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FASHION TIPS FOR THE FIELD GRADE

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From my perch here in the ivory fortress of the U.S. Army War College, I am tasked to look across the Army, take notice of strategic trends in the human dimension of war, and then ponder their implications for the military. Recently, I have felt compelled to address a strategic trend noticed by most everyone in the Army, yet seldom discussed in open company. Although I have yet to get my hands on the actual statistics to prove it, I believe that right about the time an officer attains the rank of major, his choice of clothing begins to narrow down to two or three items. As a result, he begins to stand out in a crowd because his civilian wardrobe is about 7 or 8 years out of date. (I focus on males because they (we) have greater need for correction.)

Lieutenants and captains, who tend to be rather chic when it comes to sartorial trends, are unusually adept at noticing the indicators of this phenomenon—a lapel is too wide, a collar is too pointed, or a pair of pants just looks oh-so-1990. Interestingly, field grade officers as a group generally are oblivious to the realization that their wardrobes have reached obsolescence. They continue to wear the same clothes year after year with little regard for the change that occurs outside the Army. This especially is evident here at the U.S. Army War College where class after class of colonels and lieutenant colonels arrive attired in the ubiquitous blue blazer and khaki pants (although daring students occasionally will add a pair of off-white slacks as a sign of youth and individuality).

Why would so many field grade officers dress so much alike, even if what they are wearing is out of step with the latest fashions? Actually, there are some very logical reasons. First, the clothes they've been wearing for the last decade have served them perfectly well, so there is no need to add anything new. Their clothes are still in good condition; they are still functional. Why would they need anything else?

Second, field grade officers are at a stage in life where the Army begins to occupy most of their conscious thoughts. With 14-hour work days spent in Army Combat Uniforms, there's little time—or perceived need—to notice trends in the outside world. The last thing field grade officers have time to do is shop for new and different articles of clothing. The end result is that by the time officers reach the senior ranks, they gradually have narrowed their wardrobes to a few well-worn, but familiar items.

But this essay is not really about fashion—one look in my closet would verify that I am woefully unqualified to comment on that topic (although this year I finally replaced my 25-year-old blue blazer after the lining fell out). Instead, this essay addresses the tendency of Army officers to narrow, not their wardrobe as they progress in rank, but their opportunities to broaden their horizons and gain new perspectives.

The future of warfare has changed dramatically. Senior Army leaders are no longer merely required to be expert warfighters; they now need to be “pentathletes” – world-class warriors who are competent in statesmanship, enterprise management, and governance, as well as being strategic and creative thinkers. Warfighting always will remain the primary focus of Army leaders, but the broadening requirements involved in the future application of military force will necessitate broader perspectives and thinking.

The shift to developing pentathletes gradually has become evident in Army training and schools, but the change has not permeated the officer assignment process. Despite the examples of current pentathletes such as Generals Abizaid, Petraeus, or Chiarelli—who added additional skills to their warfighting with assignments at graduate school, language study, or studying abroad—the evidence shows that up-and-coming senior leaders are increasingly choosing to restrict their career paths to assignments that stick closely to traditional warfighting skills.

For example, a comparison of past and present career paths of general officers reflects the growing avoidance of any assignment away from Army units or staff. In 1995, 11 out of the 36 newly selected brigadier generals had attended full time graduate school earlier in their careers. Their perspectives were broadened in diverse institutions such as Duke, University of Virginia, and University of Wisconsin as these future general officers were exposed to different ways of thinking and problem solving. A decade later, the situation has changed drastically. By 2005, the number of newly selected brigadier generals who had taken time out of their careers for full time graduate study had dropped to just 3 out of 38.

Similar evidence is found in the most recent brigade command list where over 50 officers were slated for tactical command. A quick analysis of the career paths of these officers (our future general officers) shows that only about a half dozen officers ventured outside the muddy boot track for assignments such as Office of the Secretary of Defense or Joint Chiefs of Staff intern, congressional fellow, or full time graduate study. All the other officers chose to stay within traditional command and staff Army assignments focusing on the war fight.

Given that many skills other than warfighting will be needed in the future, why are so many successful Army officers reluctant to broaden their career paths with assignments away from the Army? Ironically, it is due to the same two reasons that field grade officers resist expanding their wardrobes. First, specializing exclusively in warfighting (or just owning a blue blazer) has worked in the past, so there is no perceived need to change. Second, just as field grade officers believe life is too busy to give any thought to something as trivial as augmenting the blue blazer, officers currently are consumed with fighting a war, and the idea of taking time off to develop non-warfighting skills seems irrational. Despite all the official proclamations of developing multiskilled pentathlete leaders, the reality is that the pervasive Army culture continues to encourage our best warriors to specialize only in traditional assignments.

In the case of field grade wardrobes, it is the advent of an unexpected event outside the Army routine—a wedding, a funeral, or even a job interview—that forces the field grade officer to change perspectives. With attendance required, the officer initially considers wearing a uniform, but then drops back to choosing the trustworthy blue blazer. Fortunately, the spouse intervenes at this point and sends the reluctant officer to the nearest department store to be attired under the tutelage of a savvy store clerk.

In the case of officer assignments, future uses of military force will demand much more from Army officers than just warfighting skills. Today’s warfighters acknowledge this changed environment, yet still remain reluctant to stray from a traditional career path. It therefore becomes the Army’s responsibility to identify and assign our best warfighters to broadening experiences such as internships, graduate schooling, or language study. Only with a push from the Army will the culture change.

The blue blazer always will be the mainstay of the field grade wardrobe, and warfighting always will be the centerpiece of the Army profession. But just as all field grade officers eventually encounter a situation in which the blue blazer alone is inadequate, the Army is now facing a situation that demands leaders who are more than just warfighters. But, please, nobody is pushing for body piercing or spiked hair. Just adding a nice pair of gray pants would be fine, thank you.

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