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ARMY STRONG – REALLY?

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It would be easy to discount the conjecture that the U.S. Army is in trouble. After all, we are unmatched as a fighting force and were successful in conducting military operations for regime change in two countries in the space of 18 months. Our budget in the 21st century dwarfs the gross national product of most other countries. We have the finest equipment incorporating the latest technology and the most extensive training program for its people in the world. Combine that with the relatively high confidence placed in the Army (military) by the American people, it would be easy to feel invincible. I am reminded, however, of the retort made by a North Vietnamese general to a comment made by COL Harry Summers after the Vietnam War, "That may be true, but it is also irrelevant."

I have been affiliated with the U.S. Army since the summer of 1973—first as an ROTC, then West Point cadet, and as a 30-year career officer. I have seen the Army transition from its focus on military operations in Vietnam, gain triumph in the Cold War (which enabled successes in Southwest Asia in Operations DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM), and then struggle with Fukuyama's "End of History" through the 1990s, and now in the 21st century to arrive at its current way station in history.

That journey was marked by successive chiefs of staff (CSA) taking stock of the Army and then charting a path to the future. Their methodology was to commission a series of White Papers to identify the issues of the day that would serve as the basis for key initiatives during their tenures as CSA. In 1978, following the end of the U.S. military involvement in Vietnam and facing the challenges of the All-Volunteer Army, General Bernie Rogers published "Assessing the Army." One year later, General E. C. "Shy" Meyers declared the "Hollow Army" and published "A Framework for Molding the Army into a Disciplined Well-Trained Force." It is easy to make the inference that the Army was assessed as ill-disciplined and untrained, and that actions by strategic leaders were required to address an unacceptable condition. In 1986, General John Wickham published "Values, the Bedrock of the Profession," seeking a moral touchstone for members of the Army. From those White Papers, the chiefs initiated a number of annual campaigns to redress the shortfalls in the Army and to "professionalize" the force that struggled with its identity and sought to redefine itself.

Similar circumstances face our Army today. Call them weak signals or signposts, there are several events that give cause for concern for the health of the today's Army. Consider the list: Abu Ghraib, Walter Reed, Wanat, the Fort Hood Shootings, suicides, commander reliefs, command climate/toxic leadership, and the "Lost Art of Leadership in Garrisons," where the competency of our force and its leaders were questioned.

Over the past decade, as these signals have appeared, the Army has addressed them as discrete events, and in some cases, prided itself on its actions taken to rectify them. Throughout the current conflicts, we have heard our leadership warn about the conditions breaking the Army—primarily focused on the length of deployments—"boots on the ground" and the "dwell" time of Soldiers between deployments. The primary concern was the impact on the retention of company-grade officers and mid-grade noncommissioned officers. But, the impact is more insidious; one only has to look at the series of reports, internal and external, to be concerned about the health of the Army.

We also must acknowledge the changes ahead: frozen and reduced DOD/Dept of the Army budgets; the impending downsizing and reduction of force; and concerns with implementing the repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell. These transitions serve to reaffirm the characterization of the strategic environment as volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous and the need for senior leaders to be strategic in ensuring relevance of our Army to the Nation. Not unlike in the 1990s where a peace dividend was expected after two triumphs against the USSR and Iraq, the fiscal environment of today requires a tough look at defense expenditures. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates directed "efficiencies" in DOD operations from which the savings will be reinvested into specific areas of interest, and where the budget will be significantly reduced over the next 5 years.

The Profession of Arms study is the proxy that will allow us to assess the health of the Army after nearly a decade of conflict and in the face of changes and impending transitions. Following the methodology of past chiefs of staff, General Casey and Secretary McHugh directed the Profession of Arms campaign.

By asking questions, we will be able to examine the environmental context with insights from our constituents, determine critical areas of concern that should help in reframing the problem (using the design terminology), and then chart the way ahead for the Army. Through this critical and potentially uncomfortable self-reflection, the Army can gain what it seeks—"the strength to overcome and the strength to endure."

REFERENCES

1. F. Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *The National Interest*, Summer 1989, pp. 3-18.
2. "Lost Art of Leadership in Garrisons," *Army Health Promotion Risk Reduction & Suicide Prevention Report*, Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2010, pp. 35-88.

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