

ARMY OFFICER RETENTION: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Arthur T. Coumbe

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Dr. Arthur T. Coumbe is the command historian, U.S. Army Cadet Command, Fort Monroe, Virginia and an adjunct faculty member at Austin Peay State University. He has authored a number of articles and books on Army ROTC history and the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871. He received a B.S. from the U.S. Military Academy and a Ph.D. from Duke University.

Introduction.

Officer attrition is a problem that has intermittently afflicted the Officer Corps since the conclusion of World War II. Over this period, the Army has frequently struggled to retain not only the requisite number of officers but “talented” officers as well. The retention of junior officers has posed a particularly difficult challenge and has, from time to time over the last six decades, attracted a great deal of both public and official scrutiny. Accordingly, the focus of this paper will be on the attrition problem among captains and lieutenants.

Because the Army’s officer retention problems after 1980 have been covered in considerable detail in the paper that introduced this Virtual Conference session, the scope of discussion here is limited to developments before 1980, when “Industrial Age” management practices were very much in the ascendancy in both the military services and civilian firms. We will begin our study with a look at the Officer Corps and officer retention patterns in the interwar period—the period in which many of the senior officers who would lead the Army in the 1950s, 1960s, and even into the 1970s were introduced to the military profession. A basic familiarity with conditions in the interwar army is a prerequisite for fully appreciating the effects of the changes that took place after 1945.

The Interwar Period.

Persuading officers to remain in the Army in the two decades after the conclusion of World War I was generally not a problem. In fact, throughout the interwar years, and especially after the onset of the Great Depression in 1929, the officer retention environment was very auspicious. Accessions standards were high. To obtain a commission, officer aspirants, except for those who graduated from the Military Academy, had to pass rigorous examinations designed to measure academic and intellectual attainment. The Army had many more applicants for commissions than it had vacancies in the officer corps. Competition for lieutenantcies was consequently intense, commissions were highly valued, and resignations were relatively rare.¹

The Army offered what most Americans during the Depression years undoubtedly considered to be a very attractive compensation package to its officers. Officers received adequate and sometimes highly desirable housing, free medical and dental care both for themselves and their families, an assured and sufficient salary, a retirement income after 30 years of satisfactory service, and free life insurance. In addition, perquisites such as commissary and Post Exchange privileges provided real value to officers’ families. Post exchanges, which were exempt from national and local taxes, offered substantial savings on a variety of items. Commissaries, too, helped the officer stretch his salary by providing significant discounts on groceries and other household goods.²

Professionally, the interwar Army provided a satisfying experience. Junior officers were placed in responsible and challenging jobs and allowed considerable initiative in the performance of their duties. Indeed, they were encouraged to work independently. Any mistakes and shortcomings in the performance of their duties were usually dealt with informally with a personal counseling session by their commander. Pressures to maintain a high state of readiness and what later generations would refer to as a “zero-defects” mentality were largely unknown. The Officer Corps, like the typical army post, was small and close knit. A cohesive military society produced through enforced isolation and rigorous selection helped to engender an Officer Corps distinguished by its expertise, group identification, homogeneity, and sense of

corporateness. For many in this self-contained world, a military career had overtones of a calling.³

The quality of life in the interwar army was generally quite good. The officer led what one historian characterized as a “country club existence.” His social standing was quite high—comparable to that of an upper middle class professional in the civilian community. Although officers and their wives were expected to take part in an almost continuous round of social engagements, the burden of preparing for these events (along with the burden performing many of the heavier household chores) was lightened by enlisted orderlies, who were able to substantially add to their income by moonlighting as domestic help. Family separations, when they did occur, were usually brief. Officers would, for the most part, be away from their homes only during training exercises. Families almost always accompanied officers on tours of duty in foreign stations. Moreover, the officer generally maintained a 30 hour work week, delegating much of the unit’s routine administration to NCOs. He consequently had plenty of time to spend with his wife and children as well as plenty of time to read, reflect, and get involved in sports and other activities.⁴

The Post-WW II Era.

As the dynamics of military service changed after World War II, the attractiveness of a military career declined sharply. This led to an exodus of junior officers from the ranks. By the early 1950s, officer attrition had become so worrisome that some were calling it a “threat to national security.” Top civilian and military leaders talked frankly and openly about the problem and the press devoted considerable attention to it. President Truman appointed the Strauss Committee to look into the matter in 1949 while his Secretary of Defense convened a Citizens’ Advisory Commission headed by Harold Moulton of the Brookings Institute for the same purpose the following year. In the first year of the Eisenhower administration, the Rockefeller Committee (1953) and the Womble Committee (1953) addressed the problem of officer attrition. Both of these bodies issued grave warnings about what might ensue if the Army did not take prompt action to retain its young career personnel. President Eisenhower himself weighed in on the issue in 1955 when he sent a message to the House of Representatives deploring the loss of junior officers and enlisted personnel and suggesting ways to stop the hemorrhaging.⁵

The massive influx of officers into the force during World War II had added to the Army’s junior officer troubles by creating a five-year “hump” of excessive officer strength in year groups 1941 through 1945. This hump interacted with frequent reductions in officer strength [especially after the introduction of Eisenhower’s New Look strategy in the early 1950s] and the Army’s proclivity to effect officer reductions by cutting accessions to produce a pronounced maldistribution of ranks. By the early 1950s, the Army had many older and far fewer younger officers than it needed.⁶

The greatest number of officer resignations occurred among lieutenants and captains within two years after they had completed their initial service obligation. Shortly after the Korean War ended, the Army permitted certain RA officers to resign. Among junior RA captains, the resignation rate was “alarming.” In less than one year, 30 percent of this group submitted resignations. The resignation rate of OTRA lieutenants was even more disquieting. Throughout the decade of the 1950s, in fact, only 15 percent of the reserve lieutenants produced through ROTC and OCS volunteered to remain in the Army after their two years of compulsory service. Steps were taken, from time to time, to induce these men to accept Regular Army commissions.

These efforts were ineffectual, however. Resolved to get out of the service at the first opportunity, lieutenants strenuously avoided incurring a longer term of service.⁷

The dearth of quality in the Officer Corps was considered an even a bigger problem than the lack of quantity. In 1954, the Senate Armed Services Committee stated, “The Army is today faced with a most critical and delicate problem. It is becoming increasingly more difficult to attract and hold within the career services high-caliber men and women.” One Army War College student wrote in 1956 that the Officer Corps was of the lowest...quality in Army history.” The 15 percent of ROTC graduates who elected to remain in the Army, he noted, were from the lower ranges of their cohorts in terms of intellect and ability.⁸

The growth in the Officer Corps in World War II had forced the Army to lower its intellectual and educational standards for commissioning. The emphasis by necessity was on quantity, not quality. As commissioning standards fell so, too, did moral and behavioral standards. Breaches of accepted professional conduct became commonplace. To meet the needs of the force in the post-war era, the Regular Army, which had procured virtually 100 percent college graduates from 1920 through 1940, integrated 4574 of the non-degreed officers who had been commissioned during the war into its ranks in 1947 and 1948. Input from the newly reactivated ROTC program did little to raise officer quality. The rapid fall in service attractiveness had led to the entry of many “lower caliber individuals” into the Army through ROTC despite the fact that all of them were college graduates. The Army’s power of attraction was so low that it could exercise little or no discretion over whom to let in or who it retained in the officer ranks.⁹

Some argued that the Army’s officer retention troubles were due in part to the many “low caliber” officers that it had to retain. Capable junior officers could not help but notice that many of their superior officers were considerably less educated and intelligent than they were. Moreover, rank along with the officer’s commission itself had supposedly been “cheapened” by the Army’s conferring both on “countless incompetent people.” To attract and retain high caliber officers, some argued, the Army had to do a better job of vetting officer candidates and culling the incompetent from the Officer Corps.¹⁰

Pay and standard of living issues were widely held to be among the most important factors dissuading the talented from remaining in the Army. The Cordiner Report noted that a career in business or commerce generally offered greater financial rewards and more occupational freedom than service as an officer. The Army was simply unable to give the talented young officer that pay, the stability, the prestige, the promotion opportunities, and the perquisites that a civilian firm could.¹¹

Officers were very aware that military pay and benefits had steadily eroded since the interwar years. The major of 1930, one Army War College student asserted, had a higher standard of living than the colonel of 1953. After the war, the officer had rapidly lost ground to his contemporaries in government, commerce, and business. Military pay raises in the late 1940s and early 1950s lagged far behind those accorded other segments of the work force. Even the modest pay increases that officers did receive were offset to a degree by the elimination certain longstanding perquisites such as the military tax exemption on \$1500 of base pay and the 10 percent supplement for overseas duty.¹²

Traditional compensatory benefits and services, such as those which the Post Exchange and commissary at one time provided, also markedly deteriorated after the war. As a result of a study made by the House Armed Services Committee (HASC) in 1949, the military services placed restrictions on the kind of merchandise which could be sold, added a five percent charge on purchases at commissaries to cover overhead costs, and abolished the exemption from excise

taxes on many items. Civilian shopping centers could now match, and in some cases even beat, Post Exchange and commissary prices.¹³

Other benefits that made for a good quality of life were abolished or scaled back after the war. Family housing emerged as a pressing concern for officers and their families as the Cold War growth of the Army resulted in serious shortages of on-post quarters. Most officers became commuters, living in the civilian community where they were often unable to find or afford accommodations comparable to those that existed on post. With this move off post, the Army community lost much of its cohesiveness and sense of unity. Medical treatment became problematic as well due to, among other things, a shortage of physicians. Access to medical care was often available only on a limited basis depending on the situation at each duty station. Dental care for dependents was virtually eliminated after 1956. Life insurance, which until 1951 had been provided free to officers, now had to be purchased. Family separation, virtually unknown during the interwar years, became a near universal experience as the stationing of units overseas accelerated in the fifties. Officers now had to contend with unaccompanied short tours at foreign stations at irregular intervals throughout their career. Annual leave and leisure time were other casualties. A heightened operational tempo and a new sense of urgency resulted in many officers forfeiting their accumulated leave, with both their family time and psychological well being often suffering as a result. And finally, officers lost many of the little benefits that they possessed during the interwar period, such as orderlies and certain club privileges. The upshot of this was that officer families could no longer experience the genteel lifestyle of their predecessors.¹⁴

A loss of prestige associated with being an officer also reputedly worked against retention. Public pressure and inductee discontent had brought about a democratization of the Army during the war. Practices accepted as routine in the interwar army were not appropriate in the mass citizen army created for the fight against Germany and Japan. Service leaders were forced to adopt policies that diminished the distinctions between ranks and the social gulf between the officer and the enlisted man.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, the turmoil caused by demobilization, the unsettled state of the world, and the complaints of disgruntled civilian soldiers who had had the misfortune to serve under incompetent or overbearing officers created a morale problem. The Army's action at this time was to appoint the Doolittle Board to study officer-enlisted man relationships and make recommendations to the Secretary of War. The upshot of this effort was that many of the regulations, customs, and traditions that had perpetuated the social and profession divide between the commissioned and enlisted ranks were eliminated.¹⁵

The conditions of service, too, worked against the retention of capable officers. During the interwar period, officers were given challenging tasks and allowed to work semi-autonomously with but a minimum of supervision by senior officers. The expansion of the Army in the post-war era together with the escalation of international tensions brought on by the Cold War had changed the dynamics of service. For one thing, they changed the nature of the Officer Corps, transforming it from a small, integrated, and relatively homogeneous body into a large, diverse, and transient collection of individuals. The new urgency and constant state of tension that the Cold War brought to military life also drove the Army toward the centralization of command and control. Training became rigidly controlled by detailed directives and schedules from higher headquarters. Junior officers were held on a very short leash and not allowed to exercise their judgment or initiative in their work. Because units now had to maintain a high state of readiness, not even routine matters could be left to chance. Junior officers were now required to attend to

many housekeeping chores that had been left to corporals and sergeants in the interwar years. The deleterious effects of centralization and over-supervision were compounded by overwork—another outgrowth of the perpetual state of urgency occasioned by the operational demands of the Cold War. Young officers found themselves working fifty, sixty, or even seventy hour weeks, sacrificing their family life for the sake of their menial and oftentimes unnecessary duties.¹⁶

The officer personnel management system added to the frustration of the most able captains and lieutenants. The large part that seniority played in promotion reportedly killed initiative in the truly ambitious and dissuaded them from remaining in the service. Moreover, the emphasis in this system was not on managing junior officer careers but on “filling spaces with faces.” Lieutenants were regarded as interchangeable parts and treated like requisitioned items in the supply system. Little thought was given to their professional development to their goals and abilities.¹⁷

To boost retention rates, the Army adopted a number of measures designed to improve the lot of junior officers. Periodic pay raises, enhanced survivor benefits, the stabilization of assignments, the abbreviation of hardship tours, increased career counseling requirements, and accelerated promotions for the most competitive officers were some of the initiatives adopted. In most cases, the lot of the junior officer was in fact improved at least to some extent.¹⁸

While welcomed, the adopted measures did not have the desired effect on retention rates. The measures taken, after all, were quite limited in scope, dealing primarily with organization, career counseling and pay. While the periodic pay increases attained during the 1950s were eagerly accepted by junior officers, they were not of a nature or of a magnitude that could lure top quality officers away from civilian firms, which could still offer far more generous compensation packages than the Army. To make matters worse, advantage was not taken of those opportunities that did present themselves. The 1958 pay raise legislation had given the Army the ability to affect the retention equation in a significant fashion. Passed in the wake of the Soviet launch of Sputnik, it authorized the services to grant targeted increases to certain specialists who were in critically short supply. While the Navy and Air Force took advantage of this legislation, the more egalitarian Army did not. Absorbed in the cult of the generalist and the company man approach to officer personnel management, it chose to grant across the board pay hikes and spread the financial rewards evenly among all segments of the Officer Corps.¹⁹

Efforts to raise retention rates also suffered from a lack of holistic and systematic analysis of the various factors (along with the relationship among those factors) that influenced the career decisions of junior officers. The studies that were conducted by the various boards and organizations that looked into the retention issue were, for the most part, ad hoc affairs that lacked depth, breadth, and scientific rigor. Moreover, none of these efforts attempted to articulate a holistic strategy that took into account the full range of factors that impacted retention.²⁰

Vietnam.

Officer retention resurfaced as a major issue during the Vietnam War. To be sure, it had never really disappeared. The exodus of junior officer talent that began in the late 1940s continued largely unabated into the early 1960s (although that flow was subject to, inter alia, intermittent fluctuations of the unemployment rate). Concern among senior Army leaders waxed in the late 1960s and early 1970s as the exodus of junior officers from active duty reached what many observers considered to be crisis proportions. The high turnover rate not only represented a loss

of valuable military experience and a reduction in the overall ability and proficiency of the Army, it greatly increased costs and contributed to a rising defense budget, which had become a matter of great concern to lawmakers by the late 1960s.

The officer retention rate fell dramatically over the course of the 1960s. OCS retention rates sank from 71.7 percent in 1960 (a year when OCS input into the Army was very limited) to 33.8 percent in 1969 (by which time OCS had become the Army's single largest accessions source). The slumping rate of extensions by OCS commissioned officers was explained in part by the increasing numbers of college graduates who had entered OCS to avoid enlisted service but who had no intention of making the Army a career.²¹

The retention rate for ROTC officers was even worse. That rate for other than Regular Army (OTRA) ROTC officers decreased from 24.2 percent in 1960 to just 11.2 percent in 1970. Even more worrisome to the Army, the retention rates of Distinguished Military Graduates (DMG) were equally as low. Many ROTC graduates, like OCS graduates, were draft-induced volunteers with little inclination to make the army their career. The situation with ROTC officers was considered so serious that real consideration was given to replacing ROTC with a more cost-effective commissioning program.²²

Although retention rates among USMA graduates were somewhat better, the rate at which they were leaving the Army was still distressing. USMA rates were bolstered throughout much of the sixties by two factors. First, the Military Academy admitted more prior service cadets in the sixties—and in this era they had a higher propensity to remain in the service. Second, in FY 1966, the Army instituted a Selective Retention Program that had an involuntary component. The program was designed to retain on a selective basis those individuals needed to support the buildup of the active Army who otherwise would have been lost through voluntary retirement, resignation, or relief from active duty. When the Involuntary Retention program was terminated in December 1969, the resignation rates of the USMA classes 1963 through 1965 shot up and exceeded historical norms.²³

Once again in the Vietnam era, however, the lack of quality among junior officers was considered to be an even bigger problem than the lack of quantity. The Army, one war college student bluntly asserted, does not “retain outstanding officers in large numbers.” Top quality lieutenants and captains were leaving the service in “alarming numbers” and officers in the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel (ODCSPER) were not optimistic about reversing the trend. Even the Army ROTC scholarship program, instituted in 1965 to raise the qualitative input of the ROTC program, it was concluded, was not attracting the “talented and educated young men” that the Army hoped to procure and retain as career officers.²⁴

In an effort to stem the flow of junior officers out of the service, the Army conducted and sponsored a number of studies designed to determine what type of individual stayed in the service and what type left. The Army found, not surprisingly, that education and socio-economic background were inversely related with propensity to pursue a career as an officer. The higher the education level of the captain or lieutenant, the more likely he was to seek civilian employment. Junior officers with less than two years of college were more than twice as likely to make the Army a career as those with a baccalaureate degree, and three times as likely as those with a master's degree or above. The more intelligent and educated officer, the army concluded, was less likely to pursue a career because he was more aware of alternatives.

At the same time, officers from affluent neighborhoods, it was found, were less likely to stay in the Army than those from poor or lower middle class communities. The material aspirations of the less affluent could be met through a military career while those of the upper middle class

could not. Geography and marital status also figured into the retention matrix. Junior officers who grew up in rural areas were more likely to remain in the Army than those from urban communities and married officers, especially those with children, had much higher retention rates than single officers.²⁵

Some linked the Army's retention difficulties to the social and political turmoil of the era. In an age of urban riots, student demonstrations and widespread social unrest, anti-military attitudes and demands for greater individual freedom seemed to permeate the educated segments of society. Such an environment did nothing to encourage military service. Still, some pointed out, the turmoil surrounding the Vietnam War had less influence on junior officer retention than many supposed. There were other factors that were far more important in shaping the career intentions of junior officers than this turmoil.²⁶

Many of the factors that had negatively affected retention in the 1950s and early 1960s were still present, although some had taken on at least a slightly different aspect. One such factor was pay. The more highly educated or technically trained junior officers often felt that they were given duties that were beneath their level and that they should receive more pay than less skilled or educated officers. They also perceived the Army pay system to be inflexible and excessively bureaucratic. That system did not compensate for performance variables such as level of responsibility, long hours, and the quality of work performed. Promotion continued to be an issue. Civilian firms generally placed more emphasis on performance and less on seniority than the Army.²⁷

Family separations, frequent moves, and lack of leisure time likewise remained as important impediments to retention. One Army survey conducted during this period found that the most unpopular and negative aspects of Army life from the perspective of the junior officer's wife were family separations and frequent moves. For the officer who decided to leave the service, the lack of leisure time ranked high on his list of reasons for leaving.²⁸

The low prestige of the military profession became even more salient as a retention factor during the period under review. While much of this was attributable to trends over which military leaders had no control, the Army itself contributed to the diminution of prestige. The rapid promotions that occurred during the Vietnam War (some officers made major with only five years of service) and the erosion of accessions standards that the Army resorted to make its quantitative requirements certainly hurt the image of the Officer Corps. Increasingly, the large number of marginally qualified officers that the Army accessed and promoted to lead an expanded force drove many of the most capable officers out of the service.²⁹

The lack of opportunity for reserve officers, who made up the bulk of the Officer Corps, contributed to the retention problem as well. To be sure, Army leaders expressed dismay that only a small fraction [about 16 percent in the late 1960s] of reserve officers, or "Other Than Regular Army" (OTRA) as they were designated, remained on active duty after their initial service obligation expired. At the same time, however, the Army gave the OTRA junior officer a distinctly second class status. Upon his entry into the active army, the OTRA officer recognized that for him, the career opportunities and tenure of service were far more dubious than for Regular Army officers. As OTRA officers, they soon became aware that their retention on active duty was highly dependent on the periodic reductions in force effected to stay within fluctuating officer ceilings. For the most part, chances for advanced civilian education, attendance at a senior service college, and landing a career enhancing job were remote. These inequities, coupled with the fact that many OTRA officers sought a commission in order to avoid service as an enlisted man, resulted in the low retention rates of this group.³⁰

According to the ODCSPER, the biggest single obstacle to officer retention continued to be a lack of job satisfaction. As it was, most junior officers had little scope for independent action and hence little opportunity to develop a sense of self-worth or self-importance. Nor did the jobs to which they were assigned generally afford them responsibility, provide them with a sense of accomplishment or present them with a challenge.³¹

As we have seen, one of the reasons for this state of affairs was the elevated state of combat readiness required by the Cold War. Commanders had to train according to centralized training directives, prepare their organizations to deploy on short notice, and certify on a quarterly basis the quantifiable readiness condition of their unit. Pressed to achieve near perfection even in routine matters, they expected junior officers to personally oversee many menial tasks for which they were held personally accountable. Junior officers saw themselves as tethered to the supervision of tedious and often trivial duties and work details, subjected to hectic and harassing working conditions, and deprived of opportunities for individual initiative and development.³²

Even more troubling to junior officers was the fact that their jobs and MOSs were generally inconsistent with their skills, career interests, educational qualifications, or military training. For those officers with highly specialized educations, the inability of the Army to use their qualifications and skills served as a huge disincentive for retention. Although some branches tried to assign officers to jobs that matched their skills or educational background, the odds of actually making such a match were quite small.³³

Factors that inhibited the Army from aligning jobs with skills, education, and military training included; (1) the Army's preference for the generalist; in the company man system that guided officer management, there was little room for the highly educated, technically trained junior officer who wanted to use his special skills; (2) the Army's tendency to manage officers by placing bodies in slots rather than matching skills with positions, a topic that has been discussed in some length in previous papers; (3) the practice of levying school quotas that exceeded actual requirements, as many officers were consequently sent to a school only to fill a quota; (4) policy churn at the HQDA level; frequent changes in requirements and personnel policies disrupted career management plans and practices and added another level of complexity to the branch manager's task of aligning positions with skills and abilities; and (5) the tendency of local commanders to divert incoming officers from the jobs for which they were requisitioned and trained.³⁴

The fifth point needs some elaboration. Local commanders, exercising their command prerogatives, further reduced the likelihood of effecting a job-skills-education alignment because of their focus on effectively staffing their own organization. Consequently, they made assignments that filled the command's most pressing need first; the junior officer's skills or education became a secondary consideration at best. This naturally caused disillusionment among junior officers who felt that they were not trained for the job they were performing or they were not performing the job for which they were trained.³⁵

The probability that a junior officer would stay in the Army, it was recognized, was greatest when he performed responsible and rewarding jobs. Line duties that ultimately led to command assignments offered greater intrinsic satisfaction than administrative or support duties such as motor pool officer, housing officer, or club officer. Captains who had commanded and had performed the normal progression of duties as lieutenants leading to that assignment stayed in the Army at much higher rates than those who had performed less responsible duties.³⁶

Interestingly, junior officers who had served in Vietnam had, as a group, the highest tendency to remain in the Army. In fact, the retention of reserve officers who had served in Vietnam was four times higher than those who had served only in the U.S. Many of the administrative requirements of the garrison and training environments that junior officers considered to be artificial and unnecessary were waived or given a low priority in Vietnam. Moreover, the junior officer was for the most part utilized in his MOS and given an opportunity to command at the platoon or company level under the most challenging conditions. Many officers stated that combat tours in Vietnam had provided them with their only assignment that afforded them a challenge, responsibility with authority, independence, and a high sense of accomplishment.³⁷

The Army was unable to provide a comparable degree of job satisfaction to the Vietnam veteran in stateside assignments. Large junior officer over-strengths had accumulated on Army installations in CONUS, especially in training centers. Many junior officers found themselves engaged in meaningless “make work” assignments or performing degrading jobs. Many who subsequently left the service stated that if they could have experienced the feeling of challenge, responsibility, independence and achievement that they enjoyed in Vietnam they would have stayed in the Army.³⁸

To address the downward spiral in retention rates, the DCSPER asked the Franklin Institute Research Laboratories (FIRL) to conduct a study of the various factors that influenced junior officers’ career decisions. The study, completed on 30 September 1968, was based on a career motivation questionnaire and personal interviews completed by 4532 company grade officers with more than six months but less than five years active federal commissioned service. It served as the basis for a DA plan, implemented in FY 1970 and published in DA Pam 600-20, to improve junior officer retention. Although not all of the 44 separate actions listed in the aforementioned document can be listed or discussed, a brief overview can provide a sense of its scope and focus.³⁹

First, considerable attention was given to the need to establish and sustain multiple channels of communication between junior officers and senior leaders. Career management policies and procedures and career opportunities were to be presented and explained to the junior officer throughout his initial tour of service. In addition, a block of instruction on career counseling was to be incorporated in all basic and advanced courses and training literature, lesson plans and other publications were to be updated to address the problems of over-supervision and communications between superiors and subordinates. Another area that received considerable attention was civilian education opportunities for junior officers. In the FIRL survey, junior officers had expressed a strong desire to further their civilian education. Three specific areas were addressed: (1) the need to request more funds for civilian schooling; (2) the need to expand on-post college programs; and (3) the importance of allowing selected junior officers to attend college courses during duty hours.⁴⁰

The need to improve fringe benefits was also recognized in the plan, although the majority of actions in this area called only for additional studies to be made. The Surgeon General, for example, was asked to study several proposals dealing with medical benefits while the DCSLOG was asked to consider several proposals dealing with housing and commissary matters of particular interest to junior officers and their wives.⁴¹

Oddly, in light of the emphasis placed on job satisfaction, only two of the 44 actions were aimed at improving the intrinsic value of duty assignments. The two actions had as their goals the conversion of quasi-military duties to other than commissioned officer spaces and the limitation of the time that a junior officer would spend in a quasi-military billet. To achieve these

goals, the plan suggested that the management of certain unconvertible quasi-military positions be entrusted to branches, which would control assignments to these billets under a specific career plan.⁴²

Pay was addressed in only one of the 44 approved actions and then in a very limited way since the Hubble Pay Plan, a comprehensive military compensation package promising substantial pay raises, was then in the vetting process. Thus, the plan's proposals were restricted to issues such as commuting and dislocation expenses and BAQ/BOQ adjustments, which were recommended for further evaluation.⁴³

Finally, taking a page out of the FIRL study, the Army tried to involve senior officers more directly and more actively in retention efforts. Through DA publications and the exhortations of senior army leaders, local commanders were to be imbued with the idea that the counseling of junior officers was one of the prime responsibilities. The assumption was, based on the results of the FIRL study and other surveys, that direct and regular communication between senior officers and lieutenants was key to persuading high quality individuals to remain in the army.⁴⁴

The action plan that the Army put together, as perhaps is evident from the overview presented above, was woefully insufficient. It lacked decisiveness, direction, and specificity. The wording of the approved actions allowed the widest possible latitude for interpretation and implementation at all levels of command and almost ensured that no significant results would ensue. Several of the actions, in fact, only required additional studies to be made of particular issues. Moreover, many of the most formidable obstacles to retention—the dissatisfaction flowing from frequent moves and family separations, for example—were virtually ignored or treated in the most superficial fashion.⁴⁵

One lesson learned by Army leaders during this era was the apparent futility of targeting the well-educated for retention in the service. That is not to say, of course, that the Army rejected such individuals, only that it decided not to make extraordinary efforts to attract and retain them. Thus, instead of going all out to provide job satisfaction to its pool of highly educated lieutenants and captains, it set about to educate those officers most likely to pursue a military career—i.e., those officers without degrees and those ROTC graduates from less selective schools. To paraphrase the FIRL study, the Army had concluded that it could not motivate the highly educated but it could educate the highly motivated. Consequently, educational initiatives such as the degree completion program received a renewed emphasis in this era.⁴⁶

The realization that the educated and affluent tended to shun a military career, of course, was not new but it did undergo a kind of crystallization during this period. Several factors contributed to this. First, the Army in the late sixties and early seventies was moving toward an all-volunteer force and had to pay careful attention to personnel costs. The material aspirations of the less educated were easier to fulfill than those of the highly educated. Second, the company man model that informed the officer personnel management system had as one of its underlying assumptions that talent could be “grown” through a series of developmental assignments and periodic professional training. The supposition was that almost anyone, provided that they possessed a certain minimum level of intellect and ability, could be shaped into an effective leader. Experience counted for far more than innate ability in this system. Third, by the late-sixties, a number of studies had been completed and a significant amount of data had been collected that painted a fairly clear picture of who stayed in the Army and who did not. While they did not constitute a holistic strategy for retention, they did establish quite conclusively that educational attainment and socioeconomic status were inversely related to the likelihood of one's pursuing a career as an Army officer. Finally, by the early seventies, most of the senior officers

who had been commissioned in the late-thirties had passed from the scene or were about to. Their successors, brought up in the Cold War, did not experience the interwar Army and entertained a different set of assumptions and expectations about officers and the Officer Corps.

Summary and Conclusion.

World War II and the Cold War had drastically altered the character and composition of the Army's Officer Corps. Not only were officer requirements much greater than they had been in the interwar period, but a new set of international and domestic conditions changed the dynamics of officer accessions and retention. After 1945, the material incentives associated with a military career declined. Pay, fringe benefits, housing, medical and dental care, life insurance, Post Exchange and commissary privileges all suffered significant erosion. At the same time, the prestige of being an officer fell while the nature of the Officer Corps changed drastically. The relatively small, cohesive, and homogenous Officer Corps of the interwar era was transmogrified into the distended, mottled, and loosely integrated one of the Cold War era.

Just as significantly from the standpoint of officer retention, the nature of military jobs along with the working conditions in which officers had to operate changed radically after World War II. The new sense of urgency and the increased emphasis on readiness induced by the demands of the Cold War helped bring these changes about—changes that many believed dissuaded the brightest and most capable junior officers from pursuing a military career. The constant state of tension and focus on readiness that the Cold War brought to military life drove the Army toward the centralization of command, control, and training. Training was now closely supervised and tightly controlled by detailed directives and schedules. Junior officers were held on a very short leash and not allowed to exercise their judgment and originality in their work. Since there was little room for error in this environment, junior officers found themselves engaged in many routine and trivial matters that their predecessors in the interwar years had left to noncommissioned officers.

After 1945, the emergence of the Cold War with the Soviet Union forced the nation to maintain a huge active army. To lead this greatly expanded force, the Army adopted a quantity-based rather than talent-based retention strategy. That strategy, however, had unforeseen and untoward consequences. For by accessing and retaining large number of marginally qualified officers, it drove many of the most talented and highly educated junior officers out of the service.

The Army continued to struggle with junior officer attrition problems through the 1960s and into the 1970s. Many of the old obstacles to retention, of course, remained—although some of them in a slightly different form. Pay, benefits, housing, long hours, family separation, and frequent moves retained their salience as did the difficulties created by the maintenance of a two tiered officer corps in which OTRA captains and lieutenants (who comprised the bulk of the officer corps) were accorded second class status. New obstacles cropped up to add another level of complexity to the Army's attrition woes. The emergence of anti-war and anti-military attitudes, the tremendous expansion of OCS and the simultaneous erosion of accessions standards, and the creation of large junior officer over-strengths in CONUS army installations were some of the new challenges with which senior leaders had to contend. That last condition—the large junior officer over-strengths—greatly aggravated the already huge problem that the Army was having with providing meaningful and challenging jobs to its lieutenants and captains.

Although attrition created huge shortages in the ranks of junior officers, it was the qualitative consequences of officer attrition that garnered the most concern. After 1945, the Army lost the

most educated and skilled officers to civilian firms. Many voices warned of the effects that this loss of talent would eventually have on the Officer Corps in terms of both military proficiency and societal prestige.

Measures were taken to boost retention and keep the most talented junior officers in the Army. In the twenty five years after the end of World War II, in fact, the problem was studied by a host of boards, commissions, agencies, and think tanks who made recommendations about how to solve it. The actions adopted by the Army to allay its retention troubles, however, were largely ineffectual, especially when it came to the qualitative aspect of the problem. The steps that the Army prescribed were incremental and generally lacked decisiveness, specificity, or long-term vision. Wide latitude for interpretation and implementation was accorded to commanders in the implementation of these actions and, many of the most complicated or difficult problems were for all practical purposes ignored. Moreover, the egalitarian ideology of the Army and its commitment to the cult of the generalist prevented it from targeting the highly or technically educated for retention. Thus, pay raises were of the across the board rather than the targeted variety.

By the early seventies, a sort of consensus had emerged within the ranks of Army leaders. Instead of concentrating on attracting and retaining the highly talented and educated, it was agreed, the Army should focus on developing and educating the highly motivated. Taking extraordinary measures to attract and retain the cream of the American undergraduate population would, they concluded, lead to frustration and failure. That is not to say that the Army wanted to exclude or discourage these high academic achievers from following an Army career, only that they could not be the Army's focus. This manner of looking at retention fit the budgetary realities of an all-volunteer force and accorded closely with the assumptions that underpinned the company man system of personnel management.

Much has changed, of course, since the end of conscription in the early seventies. The international and domestic challenges facing the United States today are much different than those encountered during that era. The Army has of course changed as well over the past thirty-six years, reconfiguring itself several times to meet evolving changing threats and demands. Still, much of the thinking that undergirded ineffectual Army officer retention policies in the sixties and seventies prevails today, despite fundamental changes in the American labor market. In the Army's Officer Corps, experience and motivation still count for far more than technical skills and intellectual attainment.

¹ Edward M. Coffman, *The Regulars: The American Army, 1898-1941* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 147-148; In anticipation of the large army authorized by the National Defense Act of 1920, the War Department commissioned 5229 officers in the aforementioned year. The large number of officers in this "hump," as it would become known, combined with the practice of promotion by seniority and a mandatory retirement age of 64, created a logjam in advancement. By 1932, almost 4200 officers—which represented roughly a third of the officer corps—were between the ages of 37 and 43; 1885 captains and 234 lieutenants were in their forties. This discouraged some from remaining in the Army. The USMA class of 1915, of which Eisenhower was a member, entered the Army before the "hump" was brought in and held relatively high rank and responsible positions during the interwar period. That class saw only 12 (or seven percent) of its members resign before the outbreak of World War II. The USMA class of 1923, on the other hand, had to contend with both the hump and the fiscal austerity of the interwar era. It consequently lost 71 (or 24 percent) of its members to the civilian world before 1941, which was considered at the time to be a very high attrition rate; Charles J. Denholm, "Officer Promotion and Elimination," Individual Study, USAWC, 26 March, 1956, 4.

² J. G. Harbor, "The Army as a Career," in *The Officer's Guide* (Washington, D.C.: National Service Publishing Company, 1930), 1-19; John G. Taber, "Career Incentives for Officers," Individual Study, USAWC, 1 March 1954,

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- 4-5, and 8; Samuel D. Burns, "Career Incentives for Officers," Individual Study, USAWC, 15 March 1954, 21. James B. Leer, "Career Incentives for Officers," Individual Study, USAWC, 15 March 1954, 4; Willard Latham, "The Army as a Career," Student Thesis, USAWC, 23 February 1968, 11; Max L. Pitney, "Retention of Junior Officers," Student Thesis, USAWC, 19 March, 1959, 8 and 12.
- ³ Elbridge Colby, *The Profession of Arms* (New York and London: D. Appleton and Company, 1924), 21-22; Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier* (London: Times Publishing Company, Ltd., 1962), 65; Taber, "Career Incentives for Officers," 4-5 and 8; Burns, "Career Incentives for Officers," 21; Leer, "Career Incentives for Officers," 4; Latham, "The Army as a Career," 11; Pitney, "Retention of Junior Officers," 8 and 12.
- ⁴ R. Earnest Dupuy, "Pass in Review," *The Army Combat Forces Journal*, vol. 5, no. 3 (October 1954): 48; Taber, "Career Incentives for Officers," 7, 9, 14, and 24; Latham, "The Army as a Career," 12.
- ⁵ Dwight D. Eisenhower, Message from the President of the United States Relative to the Personnel Turnover in the Military Service of the United States, House of Representatives, 84th Congress, 1st Session, January 13, 1955; "The Womble Report of Service Careers," *Army Information Digest* (February 1954): 24-36; Kay L. Wieland, "Junior Officer Retention: The Army's Dilemma," Student Thesis, USAWC, 31 March 1970, 2; Leer, "Career Incentives for Officers," 1, 2 and 10; Taber, "Career Incentives for Officers," 29 and 31.
- ⁶ Denholm, "Officer Promotion and Elimination," 15.
- ⁷ Hanson W. Baldwin, "The Problem of Army Morale," *New York Times Magazine* (December 5, 1954): 9 AND 55; Francis W. O'Brien, "Long Range Procurement Plan for Regular Army Officers," Individual Study, USAWC, 14 March 1955, ii, 19, 28, and 33; Denholm, "Officer Promotion and Elimination," 16; Pitney, "Retention of Junior Officers," 3.
- ⁸ Hanson W. Baldwin, "What's Wrong With The Regulars," *Saturday Evening Post* (October 31, 1953): 19-21 and 104-110; Denholm, "Officer Promotion and Elimination," 29, 32, 41; U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Armed Services, Officers Grade Limitation Act of 1954, H.R. 7103, USGPO, 1954.
- ⁹ Leer, "Career Incentives for Officers," 10; Denholm, "Officer Promotion and Elimination," 1, 5-7.
- ¹⁰ Taber, "Career Incentives for Officers," 36, 38, and 47; Denholm, "Officer Promotion and Elimination," 20.
- ¹¹ U.S. Department of Defense, A Modern Concept of Manpower Management and Compensation, Vol. 1: Military Personnel: Report by the Defense Advisory Committee on Professional and Technical Compensation, Cordiner Committee (Washington, DC: May 1957): 23-27; O'Brien, "Long Range Procurement Plan for Regular Army Officers," ii; Burns, "Career Incentives for Officers," 5; Pitney, "Retention of Junior Officers," 13 and 23.
- ¹² U.S. Department of the Army, Leadership Human Research Unit (HUMRRO), *The Retention of Army Career Personnel: An Analysis of Problems and Some Proposals for Research*, Presidio of Monterey, CA: August 1958. Leer, "Career Incentives for Officers," 5, 20-22, Burns, "Career Incentives for Officers," 4-5, Pitney, "Retention of Junior Officers," 6-7, 13, and 23; Taber, "Career Incentives for Officers," 31 and 39. Between October 1, 1949 and May 1, 1952, for example, industrial wages rose 21 percent while military pay increased by a mere 5.7 percent.
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- ¹⁴ U.S. Adjutant General's Officer, "Benefits or Improvements that Would Contribute Most toward Increasing the Value of an Army Career," Survey Prepared by Personnel Research and Procedures Division, Washington, DC, 1958; Robert H. Nevins, Jr., "The Retention of Quality Junior Officers—A Challenge for the Seventies," USAWC Student Thesis, 4 March, 1970, 10; Pitney, "Retention of Junior Officers," ii, 13 and 28-29, 37; Leer, "Career Incentives for Officers," 23, 26; Taber, "Career Incentives for Officers," 22; Houck Spencer, "Evaluation of the Regular Officer Corps or the United States Army by Historical Professional Standards, Student Thesis, USAWC, 19 March 1958, 6.
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- ²⁰ Wieland, "Junior Officer Retention," 2.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

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- ²² Ibid., 2, 36.
- ²³ Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel (ODCSPER), Annual Historical Summary (AHS): FY 1966, 40; ODCSPER, AHS: FY 1970, 50, Nevins, 1.
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- ²⁵ Spence, 16; Wieland, 27-28, 32.
- ²⁶ J.W. Fulbright, "Militarism and American Democracy," *Vital Speeches of the Day* (May 15, 1969): 458.
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- ³¹ Nevins, 55; AHS, FY 1970, ODCSPER, 49.
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- ³⁵ Wieland, 10.
- ³⁶ Spencer, 12.
- ³⁷ Spencer, 14; Nevins, 24.
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- ³⁹ U.S. Department of the Army, *Junior Officer Retention*, DA Pam 600-20 (Washington, DC: The Adjutant General's Office, August 1969), 1-6.
- ⁴⁰ AHS, FY 1969, ODCSPER, 63; Wieland., 43.
- ⁴¹ Wieland, 43-44.
- ⁴² AHS, FY 1969, ODCSPER, 49and 63.
- ⁴³ AHS, FY 1969, ODCSPER, 63; Wieland, 52.
- ⁴⁴ AHS, FY 1969, ODCSPER, 63; Wieland, 46-47.
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- ⁴⁶ Nevins, "The Retention of Quality Junior Officers—A Challenge for the Seventies," 46; Thomas H. Spence, "Job Satisfaction as a Factor in Junior Officer Recruitment and Retention," USAWC Research Paper, 20 March 1972, 16.