-year retirement (possibly to be enacted in the near future) will ultimately result in a stretching out of the careers of those officers who remain in service past their initial obligations. The time appears ripe for the sorts of changes recommended.

**A** challenging and perilous future faces America and America's Army. To meet that future, we are going to have to employ more effectively and more efficiently the skills of our officers—a critical defense resource. More intensive education and more careful professional development must be provided to those who will occupy the most influential and responsible positions in tomorrow's Army. An American General Staff System will provide the professional leadership to meet whatever challenges lie ahead.

