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Leonard Wong
Strategic Studies Institute

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Op-Ed: Where Have All the Army Generals Gone?

November 15, 2011 | Dr. Leonard Wong

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It was a bittersweet occasion when the Army's Chief of Staff, General Martin E. Dempsey, was selected for the position of chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff — the highest ranking officer in the U.S. military. Had he remained the Army's chief, General Dempsey would have ably provided critically needed leadership and wisdom as the Army rebuilds itself after a grueling decade of war.

And yet it makes sense that the senior uniformed advisor to the President comes from the service that has deployed more troops to Iraq and Afghanistan than those provided by the Navy, Air Force, and Marines combined. Moreover, the Army has more general officers than any of the other services, so it is only logical that key billets at the strategic level are heavily populated by Army generals.

Interestingly, however, the opposite is true. An analysis of critical, national-level military positions shows that the Army is significantly underrepresented in filling leadership roles in the strategic realm. For example, of the nine combatant commanders — the four-star generals or admirals who command across service boundaries and report directly through the Secretary of Defense to the President (think Norman Schwarzkopf during Operation DESERT STORM) — just two are Army general officers. On the military's Joint Staff, the situation is strikingly similar as the majority of the influential positions are filled by general officers from services other than the Army. Overall, 36 percent of all military officers serve in the Army, yet Army officers fill only a little over 15 percent of the key joint military positions.

Despite their greater numbers and extensive experience on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan, senior Army officers are watching from the sidelines as general officers from other services are selected for key positions at a disproportionate rate. Part of the problem

is that Army senior leaders have been more preoccupied with fighting insurgencies than making themselves qualified or experienced for national leadership. A decade of back-to-back deployments has left Army colonels and generals with careers missing vital prerequisite experiences such as tours in the Pentagon, time in the interagency world, graduate schooling, or almost any assignment away from the war fight. As a result, many Army senior officers lack experience in critical strategic functions such as formulating programs and budgets, superintending acquisition programs, interacting with Congress, or managing strategic human resources. Fortunately, as the wars taper off in the upcoming years, many more Army officers will once again be available for broadening experiences to help prepare them for strategic leadership.

In discussions with dozens of up-and-coming senior Army officers, however, I have noticed another troubling trend in the Army officer corps that is potentially more detrimental to the Army's ability to lead at the strategic level — a growing disdain in Army officers for any leadership position away from troops. Army officers have always shied away from bureaucratic billets — preferring to command soldiers in the field. But a decade of making life and death decisions in combat has provided an even starker contrast to the world of consensus and compromise necessary in the Pentagon or Congress. Living a relatively black and white existence on the battlefield has encouraged antipathy towards the gray, untidy world of policymaking. Factor in memories of the shabby treatment of General Eric Shinseki after his testimony before Congress, and it is not surprising that many of the Army's best officers are eager to lead soldiers, but not the Nation.

Army leaders have dedicated the majority of their lives to service. But service and duty extend well beyond leading soldiers in battle. The Army's duty is to the Nation, and the Nation needs the wisdom and experience of Army leaders. As the Army recovers from the wars of Iraq and Afghanistan, it is imperative to send its best and brightest warriors to assignments that will prepare them not just for the next tactical command, but also for leadership at the national strategic level. For Army officers accustomed to running towards the sound of the guns, this will be a sacrifice. But today's soldiers understand sacrifice, and the Nation will be better served with soldiers willing and able to lead in the messy, yet critical realm of national strategic leadership.

The views expressed in this op-ed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government. This opinion piece is cleared for public release; distribution is unlimited.

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