Framing the Future of the US Military Profession

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This monograph argues the US military profession needs to be clearer and more precise about its expertise and jurisdictions of practice on behalf of US society. “Military” is a vague term that too often is fraught with assumptions. Such assumptions, often unstated, are a frequent source of friction in civil-military relations. In the Future of the Army Profession project, which published a first edition in 2002 and a second edition in 2005, Don M. Snider, Gayle L. Watkins, and Lloyd J. Matthews led a large team of researchers and analysts, drawing heavily from Andrew Abbott’s classic work The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor, to develop valuable insights for the US Army.

This monograph builds on the work of Snider et al. by expanding analysis to the US military profession as a whole and addressing contemporary challenges. The monograph also considers Étienne Wenger’s work on communities of practice as a valuable complement to Abbott’s sociological foundation. Conceptually, the approach the authors lay out in this monograph improves on well-known and oft-cited, yet dated, intellectual foundations, resting on the work of Samuel Huntington (1957) and Morris Janowitz (1960).

The aim is two-fold. The first aim is to represent the professional work of militaries more effectively and to investigate how militaries divide this work into different organizational structures, such as defense enterprise (that is, fourth-estate) organizations, the Joint community, services, and communities within the services. This examination produces an architecture of jurisdictional claims over how the enterprise is managed and which responsibilities the profession decides to perform organically versus outsourcing them. The examination also allows for the analysis of duties and responsibilities among military members, civilians, and former members, such as veterans and retirees.

The second aim is to propose a research agenda that builds upon this framework and examines the impact of contemporary issues on the military profession and its responsibilities to sustain its domains of knowledge and ensure continued public trust. This concern is practical because the findings should assist civilian and military leaders in adapting to the changing character of war, emergence of new security threats, and evolution of old security threats as well as articulating the military profession’s relationship with nonmilitary professions more effectively. Achieving this clarity is a shared responsibility defined through negotiation with US society and its civilian leaders.

The human competition at the heart of war and other instrumental uses of violence or coercion requires effective discretionary judgments across many domains. Clarification of military expertise and jurisdictions of practice will help to prepare US military professionals to exercise discretionary judgment more effectively.
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