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Organizational Change and Adaptation in the US Army

J. P. Clark

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ABSTRACT: The military profession changes by both slow evolution and sudden revolution. This article offers a typology to understand the factors that influence such changes, and then suggests how each factor might help or hinder the US Army's ability to adapt in the near future.

Between the early nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the US Army transformed how it prepared for war. This shift grew from an equally stark change in how the officer corps conceived military professionalism. The old professionalism was built upon the belief that military competence was a product of character, common sense, and natural aptitude. Those innate qualities might be refined through experience or study but were largely beyond the ability of the institution to manufacture. Consequently, there was little effort to train officers in anything but the technical skills of engineering and gunnery.

The new professionalism, by contrast, assumed command was a communal affair built upon a body of expert knowledge that could be codified, imparted, and regulated through umpired field training, professional education, and tactical doctrine. These activities implied the Army can, indeed *must*, shape the manner in which officers think and act.

In war times, the change in professionalism was manifest as a shift from informal direction grounded in the personality of the commander to more formal control using impersonal staff procedures. The former was embodied by the figure of a general sitting atop a hill, aides dashing off with orders dictated by the commander; the latter was characterized by a command post filled with staff officers producing detailed written plans in accordance with standardized procedures taught at a staff college. Although undeniably more functional, the elements of personality were sacrificed in the transition. Individuals lost autonomy as they were subsumed within standardized organizational structures.

Officers commissioned in the 1890s regarded this change as a natural evolution; one officer sneeringly called the era of his immediate predecessors the Army's "Dark Age."¹ From the vantage of this younger generation, the path was one of progress. Previous generations would not have agreed. They found that the notion the institution could manufacture commanders misguided and offensive.

These irreconcilable views disprove the myth of a universal military profession. There is no normative standard against which all can be

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1 William A. Ganoë, *History of the United States Army* (New York, NY: D. Appleton, 1924), 298.

judged. Instead, military professionalism can take many forms, each reflecting the prevailing ideas and values of its society and time. Because these ideas and values are so fundamental to those who hold them, a major shift in professionalism creates a significant divide within an army. Soldiers from either side of the division might be as foreign to each other as if they came from different countries. Those accustomed to the old ways regard the change as one for the worse, a betrayal of what they hold dear. Those who come up in the new tradition cannot fathom how their predecessors could have been so backward.

The first part of this article provides a conceptual framework to explain why such changes happen. The second portion applies the framework to the US Army. Using lessons from the past and observations of the present, this article explores the possibility a significant professional shift is decades in the future or whether one might already be underway.

Why Military Organizations Change

The existing scholarship of military adaptation provides several models of organizational change. In *The Soldier and the State*, Samuel Huntington examines the case of the US Army as just described. He argues a separation from society that was born of civilian neglect and geographic isolation in the late nineteenth century allowed military professionalism to flourish. His argument rests upon a flawed understanding of the beliefs of the officer corps of the time and its relationship with society.² In fact, the opposite was the case; Huntington saw professionalism more as a product of the civilian influences stirring in the 1870s which later flowered in the Progressive Era than any other factor. The Army's ties to society—not an imagined isolation—gave rise to the new military professionalism.

Among the other theories of military adaptation, one of the most influential is that of Barry Posen. He argues that the inherent conservatism of military organizations makes it necessary to have some external force—albeit often in conjunction with a maverick internal reformer—to develop new, innovative means of warfare. As an international relations neorealist, Posen contends the primary impetus for reform is a shift in the strategic environment.³

Stephen Peter Rosen offers a countering theory. Noting that external actors often lack the staying power and institutional reach to impose lasting change and that military organizations are far from monolithic, he argues only a senior military leader who imparts his conceptual vision to a rising cohort of junior followers can fundamentally reorient a larger organization.⁴ Rosen also notes adaptation is not purely a product of

2 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1957); John M. Gates, "The Alleged Isolation of US Army Officers in the Late 19th Century," *Parameters* 10, no. 3 (September 1980): 32–45; Edward M. Coffman, "The Long Shadow of The Soldier and the State," *Journal of Military History* 55, no. 1 (January 1991): 69–82; and William B. Skelton, "Samuel P. Huntington and the Roots of the American Military Tradition," *Journal of Military History* 60, no. 2 (April 1996): 325–38.

3 Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984).

4 Stephen Peter Rosen, *Winning the Next War: Innovation and the Modern Military* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

external factors, but internal competition for resources or prestige might also serve as catalysts for change.

Subsequent scholarship has provided variations and additions to the basic external-internal debate. Summarizing some of this work, Theo Farrell and Terry Terriff demonstrate cultural, political, and technological factors can also play a role in shaping institutional change. They also note some form of external shock, such as defeat in war or the emergence of a new technology, can serve as an impetus for adaptation.⁵

In summary, the scholarship of military adaptation offers three broad causes for change: external direction that overcomes military conservatism, internal direction emanating from a visionary leader, or an institutional reaction to an external shock. We can refer to these theories by the simplified shorthand of politicians, generals, and events. In combination, these causes and theories do well to explain discrete instances of evolutionary change, such as a revision of doctrine or an institutional reorganization.

In the instance of the US Army described earlier, elements of each were present. As demonstrated elsewhere, the professional transformation of the twentieth century cannot be fully explained by politicians, generals, or events. Ultimately, a series of generational shifts caused by forces beyond the control of politicians or generals and arising from trends far deeper than any single event caused the change in thinking that created the new military professionalism.⁶ Though generational difference is an intuitive notion, generation-based theories are often unsatisfying, either imposing artificial uniformity upon diverse populations or giving unnatural significance to the moment separating one page of the calendar from the next. Noting professional generations are not monolithic avoids the first fault; indeed, disagreements define a generation as much as points of consensus.

Exemplified by the competing views of John Nagl and Gian Gentile, the debate on the efficacy of counterinsurgency illuminates the great military-strategic problem of recent years and also reveals how today's soldiers filter the problem through personal experience, organizational memory, bureaucratic politics, and institutional aspirations and fears.⁷ Such complex variables cannot possibly produce a single view on this complicated issue; a theory that contends otherwise should be rejected immediately. Just as generations do today, past generations had defining debates that reflected their problems and preoccupations; thus, one means of charting the course of the institution is to plot shifting points of debate. An idea that is unthinkable to one generation becomes an eccentric notion for the next and a self-evident truth for another. Meanwhile, other ideas progress in the opposite direction, falling from the status of unquestioned assumptions to relics of the past.

While generations do not share a single understanding of their world, they do share a context of military problems and a set of resources,

5 Theo G. Farrell and Terry Terriff, *The Sources of Military Change: Culture Politics, Technology* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002), 3–20.

6 J. P. Clark, *Preparing for War: The Emergence of the Modern US Army, 1815–1917* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 269–77.

7 John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002); and Gian P. Gentile, *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2013).

tools, ideas, and values that shape how they approach those problems. Keeping our study of generations focused upon this context and not tidy dates avoids the other fault of generations-based theories—the tendency to rely on artificial calendar-based definitions. Rather than a decade or a century, shared context gives a generation its coherence. The encompassing milieu of changes presents practitioners with a different set of ideas and tools to apply to military problems, and so a new professional generation is born. The changes in environment that power these tectonic movements of professional norms take too many forms to be reduced to a simple theory, but can be grouped into three broad categories of influences: institutions, experiences, and culture.

Institutions refer to all the mechanisms by which a military deliberately tries to shape the profession: curricula of military schools, policies governing the selection of officers, systems of promotion, and methods of organizing and giving preference to certain functional specialties over others. *Experiences* encompass all the elements of military service that shape perceptions but are outside the control of the institution, such as informal norms or experiences in war. Everything else—all that is not strictly military—falls into *culture*: the values, concepts, and outlooks inherited from civilian society. Although nonmilitary in origin, civilian norms do have military implications. Class attitudes can define officer-enlisted interactions, racial attitudes can affect the conduct of overseas operations, and ideas about the national place in the world can dictate strategy.

By virtue of mass, experiences and culture tend to be more important than institutions. The several years officers spend in professional education are overshadowed by decades in units and a lifetime of interaction with society. Nonetheless, the relative importance of these categories varies with each generation, so no fixed relation or hierarchy among them can be established. The utility of the model is descriptive rather than prescriptive. The framework of influences allows us to describe the inputs into the profession better and to discern deliberate efforts to change from those that happened in response to external forces.

The institutions-experiences-culture model has three implications for military change.⁸ First, efforts to shape the profession will deviate from their intended course when reformers' efforts are channeled through institutions and interact with the influences of experiences and culture. Even reforms rigorously grounded in the logic of military effectiveness will lose coherence, diverging as they are altered by factors such as ingrained habits of thought grounded in experience or cultural notions of fairness, propriety, or prestige.

The corollary is that institutional efforts to preserve the status quo will also fail. Freezing institutional inputs in place will not halt movement in the three-sided dynamic interplay. To illustrate this, imagine if all the professional education, doctrine, and systems of training used in 1980 remained unchanged through the 2020s, thereby ensuring the

8 In the nineteenth-century Army, the officer corps and the military profession were synonymous. That is no longer the case. Because the generational model of change relies upon common influences, the different constituent elements of the Army Profession—active and reserve components, commissioned and noncommissioned officers, and Army civilians—must each be analyzed in accord with its distinct influences. To make comparisons with the past, this article will focus upon the active duty officer corps.

chief of staff in 2040 would undergo precisely the same professional socialization as the current chief of staff. Even controlling for differences in personality, the outcomes would certainly be different.

General Mark Milley was commissioned into the Army of the Cold War era, served in an experimental motorized division in the 1980s, deployed to Haiti as a brigade operations officer, commanded brigades in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Afghanistan, and Iraq, and returned to Afghanistan as a brigadier general and later as a lieutenant general.⁹ Contrast his background with the future chief of staff, who was commissioned around 2005 and most likely had multiple deployments as a company-grade officer to Iraq, Afghanistan, or both. While he or she might have served in the same campaigns, what Milley took from the early days of Iraq as a brigade commander after 20 years of commissioned service was quite different from what his successor might have learned as a platoon leader during the Iraq troop surge.

And the future chief of staff—just promoted to major—still has many formative experiences coming in the years ahead. Furthermore, the ideas, events, technologies, and influences that have surrounded Millennials are different than those that shaped the Baby Boomers. Even if the institution attempted to instill the exact same traits, habits of mind, and approaches to solving military problems, differences in experience and culture would cause a different outcome; change comes whether we want it or not.

The third implication—and the most important—is that while the institution can neither command nor halt change, it can channel the forces of experience and culture in a beneficial direction. This was the case with the Root reforms in the early-twentieth century, which introduced a general staff corps, realistic large-scale training, and a comprehensive system of professional education to include the US Army War College. Those reforms were not sufficient in themselves to create the professional attitude embodied by young officers like George C. Marshall. The reforms did, however, harness the spirit of the age by employing methods of education, training, and doctrine that earlier generations would have resisted as too intrusive.

Without Root, Marshall would have likely had much the same attitude toward professionalism derived from Progressive Era society, but he would not have received the specific skills and knowledge that made him such an adept planner in World War I. Because of these institutions, Marshall and his peers learned how to manage field armies much larger in size than that of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) in World War I, which were able to manage field armies. This proficiency would have been impossible if the foundation of professionalism had remained based on character, talent, and experience.¹⁰

9 General Mark A. Milley Résumé.

10 Forrest C. Pogue, *George C. Marshall: Education of a General 1880–1939* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1963), 167–79. The US Army in World War I was flawed in many aspects, but its ability to command large forces from the outset of the conflict was vastly superior than demonstrated at similar stages in previous wars; and Clark, *Preparing for War*, 256–68.

To the Present: Three Army Generations

Beyond these generically applicable observations, the analytical prism of institutions, experiences, and culture can yield insights into the intergenerational dynamics of a specific organization. An examination of how those influences shaped and continue to shape each cohort fosters mutual understanding and self-awareness, creates opportunities to question predilections and biases, and suggests the future course of the organization. Put differently, it seeks a sense of perspective by attempting to view the present in the same fashion that future historians will someday consider.

The Superpower Generation: The Perils of Misunderstanding

With these general observations in mind, we can apply the framework of institutions, experience, and culture to the present and the future. Currently, there are three generations serving within the US Army, the oldest of which is the Superpower Generation. Made up of those officers commissioned in the mid-1980s and earlier, this group includes some senior brigadier generals and most of the major generals and higher. They entered an Army configured for the Cold War and then gained operational experience in Grenada, Panama, Desert Storm, Somalia, Haiti, and the Balkans. Culturally, they are drawn from the late Baby Boomers.

No longer subject to standardized assignments, education, or training, these officers are beyond the reach of formal shaping mechanisms; in fact, they are the ones who control the institutional levers shaping the two younger generations. The commendable willingness of the Superpower Generation to make sensible accommodations to generational differences was well expressed by a foreign senior leader, Air Chief Marshal Sir Andrew Pulford of the Royal Air Force, who when asked what he thought about accommodating younger sensibilities, replied, “It is absolutely imperative that I do not build an air force for a 56-year-old man. It is [the young airmen’s] air force, not mine.”¹¹

The application of general principles, however, sometimes flounders on the emotion of specific cases. In 2013, Sergeant Major of the Army Raymond Chandler defended a strict tattoo policy, asserting it was necessary to ensure soldiers conformed to the highest standards of military appearance.¹² A valid institutional concern for functional, psychological, and reputational reasons, what constitutes military appearance is not fixed. Indeed, even values far more central to military practice—such as courage, honor, and duty—have varied over time.¹³ The cultural connotations of tattoos have changed significantly over the last several decades. To many younger soldiers, the unpopular policy seemed to reflect outdated cultural preferences rather than genuine military need.

11 Air Chief Marshal Sir Andrew Pulford, Royal United Services Institute, September 18, 2014.

12 David Vergun, “Army Tightens Personal Appearance, Tattoo Policy,” Army News Service, March 31, 2014, https://www.army.mil/article/122978/Army_tightens_personal_appearance_tattoo_policy.

13 John A. Lynn, *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture*, rev. ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1988); Gerald Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1989); and Paul Robinson, *Military Honor and the Conduct of War: From Ancient Greece to Iraq* (London: Routledge, 2006).

An instance of misunderstanding emerged from different generational views in 2011. The year before, an Army study on suicide prevention included a chapter titled, “The Lost Art of Leadership in Garrison.”¹⁴ Members of a temporary organization that was investigating related issues through interviews with soldiers of all ranks at various posts, observed that this effort resonated with senior officers. The Superpower Generation wanted to regain some of the qualities of the Army of the 1990s. Most had commanded brigades and battalions in the period, pivotal assignments presumably integral to their professional self-conception. As such, many experienced leaders believed there was self-evident worth in formulations using the prefix “re”—“restoring lost habits,” “returning to fundamentals,” and “regaining the art of garrison leadership.” The notion repelled many junior officers who had entered service after September 11, 2001. In their imaginations, the 1990s were a barren era of small-minded attention to pointless tasks. The intended audience regarded the talk of returning to that time with horror.

We can take two lessons from these cases. First, our own beliefs of contextual and universal are easily confused. We should constantly seek objective confirmation by comparing other institutions and history in order to guard against this fault. Second, generational misunderstandings are more likely when one party’s point of reference is lived experience, and the other’s is abstract. In the not-so-distant future, the lessons Iraq and Afghanistan veterans regard as self-evident will be viewed differently by a younger generation with more dispassionate views drawn from a smaller and more eclectic set of sources—a mixture of youthful impressions, history books, war stories, and pop-culture films like *The Hurt Locker*.

The Long War Generation: The Limits of Experience

The Long War Generation occupies the broad middle swath of the officer corps from brigadier generals to captains who were commissioned from the late 1980s to the early 2010s. Whereas in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Superpower Generation commanded at nothing lower than the brigade level or were staff directors and division chiefs in higher headquarters; the Long War Generation served at the company- and battalion-levels or as more junior staff officers. Culturally, the Long War Generation consists of Generation Xers and older Millennials.¹⁵

Combat experience is generally regarded as an unqualified good. Accordingly, this second cohort would seem to ensure an unmatched Army for years to come. But generations defined by war can fare poorly when faced with new conditions. Marshall’s generation, for instance, was misled by experiences in the Philippines. There, poorly armed guerillas preferred ambushes from hidden trenches they could abandon when pressured causing the US troops to counterattack impetuously whenever fired upon, even across seemingly suicidal stretches of open terrain. Intellectually, American officers denied that the lessons of “savage warfare” were applicable to conventional warfare, but experience was

¹⁴ US Department of the Army, *Army Health Promotion Risk Reduction Suicide Prevention Report 2010* (Washington, DC: US Department of the Army, 2010).

¹⁵ It is possible future events may alter the lower boundary. If, for instance, a world-war-like conflict were to occur in the next few years, then the Long War Generation would shrink as all of those who survived to serve after that war would presumably be primarily influenced by that event.

not so easy to compartmentalize. The belief that boldness and discipline could overcome firepower, that the infantry did not require artillery support, and that it was better to remain in the open than shelter in morale-sapping field fortifications took hold.

While similar notions in European armies were swept away by the Great War, even the examples of the battles of Verdun and the Somme did not prompt the United States to reassess its convictions. Thus, in 1917 when the United States entered the war, the principal infantry tactics manual still maintained machine guns were nothing more than “weapons of emergency” and artillery was less important than rifle fire.¹⁶ Veterans of the Philippines placed greater trust in their own past than in more relevant vicarious experiences.

Unfortunately, being made prisoner of our own experiences seems impossible to avoid. Psychologists note the tendency to attach particular significance to impressions developed during particularly challenging moments of our formative years; a combat deployment as a lieutenant or captain certainly fulfills that condition.¹⁷ Several years ago, an observer to a US Army Training and Doctrine Command seminar examining a Korean conflict was struck by majors’ and captains’ fixation with IEDs even though the enemy had far more dangerous weapons.¹⁸ The participants had recently returned from deployment, a detriment in this case. Having all likely seen, and perhaps personally suffered, the effect of IEDs, the officers found it difficult to put that danger into perspective with abstract threats. Deliberate effort not to fall into the same trap as the Philippine war veterans will be required as we collectively attempt to balance threats we have directly experienced with exotic new capabilities like cyberwarfare, electronic warfare, and enemy unmanned aerial surveillance as well as older but still unfamiliar dangers such as enemy air, armor, and massed artillery.

One method of overcoming individual bias towards personal experience is to have a broad range of perspectives within the institution. As secretary of war in the 1850s, Jefferson Davis attempted to broaden the education and training of officers to prepare them to lead large bodies of volunteers. Davis correctly anticipated the manner in which Civil War armies would be raised; however, that prescience was rooted in his own past. During the Mexican-American War, he had commanded a regiment of volunteers, an experience shared by just a few dozen other West Pointers. Consequently, Davis met stiff resistance from those who lacked his perspective and saw no need to alter a hitherto satisfactory system.¹⁹

Although Cassandras—as the etymology of the term suggests—have faced similar problems for as long as human memory extends, they will be of no comfort to soldiers who suffer because accurate warnings were ignored. Of course, which predictions will come to pass is never clear in the moment. Moreover, with national security at stake chasing every fad would be unwise. Nonetheless, there is a fine line between prudent

16 *Infantry Drill Regulations, United States Army, 1911* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office [GPO], 1911), 108–15, 123; and Clark, *Preparing for War*, 259–60.

17 Stephen J. Gerras and Leonard Wong, *Changing Minds in the Army: Why It Is So Difficult and What To Do About It* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2013), 13–15.

18 Author’s conversation with RAND analyst, spring 2013.

19 Clark, *Preparing for War*, 58–63.

conservatism and reactionary obtuseness. The former is best achieved through openness to other views, a willingness to question assumptions, and rigorous study of the past to place the present into proper context. The example of Emory Upton, an outstanding regimental and brigade commander during the Civil War, illustrates the importance of the latter.

Unlike many veterans who assumed the Union victory validated the rudimentary system of training that had produced them, Upton was far more critical of the regulars' performance during the war. His analysis led him to advocate many of the changes later instituted by Root. Yet, even Upton had conceptual biases and blind spots stemming from his past.²⁰ In a war generation, even iconoclasts are likely to have a recent war as their starting point. Thus, war generations need to look outside their own time or the recent conflict will become an intellectual tether limiting how far they can stray in any direction.

So while the Long War Generation should certainly make use of hard-won knowledge, they should also remain humble and conscious of the limits of experience. In a February 2014 *Washington Post* opinion piece, former Army Captain Adrian Bonenberger proposed culling the senior ranks so outstanding captains, majors, and lieutenant colonels could be promoted directly to brigadier general. As a precedent for the idea in the early twentieth century, President Theodore Roosevelt and Secretary of War Elihu Root made similar promotions to circumvent the seniority system that governed promotions up to the rank of colonel. But, Roosevelt and Root selected officers for potential rather than actual combat performance; some of their selections had seen little or no combat.²¹ In contrast, Bonenberger emphasized the superiority of experience. Generals "trained to fight World War III against the Soviets," he argued, are of less utility than junior officers who have "fought against al-Qaeda, Sunni militias, and the Taliban."²²

So long as those and similar groups remain our only enemies Bonenberger might be correct, but the generals Upton thought so poorly prepared for command had also once been proven veterans. In the antebellum US Army, their experience was sufficient for frontier campaigns and small-scale conventional campaigns, such as Mexico, but when conditions changed, these officers were left rudderless. Upton's disgust with their failures led to his advocacy of professional institutions that would allow the Army to operate competently even when faced with situations outside the personal experience of its leaders—an institutional trait that is even more important for a global power in a rapidly changing world. This desire to transcend experience animated the Root reforms and is reflected in our current professional institutions.²³

The Nascent Generation: A Work in Progress

The final generation will eventually produce the colonels and generals of the 2030s and 2040s. At present, they are lieutenants, cadets, or

20 Ibid., 93–128.

21 Ibid., 202, 242–43.

22 Adrian Bonenberger, "Why the Army Should Fire Some Generals and Promote Some Captains," *Washington Post*, February 21, 2014.

23 Clark, *Preparing for War*, 272; and Elihu Root, "An Address Delivered at the Laying of the Corner Stone of the Army War College," Washington, DC, February 21, 1903, Box 220, Root Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

students. The ultimate character of this Nascent Generation is not yet defined, but we can look to the past for hints as to how institutions, experiences, and cultures might shape it.

If there is no large war in the next several decades, the course might be like the one of those commissioned between the Civil War and approximately 1890. This cohort was dispersed in small posts across the continent and engaged in many different missions: reconstructing the South, warring in the western frontier wars, intervening in the midwestern and eastern states, guarding the borders and coasts, and preparing for another great war. The Nascent Generation might be shaped by an equally diverse range of experiences—disaster relief, security force assistance, train-and-advise efforts, and combat in small contingency operations.

As illustrated by the case of Jefferson Davis, diverse experiences will only be useful if they are recognized, encouraged, and can be accessed when needed, which was generally not the case in the nineteenth-century Army. The unavoidable divisions caused by far-flung and diverse missions were made worse by branch and unit tribalism. Subcommunities came to regard their functions as superior to others with whom they only grudgingly cooperated.²⁴ If the Nascent Generation is to avoid this fate, institutional influences must counter the tendency for individuals and organizations to define the Army in accordance with their own narrow preferences and experiences. Doctrine, education, training, and personnel policies should emphasize the multifaceted nature of the Army and its many roles. Of course, limited resources and institutional coherence demand some degree of prioritization and preference. But to the extent just one function, mission, type of assignment, or set of skills is emphasized, the Army will quickly become a caricature of the privileged element.

The influence of culture is even more difficult to predict. If the general trend is continuity, then in that respect the Nascent Generation might also resemble the post-Civil War cohort; cultural continuity favors professional continuity. Even the most committed reformers of the late nineteenth century did not desire a fundamental break with the past. They wanted to improve, rather than overthrow, the familiar individualistic professionalism.²⁵ In the absence of a major cultural shift, the Nascent Generation would likely modify the profession to suit its tastes and ultimately remain content to operate within the same paradigm as the Superpower and Long War Generations.

If there were a cultural upheaval, the Nascent Generation might be more like the generation of Marshall, which was the product of the transition from the individualistic Gilded Age to the systems-oriented Progressive Era. The most zealous members of that group—like their reforming civilian contemporaries—desired a sharp break with what

24 For instance, see Clark, *Preparing for War*, 140–52, 178–79, 201–6.

25 One such reformer was Arthur L. Wagner, a pioneer in the development of several tools of professional indoctrination: education, after-action reviews in field training, and tactics manuals. Yet, when given the opportunity to put his ideas into tactical doctrine, he demurred, arguing it was more important for commanders to be allowed to fight in whatever fashion they wished. *Ibid.*, 217–18.

they saw as a benighted past.²⁶ We might already be witnessing early indications of a reordering of society just as great as that of the Progressive Era: extraordinary turmoil within and among the political parties, dislocation of entire sectors of the economy, and dissatisfaction with social structures manifested in movements like Occupy and Black Lives Matter. These simultaneous pressures on political, economic, and social systems could be made even more potent by technology that allows groups to organize and act in ways previously impossible.

Decades from now, the Millennials—or whatever future historians choose to call them—might be regarded as a revolutionary generation. If so, the ideas they will bring into the military would inevitably have a revolutionary impact upon the profession. Unfortunately, the nature of cultural paradigms—tied up in deeply held beliefs—makes it exceptionally difficult for those on the wrong side of history to imagine what the new way of thinking might be. Just a few decades ago, the prospect of African-Americans or women commanding white men would have been dismissed as unthinkable.

While the 1960s cultural upheaval radically altered *who* served, the *how* still reflects the Progressive Era notion that a profession is a body of expertise to be codified, imparted, and regulated by a central institution. Trends may soon alter that view of expertise and, by extension, professionalism. Google has already eroded the value of simply knowing facts. Professions are distinguished by the application of judgment, which has long seemed safe from automation; however, recent experiments in using machine learning and artificial intelligence for legal research and medical care have brought the prospect of disruptive change to even the two quintessential professions.²⁷ In medicine, just a partial automation of diagnosis, surgery, and patient monitoring could render obsolete the present distinctions between doctors, nurses, and technicians. That shift, in turn, would have enormous implications for the professional apparatus of associations, journals, accrediting boards, and schools grounded in the current boundaries of expertise. A revolution of that sort in just one field might not have much effect on other trades, but how might public perceptions of institutional authority change if multiple fields undergo similar transitions? In that case, an entire generation might develop a common expectation of the need for change and reform in all fields.

Such a generalized distrust of the status quo among those entering military service would have obvious implications for trust within the organization. Yet in our system, the opinions of those who oversee the military are also important, as demonstrated by recent efforts to reduce commanders' authority over military justice due to perceptions of incompetence in the handling of sexual assault. Such interventions would increase if we enter an age of reform similar to the

26 Michael E. McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870–1920* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2003); and John Whiteclay Chambers, *The Tyranny of Change: America in the Progressive Era, 1890–1920*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

27 For instance, see Michael Mills, “Artificial Intelligence in Law—The State of Play in 2015?,” *Legal IT Insider*, November 3, 2015, <http://www.legaltechnology.com/latest-news/artificial-intelligence-in-law-the-state-of-play-in-2015/>; Daniela Hernandez, “Artificial Intelligence is Now Telling Doctors How to Treat You,” *Wired*, June 2, 2014; and “Who Wields the Knife,” *Economist*, May 7, 2016, 70.

early twentieth century. The appearance of incompetence or inefficiency could lead to efforts to reduce military authority in other areas, such as human resources, procurement and contract management, installation management, media operations, and information technology that are outside of the core business of applying violence on behalf of the state.

A 2013 study, *Building Better Generals*, coauthored by Lieutenant General (Ret.) Dave Barno, implicitly acknowledged there are already weaknesses in the management of such functions. To correct these faults, the study recommended senior leaders slated for institutional positions receive relevant education, such as a civilian master of business administration and be given one or two preparatory assignments within that field.²⁸ These suggestions were, in part, inspired by Barno's own experience of being placed in charge of the Installation Management Command after a career in operational command and staff appointments. "I was a complete neophyte," Barno admitted.²⁹

The professional preference is to retain as much control as possible on the premise that military requirements are so unique only someone with a career of uniformed experience can make proper judgments about how to integrate generalist functions into military institutions. Future political appointees and legislators might not be convinced by this argument and opt for the simpler solution of employing civilian experts to manage these functions. Indeed, the Department of Defense (DoD) recently announced it would seek legislation to allow lateral entry, a variation granting civilian specialists commissions in the middle ranks. The proposal seeks to create a realistic path into military service for those with advanced technological skills. For instance, someone from Google or Facebook might become a colonel overseeing cyberwarfare or information operations.³⁰

At present, even the most ambitious plans for lateral entry are confined to functional or technical specialties. All credible plans for personnel reform observe the divide between those specialties and the defining military function of command and operations. Yet in a world of complex whole-of-government problems that distinction might be difficult to maintain. For instance, if the success of a stabilization operation is predominantly a matter of re-establishing governmental and economic activity while security operations are only a supporting effort, then future policymakers might decide to make a development specialist the overall commander of an interagency task force. Ironically, this alignment of the most relevant expertise with the staff resources to support decision-making would be consistent with the military principle of unity of command. Similarly, in a gray-zone conflict—in which the main forms of maneuver allowed to Western forces are political, informational, and digital—policymakers might place greater trust in

28 David Barno, Nora Bensahel, Katherine Kidder, and Kelly Saylor, *Building Better Generals* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security [CNAS], 2013). It is worth noting the CNAS report made note of corporate best practices in executive management, an example of the way in which the outlooks and methods of contemporary civilian society influence the manner that military professionals approach their specific problems.

29 Sydney J. Freedberg Jr., "How to Get Best Military Leaders: CNAS Says Split Warriors From Managers," *Breaking Defense*, October 25, 2013, <http://breakingdefense.com/2013/10/how-to-get-best-military-leaders-cn-as-says-split-warriors-from-managers>.

30 DoD, *Force of the Future Final Report: Reform Proposals (Version 2.0)* (Washington, DC: DoD, 2015), 18–22; and Ashton Carter Memorandum, "The Next Two Links to the Force of the Future," June 9, 2016.

the skills of diplomats, politicians, or technology gurus like Jared Cohen, the head of Google Ideas, whose strategic analysis of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant has drawn much attention.³¹

There are sound reasons to restrict command over lethal operations to long-serving military professionals; however, the decision to depart from this principle will be made by civilians rather than military personnel. And, if outsiders like Cohen seem better equipped to solve problems—an outcome that is more likely if the Long War Generation succumbs to hubris—then presidents and legislators can issue the necessary directives and legislation. Such was the case in the nineteenth century when presidents often appointed political generals to shore up political support for unpopular wars in some cases. The reason such appointments were possible at all was due to the common belief that career officers were no more fit for high command than talented civilians, a perception somewhat justified by the Army's rudimentary system of training and education.³²

The military should not be lulled into complacency by the current high levels of public trust. Civilian disdain for professional soldiers has been the historical American norm and could reappear if the institutions providing professional credibility remain stagnant. Such a turn is even more likely in a society with quite different views of expertise than those of the twentieth century and in which the archetypical hero is the 20-something Silicon Valley entrepreneur.

Living with Generations

These musings are not meant as hard predictions, but as illustrative examples of how societal developments might reverberate within the military. These changes are not likely to pass, but we can be certain that there will be a major cultural change at some point. When this change occurs, the Army will have to manage tension within its ranks and between the institution and society.

Such tensions were evident during World War I, when the rise of Marshall and his contemporaries caused what historian Edward Coffman has termed a “generation gap” within the American Expeditionary Forces.³³ Commanding generals from an older generation that venerated the individual skill of the commander clashed with their chiefs of staff, who had been studying the German staff-centric system in the professional schools that the older officers had largely ignored. When the generational clash came in the midst of a larger conflict, the junior officers fared surprisingly well due to the support of the overall commander, John J. Pershing.

Decades earlier, Pershing had the benefit of what today would be termed a “broadening experience” when he was sent to observe the Japanese army during its war against Russia. Pershing admired the Japanese general staff system, which was similar to the one desired by

31 Jared Cohen, “Digital Counterinsurgency: How to Marginalize the Islamic State Online,” *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 6 (November–December 2015): 52–58.

32 Clark, *Preparing for War*, 72–73, 100–101.

33 Edward M. Coffman, “The American Military Generation Gap: The Leavenworth Clique in World War I,” in *Command and Commanders in Modern Warfare*, ed. William Geffen (Colorado Springs, CO: United States Air Force Academy, 1971), 35–43.

the younger officers of the AEF. Pershing also had personal reason to believe the preferences of senior officers should sometimes be ignored. In 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt, who was convinced that many of the Civil War veterans who still held prominent senior positions had little to offer, promoted Pershing from captain to brigadier general. That decision led to unrest within an officer corps that was steadfastly committed to promotion by seniority.³⁴ Roosevelt, however, cared little for the opinions of traditionalist officers whom he dismissed as “mutton heads [*sic*].”³⁵

Neither was that a singular instance of disrupting the preferred military order. During the overlapping tenures of Root and Roosevelt, three other future chiefs of staff, in addition to Pershing, were promoted from junior ranks to brigadier general. One of these, Frederick Funston—who but for his premature death in 1917 might have commanded the American Expeditionary Forces instead of Pershing—had only three years of experience as a volunteer officer in the Philippines before he was commissioned a brigadier general in the regular Army in 1901.³⁶ Thus, civilian preferences born of societal change overcame military resistance and radically altered the trajectory of the Army. Inevitably this will happen again at some point. The only question is when and in what form.

Observations and Recommendations

Acknowledge the nature and intractability of generational differences. When faced with the possibility of generational strife, the natural inclination is to attempt to integrate or synthesize the different viewpoints. The nature of the problem, however, suggests that this is unlikely to succeed. Generational conflict occurs when an organization contains groups that have undergone significantly dissimilar formative experiences and so consequently operate in accord with different sets of core beliefs. Compromise might be reached upon ancillary matters but not on the kind of fundamental issues that define generations.

With the national predisposition to regard history as the inevitable progression toward a better condition, the intractability of generational difference might lead one to conclude that the best course would be to bring on the new and get rid of the old as soon as possible as suggested by Bonenberger. Yet new is not necessarily better. Generational characteristics are derived from their context; there is no iron law of history dictating that cultural change must enhance military effectiveness. Even experiences formed in war might be counterproductive, as was the case when lessons from the Philippines were carried into World

34 Donald Smythe, *Guerilla Warrior: The Early Life of John J. Pershing* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), 125–30; and Clark, *Preparing for War*, 244–45. For one example of resentment over Pershing's promotion from an officer with impeccable credentials as a committed professional, see Matthew F. Steele to William Richardson, April 20, 1912, Box 2, Steele Papers, US Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle, PA.

35 Theodore Roosevelt to Leonard Wood, June 4, 1904, Box 35, Wood Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

36 The three chiefs of staff were J. Franklin Bell (promoted from captain), Leonard Wood (promoted from captain within the Medical Department), and Tasker H. Bliss (promoted from major within the Commissary Department). William G. Bell, *Commanding Generals and Chiefs of Staff, 1775–1991: Portraits & Biographical Sketches of the United States Army's Senior Officer* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1992), 102, 104, 110; and Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army. Volume 1* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1903), 441.

War I. Assuming that either the older or the younger generation has an inherently superior vantage would be a mistake: both groups are simply products of their environment.

Use training and education to complement experience. Training and education are the most direct means of shaping the profession, but they are not all powerful. Combat training centers and schools exist alongside and interact with personal experience, a reality that the Army must take into account. Just as the officer corps of 1910 demonstrated their smug imperviousness to the reality of World War I, so too future generations might also acquire a shell of misplaced certainty derived from a narrow set of experiences. If training and education are to impart a broader perspective, schools and training centers must first crack that shell of certainty by challenging individuals to reassess strongly held beliefs. The necessary precursor to this practice is an organizational effort to do the same. Tactics, techniques, and procedures should be reexamined with the aim of understanding underlying objectives in order to determine under what circumstances they would no longer be desirable.

Guard against identical backgrounds. If there is no significant campaign in the coming years, then the Army will return to the condition in which most pivotal professional experiences occur within the environment of daily routine and training. If so, the structure of training and personnel systems might cause a situation in which professional diversity comes more through operational deployments than training. For instance, one might imagine that the experience of planning and executing a deliberate attack as an S-3 at the National Training Center (NTC) would become a professional touchstone since the insights gained there influence an officer's thinking throughout the remainder of his or her career. Indeed, creating such moments is precisely the function of the training center, and there is much merit in that purpose.

But what if a significant majority of brigade commanders all share that same touchstone moment, or more accurately, a similar set of 10, 20, or 30 pivotal moments accumulated over the course of a career? At the individual level, all of those moments are valid and useful. Yet at the institutional level, it is dangerous for a large number of key leaders to draw upon a pool of similar challenges framed in similar ways. Key and developmental assignments should be reviewed with the aim of determining what are truly vital shared experiences and where there might be opportunities for diversification. A fine balance is to be struck; undoubtedly, those entrusted with the lives of soldiers must possess a core of essential knowledge, but the Army should not too narrowly define that core. The Army that stakes its future upon a narrow set of skills and attributes risks disaster when the character of warfare renders that core less relevant, or even obsolete.

Encourage diverse experiences. Personnel policies, another important tool of institutional control, foster adaptation by making use of the broad base of experience already resident within the institution. With the benefit of hindsight, a combination of personality and formative experience clearly led Jefferson Davis to anticipate the mixing of professionals and citizen-soldiers in the Civil War and likewise influenced Emory Upton to apply professional education to command before others saw the possibility. In an organization as large as the US military,

there are undoubtedly individuals who by similar quirks of background possess an equally good sense of future trends. Ideally, in addition to tolerating such individuals during the Cassandra stage, the personnel system should encourage professional soldiers to pursue developmental opportunities that foster alternative thinking.

Of course, the Army already encourages broadening assignments. Yet this is an excellent illustration of the early observation that institutional efforts to shape the force are often diverted from their intended course by other influences. In this instance, even the institutional inputs work at cross-purposes. An evaluation system that often punishes those who step outside of the large rating pools of typical Army assignments to venture into the joint, interagency, and multinational arena with unwavering mathematical severity, discourages the broadening encouraged by other elements of the personnel system. This observation is not meant to advocate for overturning the present evaluation system as the personnel system must meet many different aims and optimizing it solely to encourage broadening experiences would be naive and unwise. Nonetheless, it should be acknowledged that the Army is sending mixed messages with its institutional influences.

In order to achieve the desired effect, institutional efforts must also account for the influence of experience. Just as field grade officers who experienced the reduction in force during the early 1990s frequently counseled younger officers to pursue conservative career paths, members of the Long War Generation who have experienced the perhaps even more traumatic separation boards and unusually low promotion rates of recent years will almost certainly urge caution when mentoring the Nascent Generation. Thus, both institutions and experience are likely to cause less rather than more professional diversity in the years ahead.

Communicate assumptions. Whatever the issue at stake in any generational conflict, senior leaders should articulate the assumptions that frame their views while seeking to understand the foundation of the younger generation's perspective. Identifying the competing core principles would, at the very least, allow the discussion to move beyond the superficial cause and get to the fundamental issues at the heart of any conflict. For instance, intergenerational conflict in the American Expeditionary Forces was only secondarily over the proper role of the chief of staff—the underlying cause concerned the nature of military expertise. There is little likelihood that the two generations would have ever agreed on the subject; both were entirely committed to their respective views of professionalism, which were each rooted in decades of personal experience. Yet, the inevitable strife might have been lessened with mutual understanding of the core issue.

As mentioned in the discussion of the Nascent Generation, similar questions about the nature of professional expertise and command might reawaken after lying dormant for a century. Likewise, several other conceivable sources of differences, such as delineating roles between humans and machines in warfare, deriving lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan, or compensating soldiers for military service, might separate generations in the years and decades ahead. Moreover, issues current professionals cannot even imagine as points of dissension will become disputes.

Practice prudence and humility. Prudence and humility are ultimately the greatest keys to adaptation. These virtues suggest a moderate, cautious approach that counsels against trusting too much in individual experience, assuming that personal values and understanding are universal, overestimating the Army's ability to command change according to its wishes, or resisting all change until it is imposed. The Army should be a slow adapter. Chasing transitory fads in the civilian sphere is not necessary as being too eager to change creates needless turbulence and undervalues the considerable store of wisdom built into the present military organization and practice. Lagging a step behind allows military leaders to carefully assess civilian interventions, but once an expectation or way of thinking has become pervasive across society, the course is clear. The choice is between deliberate acquiescence and uncompromising, ultimately futile, resistance that cedes influence over the future force.

