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## On “The Battalion Commander Effect”

Ralph Masi  
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This commentary responds to Everett Spain, Gautam Mukunda, and Archie Bates’s article, “The Battalion Commander Effect,” published in the Autumn 2021 issue of *Parameters* (vol. 51, no. 3).

**Keywords:** command, leadership, retention, promotion, validity

The article, “The Battalion Commander Effect,” is a helpful, additional step in addressing one possible correlate of lieutenant retention, arguing for its role as key determinant in junior officer stay-or-leave decisions—while simultaneously advocating for the role of retention in senior officer promotion decisions. At face value the article oversimplifies, given several possible methodological issues, while making a leap to promotion board determinations. Analyses should be expanded, with detailed quantifiable results provided before any serious discussion of policy implications (for example, promotion board decisions affecting former battalion commanders), are undertaken. Methodological concerns, including possible omitted variable bias, should be addressed to confirm validity, before far-reaching implications for practice are drawn.<sup>1</sup>

Expanding analysis “out” would include both *company* and *brigade* commander effects, in addition to the current battalion commander effects. Expanding it “down” would add more refined assessments of battalion commander effectiveness; some via Officer Evaluation Reports, others potentially via “360 evaluation” of leaders. Once done, detailed results, including regression coefficients and p-values, could be included in tabular form, for example, in an appendix if preferred due to space constraints. Showing the relative effect, and power, of each is key to a more complete understanding of the battalion commander effect.

That battalion commanders have a major effect on lieutenant retention in relation to other factors is undisputable. They do, after all, “check the box” on the lieutenant’s evaluation, from “Most Qualified” to “Unqualified.”<sup>2</sup> By the

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1. Humbeto Barreto and Frank M. Howland, “Omitted Variable Bias,” in *Introductory Econometrics: Using Monte Carlo Simulation with Microsoft Excel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and Kevin A. Clarke, “The Phantom Menace: Omitted Variable Bias in Econometric Research,” in *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 22, no. 4 (September 2005): 341–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07388940500339183>.

2. Headquarters Department of the Army, Revised Officer Evaluation Reports, April 1, 2014, Implementation.

major promotion board, likely future battalion commanders have already been earmarked. Junior officers through the rank of captain also know if they are “going places,” or will be left behind, as a direct function of those assessments. During years of working officer retention in the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Army/G-1, with officer analysis at the year-group level of detail, I noted many former officers from my West Point class who, on discerning they would not be battalion commanders, left service after company commands and moved on to rewarding careers in the private sector. This is not unusual, among service academy graduates—they are prized by industry, too, given the breadth and depth of academic and leadership training: if they leave early.

That specific behaviors and overall effectiveness (apparently not measured or employed) of battalion leaders can also be a major correlate of retention (not a predictor, though, as the authors note) is also not in dispute. Alongside other “leadership” variables, the singular battalion commander effect measured generically in the study may well diminish—and significantly. Likewise it could be shown to be stronger still for “good” battalion commanders versus weaker ones, if such variables were measured and included in analysis.

Leadership variables (for example, additional independent variables in regression equations) might include tactical and technical proficiency via the leader’s professional standing, as measured by evaluations at the time those lieutenants were assigned; the same is true for leader interpersonal qualities (for example, “people skills”) and sincerity—does the leader act without pretense? If these qualities were added to the study, greater value could be obtained and the variables could eventually become points on a “talent checklist” that could more effectively assess the impact of a commander.

Hence, more could be done with a statistical sample of 1,745 former battalion commanders and their 36,032 lieutenants. Roughly 20 lieutenants per former battalion commander can provide significantly more by way of insight than the study reveals, via interviews and focus groups to expand the basic findings.

Details of the additional empirical tests that were mentioned on other leaders need to be included in the article; it appears company commander impacts may have been included, but details are not provided. Brigade-level leadership does not appear to be included in the analysis at all. Independent variables used in the Spain, et al., study, in addition to former battalion commander, included officer commissioning year (year group), post, branch, source of commission, gender, race/ethnicity, age, commission source quality, marital and child status, and graduation from prestigious tactical schools (for example, Airborne and Ranger schools). Instead, more evaluation by way of so-called lateral comparison of battalion commander effect to company and brigade commander effect can,

and should, infuse the analysis and discussion and enhance construct validity. Are we measuring what we think we are measuring(?)—that is, decision to leave service, as a function of leadership, and whose leadership? Such “apples-to-apples” comparison is essential.

In summary, the most important implication of the study for practice, assessing battalion commanders on officer retention, could well be based on a false set of assumptions (for example, that it was the battalion commander and his effects driving losses). This common misperception ended many promising careers in an earlier day, when reenlistment rates were a criteria for evaluation for both battalion and company commanders. Ironically, this was the period of the “hollow Army,” with enlisted cohort high-school graduation rates at a low point for the volunteer Army, and bottom quartile on the Armed Forces Qualification Test at a record high. The *Atlantic* article, “Why Our Best Officers Leave,” notes correlates from weak generalship to bureaucratic management that stifle initiative and entrepreneurship.<sup>3</sup> Finally, service academy graduates do leave active duty at a relatively high rate. Given the cost to produce these officers, which is higher than for other commissioning sources, there is another field for further study.<sup>4</sup>

Next steps should include expanding analysis as indicated and conducting structured interviews with high-performing battalion commanders and focus groups with their junior officer cohorts, following the formers’s change of command. A plausible addition to the body of work—and easy to implement—would be a survey of all lieutenants and junior captains leaving active duty and their reasons for resigning. Questions could be formed under an organizing scheme that focuses on Army, local command climate (battalion, brigade, and installation), private sector, and personal (for example, family).

There are a number of ways to pinpoint the problem of junior officer retention. As the US Army moves back into a period of relative stability without war and the drawdown effects that have followed three times in the last 50 years—after Vietnam, the Gulf War, and the war in Iraq—the time to do so is at hand.

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3. Tim Kane, “Why Our Best Officers Are Leaving,” *Atlantic* (website), January/February 2011, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/01/why-our-best-officers-are-leaving/308346/>.

4. Kyle Rempfer, “Service Academy Graduates Could See Longer Military Obligations,” *Military Times* (website), July 15, 2019, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-army/2019/07/15/service-academy-graduates-could-see-longer-military-obligations/>.

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## The Authors Reply

Everett Spain, Gautam Mukunda, and Archie Bates

**Keywords:** battalion commander, leadership, promotion, retention, talent, role model

**W**e thank our colleague for both his distinguished Army career and his thoughtful and comprehensive review of our manuscript. Also, we are grateful for *Parameters* providing us the space and audience to engage in this important dialogue. We humbly offer the following response.

The purpose of our study was to empirically investigate the anecdotal relationship between battalion commanders and their lieutenants' retention (for example, BCE), and our analysis found there was, in fact, a statistically significant correlation between them. Our colleague argues our analysis would be improved if we included leadership-related variables about the battalion commanders, such as sincerity, people skills, and tactical and technical competence. We agree these variables (and several others) could be mechanisms of a battalion commander's influence on his or her lieutenants, but we are not aware of a reasonable mechanism to get these data in sufficient numbers of former battalion commanders to test them statistically. He also argues brigade and company commanders may similarly influence lieutenants' retention decisions and should be included in the analysis. This is certainly plausible. We decided not to include brigade commanders since they have relatively infrequent interactions with lieutenants and, therefore, likely slight influence over their propensity to continue to serve. In retrospect, we could have included brigade commanders in our analysis and let the statistics confirm (or deny) this.

Regarding including company commanders in our analysis: we did not include them and believe not doing so was wise. First, the climates company commanders set are influenced significantly by their battalion commanders, but not vice versa. So, an empirical analysis that included both company and battalion commanders in the same regression would likely obscure each variable's predictive effect. Second, company commanders lead roughly three to six lieutenants each, which is not a large enough group size to test empirically with statistical confidence. Ultimately, we worked to avoid over-specifying our regression by identifying a small, yet meaningful, subset of variables for our

analysis, given it was both impractical and unwise to measure and include every contextual variable.

We agree readers would benefit from more statistical evidence of our findings, such as tabular lists of regression coefficients, p-values, and other data customarily depicted in papers based on empirical analysis. However, at the time of our submission, *Parameters* restricted authors to two or fewer graphics. We understand *Parameters* is in the process of adding a feature, which will allow future authors to include hyperlinks to additional online content, which is welcome news for researchers who wish to publish in *Parameters*. Earlier in our careers, we were frustrated to learn many scholarly publications charge fees to practitioners to download their articles (for example, “Early Predictors of Successful Military Careers among West Point Cadets,” *Military Psychology*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08995605.2020.1801285>) which severely reduces the likelihood of Army leaders reading, sharing, discussing, and challenging their ideas. This is one of the reasons we targeted the open-access *Parameters* for our research, and we are grateful for its refereed peer-reviewed publication of our article.

Based on his cautionary experiences of watching the Army evaluate commanders according to their reenlistment rates, our colleague suggests the Army should be wary of using the BCE as an evaluation criterion for senior officers. We acknowledge the evidence we found on the BCE is more correlative than causal in nature. This is one of the reasons our paper suggests the BCE not be singularly considered as the definitive measure of leadership (or lack thereof), but as one of several informing assessments that can better contextualize leaders’ influence from many perspectives and within context. We encourage future researchers to investigate the BCE’s causal chain by using various empirical techniques to help establish causality, such as using an instrumental variable. Regardless of whether the Army decides to use the BCE to inform senior officer promotion and selection decisions (performance feedback), it should certainly establish a mechanism to provide BCE data to officers to encourage them to reflect on how they are treating/leading their lieutenants (developmental feedback).

Finally, our colleague’s suggestion the Army give all departing lieutenants formal exit interviews is wise, and we have advocated for this for some time (for example, “Making Exit Interviews Count,” *Harvard Business Review*, 2016). The Army agrees, and it employed an exit interview survey until recently. Additionally, in 2020, the Army implemented the Department of the Army Career Engagement Survey (DACES), which is e-mailed to every soldier every year during his/her birth month. Interestingly, the Army received as

many DACES responses in its first two months as it had received exit interview responses in the previous two years, so the Army recently wound down its exit interview survey and uses the DACES for the same purpose. The DACES data is likely more valid as it allows for longitudinal perspectives on the same population leading to their exits (or retention), while exit interview data are gathered once during an emotional time.

As we had hoped, the BCE paper has the Army talking. An Army component commander to a Department of Defense combatant command shared it with his generals at his recent command conference. At least two of the branch schoolhouses are sharing it at their colonel- and lieutenant colonel-level pre-command courses. We have had the opportunity to present it to the brigade and battalion command teams of an Army division and to a forward-deployed general staff. To start these conversations, we invited the participants to list the names of the lieutenants who served in their companies when they were company commanders. We then requested they identify one third of those lieutenants as high-potential (HIPO). Next, we asked them to mark whether each lieutenant stayed in the Army long enough to be a company commander. Finally, we asked them to calculate their Company Commander Effect (CCE) and  $CCE_{HIPO}$ . Most of them completed our request, and then the conversation about the BCE and  $BCE_{HIPO}$  really flowed. Some of them responded with, "But I don't know if LT Smith or LT Nguyen stayed in or got out." Those commanders may have other issues.

Overall, our colleague's feedback is very well taken, as our profession encourages this sort of dialogue. His comments add to a conversation that already includes significant responses from current and former officers. Much reaction has been in the form of, "Yes! My battalion commander was terrible, and he/she influenced me to get out," or "My commander was inspirational and, look at me, I'm still here after 20 years." We have also received a moderate amount of pushback, some of it similar to our colleague's comments on potential omitted variable bias.

Interestingly, we have been asked, "Is there an equivalent of the BCE on junior enlisted soldiers?" We believe it might be the platoon sergeant effect (PSE), because a platoon sergeant is typically a sergeant first class, the first senior non-commissioned officer rank, tenured in the organization (for example, selected by a Department of the Army centralized selection board) and able to remain in the Army until well after minimum retirement age. A platoon sergeant is also two supervisory levels above most of his or her junior enlisted soldiers, similar to a battalion commander being two supervisory levels above

his or her lieutenants. We would encourage future empirical research on this hypothesized PSE.

Again, we thank our colleague for his important contribution to this valuable conversation. As our nation's threat environment grows ever more complex, quality leaders will become even more important than they were in the past. The Army's success crucially depends on ensuring its best lieutenants decide to stay. If the BCE idea helps senior officers think more about how they are impacting the retention of their junior officers, especially their highest potential ones, our future Army stands to be even more ready to fight and win.

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