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Career Management: Time for a Bold Adjustment

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It's not easy to make a case for reform of an organization flushed with victory. Still, that is just what this essay will endeavor to do. But perhaps *reform* is not the right word, summoning up as it does the military reform movement of the 1970s and '80s, in which a host of external critics urged fundamental change upon what they labeled a stubbornly conservative body of military professionals.

In fact, significant changes for the better have been made within the armed services and the defense establishment since the Vietnam War. Leadership skills have been strengthened, individual training has been systematized and unit training made more realistic, and high standards of troop discipline have been restored. The readiness of our forces deterred Soviet expansion and our military assistance blunted communist adventurism in the Third World, contributing to the collapse of Marxism-Leninism as a force in international politics. In the Persian Gulf War, so-called gold-plated weapons more than proved their worth, an extraordinary excellence in joint staff planning was displayed there, and maneuver operations worthy of a Hannibal or a Napoleon precipitated the rout of a numerically superior enemy. Whether part of the credit for all this should go to external critics is academic—it was professionals who implemented the needed changes and produced those victories.

So, rather than urging reform because of alleged failure in the past, this essay will suggest that we adapt America's profession of arms to the changes wrought by victory. Specifically, it will explore whether the current military career system, created in the aftermath of World War II and based on preparedness for massive expansion against a monolithic enemy, is suitable for the non-bipolar, New World Order of the future.

Origins of the Current Career System

The mobilization for World War II entailed a fortyfold expansion of the services, causing extraordinarily fast promotions within the officer corps. Among the legends from that period is Army Chief of Staff George Marshall's little black book, from which he rapidly advanced those who would become the senior ground leaders of the war. (It goes almost without saying that similar apocryphal lore exists within the Navy and Air Force concerning Admiral King and General Arnold.) Less well known is that all of the service departments concurrently boarded out large numbers of officers judged to be too old or otherwise not up to the demands of the coming conflict. Then, as the mobilization and the war itself progressed, it was discovered that many officers, including some whose performances had been exemplary in peacetime, could not cope with the turbulent reassignments and varied stressful duties required during hostilities. A life-or-death struggle did not permit second chances, so there were many personal failures as well as successes attendant upon America's worldwide victory.

Having experienced two great mobilizations in their lifetimes, and foreseeing the emergence, in Soviet communism, of yet another major adversary, service leaders were determined to make their institutions readier for the next international confrontation. Among other lessons learned, they seem to have perceived a correlation between success in the rapid reassignments of wartime and a previous pattern of varied experience in peacetime. This became the "generalist ideal," and led to its administrative manifestation, a new and elaborate system of career management. Officers' careers would be directed to ensure them varied experiences, and those who could not cope with variety would be eliminated. Peacetime service would thus approximate, at a reduced risk to national security, the developmental stresses of war.

The means for quality control, an up-or-out promotion standard, was institutionalized in the Officer Personnel Act of 1947. Lieutenants not promoted to captain (Army/AF/Marine titles of rank are used here for simplicity) would leave the service in their twenties; captains not promoted to major, in their thirties; majors, lieutenant colonels, colonels, and brigadier generals

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would retire in their forties or early fifties, in each case a few years after having been passed over. Except for a small number of very senior generals and admirals, the military would no longer be a lifetime career.

It is curious to note that the same age/rank relationship was made to apply to all officers, regardless of function. For example, those whose duties did not require any particular degree of physical vigor (e.g. a lieutenant colonel of the adjutant general's corps managing an administrative office) would be held to the same up-or-out standards as those whose duties clearly did (e.g. an infantry lieutenant colonel commanding a combat battalion). The principal rationale of the act apparently was not, contrary to conventional wisdom, a need for youth and vigor, but simply a desire for rapid peacetime advancement—possible only if those not advancing got out of the way—as a means of testing adaptability to rapid wartime advancement. The services would thus be more ready for the next major expansion, having (to use a business term) an “inventory in motion” officer corps.

A factor not taken into account by the creators of the new system was that of institutionalized large-scale overseas stationing of our armed forces. Following promulgation of the Truman Doctrine in 1947, communist power seizure in Czechoslovakia in 1948, the Red Army's victory in China's civil war in 1949, and North Korea's invasion of South Korea in 1950, we deployed and long maintained between a quarter and a third of our forces overseas. The result was an increase of turbulence in officer career patterns. In addition to changing jobs upon promotion (on average, every fourth year) and upon each assignment to and from resident schooling (about every fifth year), the successful officer would be assigned overseas and back perhaps three times in a 20- to 30-year career. It is not necessary to wrestle with the mathematics—a random survey of, say, colonels with 25 years' service will show that average tenure in each duty position has been scarcely a year and a half. This appears to have been the case regardless of the criticality of the position; a case in point (and one can find many such) is that the Army's M-1 tank had nine program managers in its 12 years of development.

Does Up-or-Out Make Sense?

Speaking from the standpoint of business (which this writer does, after a decade of managing executive development in a major corporation), such turbulence would be regarded as absurdly counterproductive. An executive in charge of a typical factory, marketing organization, research laboratory, or sales force would just be getting truly effective after a year and a half on the job. Moreover, that short a time would not be enough to judge an executive's performance or to determine his readiness to advance to higher levels of responsibility.

But, it will be argued, the military is not a business organization. True as that may be, the suspicion remains that rapid reassignment, even given its advantages as a winnowing device and in preparing officers for mobilization expansion and wartime turbulence, has been overdone.

For one thing, it appears to have resulted in a requirement for vastly larger numbers of officers. If each officer in an organization has arrived there so recently as to still be on the learning curve, it will take many more officers to provide the skills and knowledge for effective operation. A case in point—obvious to an observer from the business world—is the astonishing profusion of officers in positions labelled “deputy,” “executive officer,” “special assistant,” and “aide.” Statistically, the proportion of all officers in the services has burgeoned from 9.4 percent to 15.5 percent since World War II, with that of the field grades—major through colonel in the Army, Air Force, and Marines, lieutenant commander through captain in the Navy—more than quadrupling, from 1.3 percent to 5.4 percent.

In 1983, the President’s Private Sector Survey on Cost Control (the “Grace Commission,” for which I directed manpower analysis on the Department of the Army Task Force) estimated that the services could, by a moderate reduction in reassignment frequency, substantially lower officer requirements. Steps recommended were replacement of lengthy resident schooling by short courses on a TDY-and-return basis, lengthening of “desirable” overseas tours, extension of tenure in command and key staff jobs, and flexibility in hewing to a position’s prescribed rank (with, say, a year’s limit) for those promoted while in the position. Action has never been taken on those recommendations; and, to no one’s surprise, the current drawdown, temporarily put on hold by the Persian Gulf crisis but now gathering momentum, reduces officer strength far less proportionally than overall manpower.

Now, it should be noted that there has indeed been an expansion of the services with every major crisis but the most recent, and an attendant speedup in the promotion of officers. This would appear to make somewhat of a case for the sort of turbulence-conditioning we have been talking about. In the future, however, it is probable that such expansion, with or without reserve-component mobilization, will become a distant memory. There is no imposing enemy to the United States on the horizon, nothing at all comparable to the Central Powers of World War I, the Hitler-Tojo Axis, or Moscow-centered communism at its height of aggressiveness. To be sure, Japan and the European Community threaten our international economic competitiveness, but it strains imagination to foresee a role in either case for armed intervention.

Before further discussing rapid reassignment, rapid promotion, and up-or-out attrition, let us dispose of what I consider to be a side issue—the question of “youth and vigor” that I raised earlier. In today’s Army, a junior

officer remains in grade as a lieutenant for only four years. (All of these figures may be stretched out somewhat during a drawdown, but experience indicates that the effect will be temporary.) This is necessary, it is argued, because only someone in the vigor of his or her early twenties has the hustle and stamina to lead a platoon of teenage soldiers in the field. Apparently unquestioned is the anomaly that the platoon sergeant is usually in his thirties or even early forties, with duties that are likely to be even more arduous than the lieutenant's. The same paradox exists with the captain in his late twenties commanding a company, whose first sergeant is likely to be a grizzled veteran in his late forties.

The officer/NCO relationship aside, one wonders why a lieutenant colonel commanding a battalion must be in his or her thirties, a colonel commanding a brigade in his early forties, and so on into the general officer ranks, when it is taken for granted that an obviously vigorous Norman Schwarzkopf should retire in his fifties. It would seem to make better sense for officers to command a decade later in age and service, if the individuals concerned were fit; and for flag-rank officers to serve until age 65, as is accepted practice for comparable positions in business. If the logic is truly one of vigor, and if age has been merely a convenient surrogate, could not there be a physical fitness requirement for continuation in a combat-type career track?

In fact, physical vigor as such cannot be the true reason for current practice. There already exist fitness tests for duties with specific physical requirements, aviation being the largest and most obvious example. It is hard to understand why existing tests for overall physical ability could not be applied on some sort of sliding scale, by age and type of function. There has to be some other rationale underlying the services' insistence on maintaining the up-or-out system of promotion and retention.

Up-or-Out: Rationale and Consequences

There is such a rationale—it is officer recruitment and retention. Forget (if you ever believed) that old Chinese proverb about not using good iron for horseshoes nor good men for soldiers, for its suggestion that stupidity befits soldiership has no validity in this day and age. Anyone familiar with the fast changing, technologically intricate, and politically and managerially sophisticated requirements of modern warfare knows the gross untruth of such a saying. There is hardly any use in a modern armed service for the mythical dumb soldier, and there is certainly no place for other than first-rate managers and leaders among its officers.

The problem is how to attract and retain such officers, given the managerial challenges and the financial and lifestyle rewards of a business

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career in our business-oriented society. Rapid promotion does indeed provide such a means, at least during the early years of service. There is little in civilian industry to compare with the opportunity for an Army or Marine captain, at the age of 27 or so, to lead a company/battery/troop of 100 to 200 soldiers. Indeed, the prospect of so much responsibility at so young an age is a principal recruiting theme of all the services' ROTC programs. This also applies to command of a Navy ship or Air Force squadron (or Army/Marine battalion), where an officer in his or her late thirties is responsible for hundreds of men and women and tens of millions of dollars in budget and inventory. By that age, of course, near-term eligibility for full retirement (including immediate receipt of benefits) after 20 years is a powerful force for retention. As a result, a resignation between the 15th and 20th years of service is a rare occurrence, while retirement immediately upon reaching 20 (typically at 40-plus years of age) is so common as to be unremarkable.

Unfortunately, the logic cuts both ways. If we value officers for the intelligence and resourcefulness shown in their duty performance, we have to give them credit for applying the same intellectual energy to their personal lives and careers. It is all very well to hope that patriotism, dedication to duty, and love of military life will keep enough of these better officers in the service. Only a tiny minority, however, have the prospect of achieving such high rank as to remain past their forties, and this is generally understood. Many of our finest officers, therefore, will choose to resign in their first decade in uniform, to begin civilian careers at an age and level where there are ample opportunities for entry into business organizations. Others, after completing 20 years of service and thus achieving minimum eligibility for retirement, will leave while still young enough to start a genuine second career.

This is not necessarily a bad thing. If there were no up-or-out method for narrowing the promotion pyramid, and if too many officers chose to remain, promotion would soon grind to a crawl and the services would lose a recruiting and retention inducement that speaks powerfully in America's materialistic society. As it is, those who remain to compete for high rank, like those who depart, have made an intelligent risk/reward analysis. For those who stay, the ceremony, camaraderie, adventure, moral satisfaction of public service, compensation adequate to a middle-class lifestyle, and security afforded by a

relatively stable institution have made the risk worthwhile. If they then succeed in achieving high rank, the rewards are considerable in terms of continuing prestige within a community where they have spent most of their lives.

Thus it can be demonstrated that from the services' traditional point of view, up-or-out makes eminently good sense. The question remains whether it makes good sense from the standpoint of current trends in defense expenditures, national budgets (and deficits), and the ability to finance the relatively large, intensively trained, and high-tech standing force required by the interventionist strategy arguably implied by the New World Order.

Let us assume, for the sake of a rough analysis, that the drawn-down Army requires 75,000 officers. If 65,000 have less than 20 years of service, and receive, in pay and benefits, \$100,000 a year, their active-duty cost would be \$6.5 billion. Given that the 10,000 remaining past 20 years of service receive not only higher pay but also greater perquisites, a combined pay/benefit/perquisite cost of \$150,000 per officer seems not unreasonable, for an additional cost of \$1.5 billion. This is not all the cost, however. Of those who do not stay past 20, some 2000 per year may be assumed to have retired at 20 years (say, age 42), with a life expectancy to age 75 (a conservative average, given the physical vigor of military officers); if these receive pensions and benefits equal to half of what they got on active duty, the cost may be computed at $33 \times 2000 \times \$50,000 = \3.3 billion. The 10,000 who stay beyond 20 years are of course all eligible to retire. If they do so at an average 25 years of service, their retirement costs will be 2000 (per year) $\times 28$ (years in retirement) $\times \$75,000 = \4.2 billion. The total cost for the Army's officer corps thus adds up to \$15.5 billion.

However, if we then assume that promotions and reassignments are slowed and the career stretched out, the Army could presumably get by with perhaps a third fewer officers (see the Grace Commission recommendations cited earlier). This means the Army would have only 50,000 officers, 43,000 of them with less than 25 years of service (a new minimum retirement point), and 7000 remaining past 25, some to 40 years. If, as a consequence of both reduced numbers and increased apprehension about remaining further into middle age, only 1000 per year stay long enough to retire at 25 years, with the 7000 beyond 25 retiring at an average of 35 years, the total cost of the officer corps becomes around \$7.7 billion, half the cost under the current system. If reductions in education and training costs (because of longer payoff time in each duty position) are included, the total cost would be far less than half. Adding in the other services, we are talking about savings on the order of \$20-30 billion a year.

These figures are admittedly crude, but one can be sure that critics outside the services, in an effort to design and create intervention-capable forces within severe budget constraints, will use just such sorts of analyses.

A Need for Adaptation

Suppose that a study by the Joint Staff, using the authority granted by the Goldwater-Nichols Act (and the capability so ably demonstrated in the Persian Gulf War), confirmed the premises developed in this essay: that rapid promotion is justifiable only for the sake of recruiting and retention; that frequent reassignment and up-or-out attrition are justifiable only to support the expedited promotions; and that none of these procedures makes sense in the context of constrained resources, a non-mobilization strategy, and the strong likelihood that stretched-out time between promotions and during assignments would actually enhance performance. Would the services then insist that recruiting and retention are so vulnerable as to justify reduction in the other aspects of mission capability?

The question, then, boils down to whether recruiting and retention are really so vulnerable. As for recruiting, college graduates are surely attracted into the officer corps for many of the same reasons that attract less-advantaged men and women into the enlisted ranks—the distinctive attributes of military life (adventure, outdoor activity, exercise of leadership and responsibility, foreign travel, discipline, etc.) plus the benefits of education (beforehand in a service academy or ROTC scholarship, or afterward in a GI Bill) useful in or out of the service. The prospect of 20-year retirement does not appear to be a prominent incentive for entering the service, if one may judge from a lack of emphasis on the subject in recruitment advertising.

The most productive area for examination, therefore, would be whether a stretch-out of promotion during the early years of service and a shift of eligibility for full retirement to 25 (or even 30) years would so decrease junior officer retention as to diminish force effectiveness over the long term. Possibly, the opposite would occur—that career extension of experienced and physically vigorous officers past 20 years of service would significantly enhance their leadership and thus the retention of their subordinates. Given a program of assistance when the time comes to make a transition to a second career, it is also possible that more officers would be willing to risk deferring that transition to a later age. Most large business corporations, recognizing the difficulty of managerial job-hunting at a mid-career level (and at middle age, when financial obligations tend to be at their highest) have made such outplacement programs a standard practice.

Equally important to determine would be the impact of a new career system on the military's sense of professionalism. There appears to be a consensus among scholars that the military services in modern industrialized nations are converging with their larger societies, that is, becoming more occupationally oriented than professional (in the traditional sense of the

military as a culturally separate professional group). Whether reestablishment of the military as a “lifetime career” (which is what the suggested changes would amount to) will move the American military closer to or farther from the mainstream of national work patterns, and whether that result is good or bad for national security, are surely as important as tangible questions about manpower and budgets.

“But why change at all?” the skeptic may well be asking. As I remarked earlier concerning cost analysis, that which is distasteful to the military traditionalist may very well be attractive to civilian critics, those who are seeking to design and create intervention-capable forces within severely constrained resources. And make no mistake about it, our nation—given all its problems of urban decay, educational decline, crumbling infrastructure, drug abuse, rampant crime, and diminished international competitiveness, and given further the opportunity presented by the end of bipolar confrontation—is not likely to keep defense expenditures at the top of its agenda. The military, for its own sake, needs to undertake appropriate reforms before they are imposed from above by its political masters.

Summarizing the foregoing, effective reform of the military career system would include these elements:

- Reducing the number of non-essential officers by lengthening assignments, curtailing resident schooling, and eliminating deputy/executive/assistant-to positions.
- Eliminating blanket up-or-out as a device for managing officer age and rank distribution.
- Setting minimum eligibility for full-benefits retirement at 25 years, with eventual extension possibly to 30 years, depending on experience with retention patterns.
- Stretching out promotions, in keeping with such stretched-out careers.
- Establishing a schedule of fitness standards for appointment to positions (or continuation in career tracks) requiring a high degree of vigor. Alternatively, retaining up-or-out as an exception for those career tracks only.
- Involuntarily terminating officers whose performance has unacceptably declined, or whose skills are no longer needed by any of the services.
- Establishing a transition program, similar to the outplacement programs offered by major corporations, for officers terminated in mid-career.

The last of these, a career transition program for officers (with a parallel program for noncommissioned/petty officers) whose careers end in middle age, is needed whether overall reform is undertaken or not. Under the

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present system, officers retire on average in their late forties, noncommissioned and petty officers in their early forties. Whatever the rank achieved, the effect is the same: a reduction in income to around half that on active duty, at an age when financial obligations are at a maximum, and loss of the psychological and emotional satisfactions of employment just when civilian counterparts are at their height of productivity. There is thus a built-in need for military retirees to find a second career. Immediate pension and continued benefits ease the financial transition, but the morale transition is another matter. To pretend, as the current system seems to, that perception of this situation by high-potential junior officers has no bearing on their retention is to fly in the face of reality. If cost is seen as a stumbling block, by coupling a transition program to a restriction on current retire-at-will policies (i.e. limit eligibility to retirement-eligibles who contract to serve out some minimum tenure in their current positions), the program could be made essentially cost-free. (I am speaking here of the post-drawdown milieu, when the Selective Early Retirement Boards and other early-release programs have run their course.) In any case, to the extent that military service is by its nature only the first of an individual's careers, the profession should adapt that situation to its benefit rather than its detriment.

However good the design and careful the implementation, there will be much risk in modifying the officer career system. A lot of details will have to be worked out over time, as was the case following the post-World War II adoption of the current structure. That—it need hardly be said—is no excuse for inaction. The services must either take the initiative or have reforms imposed upon them by individuals and agencies who lack an experienced understanding of the profession of arms. In either case, someone has to undertake the task. The national strategy which produced the present career system has given way to a new world order, and the nation's military must be properly structured for its mission within that strategy. □