

**TOWARD A U.S. ARMY OFFICER STRATEGY FOR SUCCESS:
HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

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Introduction.

The Army has never had an overarching and integrative plan to *access, develop, retain* and *employ* talented officers through a career of service. Over the years, however, it has addressed one or another of these components in some fashion. To provide some historical context for the present subject, I offer an overview of the Officer Corps and its management in the modern era. By design, I have sacrificed nuance for clarity as I attempt to highlight general trends.

The Root Reforms.

The U.S. Army Officer Corps, along with the policies and assumptions that underpin its management, has passed through several watersheds since the turn of the twentieth century. The first occurred during the tenure of corporation lawyer Elihu Root as Secretary of War (1899-1903). Under Root's tutelage, the Army began its transformation from a constabulary force focused on policing the frontier to one that would by the 1920s embrace the concept of the Nation in Arms.

The introduction of a General Staff and a system of professional military education designed to prepare officers for specific stages in their careers signaled the demise of the frontier army and the regimental system that sustained it. In its place arose the prototype of the modern officer management system, featuring a variegated career pattern characterized by a rotation between staff and line assignments and punctuated with periodic professional training. Root's was essentially an industrial age blueprint, inspired by the corporate production model, which in his time had become a prevalent form of business organization.

World War I.

World War I necessitated adjustments to the Army's officer accessions and management practices. Before that conflict, the Army obtained its officers from West Point, civil life, and, to a very limited degree, the enlisted ranks. Due to the immense scale of the war, the Army turned to Officer Training Schools (OTS), the progenitors of the modern OCS system, for the vast majority of its junior leaders. Although the first classes (following the pre-war "Plattsburgh" formula) admitted substantial numbers of so-called "social elites," the War Department soon evidenced a decided preference for enlisted men as officer aspirants. In this clash of massive, industrial era armies, the Army's most pressing need was *for technically proficient platoon leaders, not for broadly educated junior officers adept at sophisticated abstract reasoning and prepared for a career of military service.*

The Army's first foray into large scale officer management took place during this time. It was necessitated by the Officer Corps' rapid expansion to over 200,000 men and to "simplify the procedure of discovering [officer] talent and assigning it where most needed." To serve these ends, the War Department developed the Officer Qualification Card and the Commissioned Officers Rating Scale. Both devices were intended to match skills and attributes with leadership requirements.¹

Interwar Years.

After victory and demobilization, the U.S. Army Officer Corps shrank to 12,000 men, and wartime officer accessions and management systems were abandoned. During the interwar years, one of the Army's main purposes was to provide training and leadership for a temporary mass army should the need for such a force arise. The system of officer development schools introduced by Secretary Root remained in place, albeit expanded and refined. Attendance at the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth became a mark of professional distinction and a virtual prerequisite for high rank. Adjustments were made in school curricula to incorporate the lessons learned in the war and the perceived demands of a new and somewhat uncertain international environment.²

The Chiefs of Services, or branches as they are called today, remained key players in officer management. Indeed, they had an importance rivaling that of the Chief of Staff himself. They were, according to General Bruce Palmer, "the Mama, Papa, [and] Mecca" for the Regular Army (RA) officer, controlling virtually every aspect of his professional life.³

The promotion prospects for officers were quite bleak throughout most of the interwar period. Following the armistice, the Army reduced many officers to their permanent RA grade and introduced a single promotion list. The lack of promotion opportunities, a byproduct of the so-called "hump" in officer strength created by the war, resulted in many officers spending most of their career in the same grade. Only with the outbreak of World War II would promotion opportunities for regulars open up once again.⁴

By design, West Point was the principal source of regular officers during this era. Senior military colleges and, to a lesser extent, civilian universities supplemented the output of the Military Academy while the enlisted ranks became an insignificant source of new lieutenants. The War Department was not looking for immediately employable platoon leaders but *for junior officers with a broad inventory of intellectual skills and abilities that would make them invaluable senior leaders in the Army of the future.*⁵

World War II.

World War II saw the Officer Corps grow from 17,000 to 835,000. To effect this expansion, in 1942 the War Department decentralized officer management, creating three major commands -- the Army Ground Forces (AGF), the Army Service Forces (ASF), and the Army Air Forces (AAF) -- to control and administer the training and management of officers.

Many critics attributed the Army's officer management problems during the war to this decentralized system. One of the most troubling issues was the severe distributional imbalance that existed among the various branches. Throughout most of the war, there were far too many anti-aircraft and field artillery officers and too few infantry, armor, and engineer officers. This system was also blamed for officer "pooling." In 1943, the Army's Inspector General reported that about half of all ASF officers had been sitting in replacement pools for extended periods, where they attended a "makeshift" training, designed primarily to keep them busy. It seemed that officers who lacked desired skills and ability were being shunted into these pools because they were not wanted in units. Reclassification of these marginal performers was not a viable option because of extremely cumbersome administrative procedures it entailed.⁶

The vast majority of officers who led an army of 8,300,000 men came from three sources: [1] from those who had received training in peacetime military agencies -- the National Guard, the

Officers' Reserve Corps (ORC), the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC), and the Citizens' Military Training Camps (CMTC); [2] from a body of civilians with special skills (who were awarded direct commissions); and [3] from officer candidate schools (OCS). OCS was by far the largest source of new officers. In its selection of OCS candidates, the Army again favored enlisted men, since they were thought to make the best platoon leaders -- superior to ROTC and even USMA graduates.

During the war, the existing educational facilities of the Army focused upon immediate requirements -- i.e., training large numbers of men for specific duties in an emergency situation. Education was greatly curtailed. At West Point, courses were compressed and accelerated. Some army service schools saw their courses suspended.⁷

From World War to Cold War.

World War II ended what one historian has referred to as the "golden age" of the branch chiefs. After the war, a "semi-centralized" career management division was set up to oversee officer assignments. Still, continuity was more evident than change. The branches remained powerful entities and continued to regulate career patterns.⁸

The old, interwar Army had been relatively uncomplicated, small, close-knit, and somewhat insular. The Army that emerged after World War II, however, was large, multifarious, somewhat disjointed, and more integrated into society as a whole. Whereas the interwar Officer Corps was intended to provide the nucleus for a temporary mass army, the new one was called upon to lead a permanent standing army capable of dealing with the global threat posed by the Soviet Union.⁹

As a result, the Army sought a wider distribution of talented officers to deal with the more complex and wide-ranging threat it faced in the post-war era. National security now entailed diplomacy, science, foreign aid, and industrial and technological development as much as it did traditional military training. Once again, the Army's system of officer development was refined and enlarged to incorporate the lessons of the last war and to meet the challenges posed by the new international order.¹⁰

After dominating the peacetime officer corps for a century and a half, West Point lost its quantitative preeminence as a commissioning source. The vast size of the U.S. Cold War defense establishment led to this loss of ascendancy. ROTC, which produced junior officers with a wide range of academic skills, became the engine of the Army's officer corps. By the mid-1950s, in fact, ROTC was producing twice as many regular officers as West Point. OCS was retained but drastically reduced in scope.¹¹

Officer management was placed on a new footing with the passage of the Officer Personnel Act of 1947, which allowed for greater flexibility in the handling of officers.

Prior to the passage of this legislation, it had been practically impossible to eliminate poor performers, which resulted in the Army being filled with hundreds, perhaps thousands, of colonels and lieutenant colonels it did not want. The Army published its first technical manual for officer career management in response to this legislation. In this manual, career management objectives were crafted to channel an officer's career into various different types of jobs within the confines of his assigned branch. Extended or repetitive duty in any single capacity was to be avoided; specialization was a professional sin.¹²

The basic objective of officer management remained "to develop a highly competent officer corps to serve in positions of progressively higher responsibility in the event of a national

emergency," and the end result of the process was to be a broadly trained officer, capable of grasping the wide sweep of the Army's missions and responsibilities.¹³

Many of the assumptions and policies that underpinned officer career management at this time were shared in the corporate world. Like the Army, corporations in the post-World War II era aimed to develop general management skills in prospective executives by encouraging lateral career moves across functions and departments. The end result, it was hoped, would be a leader capable of grasping the entirety of the corporation's operations.¹⁴

The Turbulent Sixties and Early Seventies.

A third watershed in the evolution of the Officer Corps began in the early 1960s and would end in the advent of the All Volunteer Force (AVF). While the first watershed determined that the professional officer should be broadly trained and versatile, and the second determined that the Officer Corps would be large, varied, and broadly based, so the events of the 1960s and early 1970s suggested that in addition to their other skills, *Army officers should be analytical, lucid, and capable of defending their positions in words and in writing.* If officers did not possess these capabilities and attributes, some feared, they would be overwhelmed in a defense department dominated by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and his army of systems analysts.¹⁵

In fact, one of McNamara's first moves as defense chief was to order a review of the Army's system of officer management. The group that conducted that review found a system in disarray; responsibility within the Department of the Army for officer personnel questions was diffused; priorities had not been established; and career managers pursued many separate and short-range objectives. No single integrated effort gave officer management coherence and direction. To remedy these defects, the group called for the elimination of the Office of the Chief of Technical Services and the transfer of officer personnel management to a new organization called the Office of Personnel Operations (OPO). McNamara promptly approved these recommendations. The concentration of all personnel functions in one special staff agency imparted a degree of unity to the management of officers and, some were convinced, to the Army as an institution.

Despite this organizational overhaul, the branch-centered management system remained essentially unchanged. The adjustments changed "who" controlled officer career planning and assignments rather than "how" they would be managed and employed. In short, the basic assumptions that had guided the assignment and career progression of officers since Elihu Root's time still guided personnel policy.¹⁶

The Advent of the All Volunteer Force (AVF).

The volunteer Army that emerged from the tumult of the Vietnam era was smaller, more disciplined, more expensive, more inward-looking, and more tied to the fluctuations of the marketplace that its conscription-based predecessor had been. It came into being at the dawn of what many observers now refer to as the Information Age. The microchip or integrated circuit, used commercially for the first time in the early sixties, was by the early 1970s beginning to transform the economy and business practices.

After relying heavily upon OCS during the Vietnam War, and with the example of My Lai and Lieutenant Calley before it, the Army became wary of relying too heavily upon un-degreed officers. As a result, after the war OCS was scaled back and ROTC re-emerged as the Army's principal commissioning source. ROTC, however, emerged from the Vietnam War with a

reduced profile among the nation's most competitive colleges, and some Army officials worried about the military and social ramifications of this retreat from the nation's centers of intellectual excellence.

The Army's current officer management system has its origins in a study on military professionalism conducted by the U.S. Army War College in 1971. The My Lai incident had moved Army Chief of Staff William Westmoreland to launch a complete review of the state of the Officer Corps. Out of this effort came a centralized promotion and command selection process, designated command tours, and primary and secondary specialties for officers. Collectively, these new practices were referred to as the Officer Personnel Management System (OPMS). While it improved the career planning process, OPMS had little effect on the Army's approach to the employment and development of junior officers.¹⁷

Approximately two years after the introduction of OPMS I, the Army convened yet another board to examine officer education and training needs. The resultant study, "A Review of Education and Training for Officers (RETO)," laid the philosophical foundation for a comprehensive system of career development from pre-commissioning through retirement. The board saw many of its recommendations eventually adopted, although its proposal to institute rigorous intellectual, physical, and psychological screening mechanisms for entry into ROTC proved too difficult and controversial to institute, at least in manner envisioned by the RETO board.¹⁸

The Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA) of 1980, which replaced the Officer Personnel Act of 1947 as the legislative basis for officer promotions and assignments, was the next major milestone in the history of officer management. Through this legislation, Congress hoped to, among other things, retain officers with scientific and technological talent and afford reasonably uniform career opportunities among the services. Like the OPMS introduced in the 1970s, however, DOPMA represented evolutionary rather than revolutionary change. Built upon legislation from the 1940s and 1950s, some of its key provisions incorporated ideas and policies that had been around since before the turn of the century. DOPMA's restrictiveness bothered many observers. Its provisions relative to assignments, promotions, and retirements were based on time in service and were applied unvaryingly and somewhat rigidly across the defense establishment.¹⁹

In the early 1980s, the Army Chief of Staff, Edward C. Meyer, ordered an assessment of DOPMA's effect on the Officer Corps. The resultant Professional Development of Officers Study (PDOS) led to a second iteration of OPMS and more incremental changes to the way the Army managed its officers, i.e., the single branch track, new functional areas, and a revised officer classification system. This study, like those that had preceded it, took aim at pressing contemporary problems.²⁰ In 1987, General Carl E. Vuono ordered an appraisal of leader development to reconcile the changes in policy and law that had occurred since the introduction of OPMS II with existing officer management practices. This resulted in the Leader Development Action Plan (LDAP), which contained over 50 recommendations that were eventually incorporated into OPMS II.²¹

The Post-Cold War Era.

Shortly after the LDAP was introduced, the Army embarked upon a momentous transformation occasioned by the end of the Cold War. The dissolution of the Soviet Union enabled a dramatic reduction in the size of the Army and its Officer Corps. While these

reductions were being effected, certain key pieces of legislation, passed in the late 1980s and early 1990s to address urgent issues that the services were then facing, began to constrain the flexibility of personnel managers. The Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 (designed to promote interoperability) and amendments to Titles VIII and XI of the U.S. Code (aimed at closer active and reserve component cooperation) had the effect of narrowing the range of assignment opportunities available to officers.²²

The post-Cold War “draw-down” created significant officer management challenges for the Army. A force structure and inventory mismatch, dysfunctional assignment practices, an inflated rating system, a pervasive “zero-defects” mentality, tensions generated by an elevated operational tempo, an erosion in the war-fighting skills of the Officer Corps, and truncated command tours suggested that something was seriously awry in the way the Army managed and developed its leaders. Critics complained that the Army had a “Cold War” mentality and that its human capital management practices were still rooted in the Industrial Age. They urged the Army to adapt its outlook and business practices to the requirements of the Information Age, a term that came into general use in the late 1980s and early 1990s to describe the changes that were, and had been for several decades, transforming the global economy.²³

To deal with these Officer Corps challenges, then-Chief of Staff Dennis J. Reimer chartered a review of OPMS II. In 1996, he asked Major General David H. Ohle and a team of field grade officers to assess that system's effectiveness in the context of the Army's existing and projected needs. In mid-1997, General Reimer approved a system developed by Ohle's team. Called OPMS III, it was predicated upon developing “competency” in the Officer Corps. While it left junior officer development virtually untouched, it had a major impact on mid-career officers by grouping interrelated branches and functional areas into four career fields: Operations, Information Operations, Institutional Support, and Operational Support. Under OPMS III, officers competed for promotion only within the same career field, effectively ending the “dual tracking” promotion system which had proved so professionally stultifying in the past.²⁴

Some heralded OPMS III as a step in the right direction--it provided alternative career choices and increased the chances for promotion and battalion command for a larger number of officers. Others were less enthusiastic. Some felt that it allowed “operators” to maintain their “stranglehold on flag-level positions,” ensuring that specialists and experts remained on the margins of the profession.²⁵

In 2000, critics of OPMS III had some of their opinions confirmed when General Eric Shinseki, the CSA, entrusted the TRADOC commander with the task of examining how the Army was preparing officers for the challenges of the next century. The Army Training and Leader Development Panel (ATLDP) which performed this task found that the personnel management system was too focused on meeting “gates”-- or in the words of (then) Major General William M. Steele, “placing faces in spaces”-- than on quality leader development. The panel also found the Officer Education System (OES) needed revamping. That system, judged as too attuned to Cold War methods and assumptions, was deemed out of synch with the Army's expanded set of missions and responsibilities.²⁶

Recent Developments.

Since the launch of Iraqi Freedom, the Army has revised its officer education system in an attempt to align it with the requirements of an extended conflict. Army training and education programs from pre-commissioning to the senior service college level have incorporated lessons

learned from Southwest Asia into their curricula. A three-phased Basic Officer Leader Course (BOLC) was introduced in an attempt to ensure that lieutenants arrived at their first unit of assignment competent in leadership skills, small unit tactics, and branch fundamentals.²⁷

As in previous periods of extended conflict, the Army's "mix" of commissioning sources has departed from peacetime patterns. Even before the launch of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003, the Army was increasingly relying upon OCS for its junior leaders due to declining officer continuation rates and reduced funding of ROTC. As a result, by 2007, and for the first time since the advent of the all-volunteer force, ROTC furnished less than half of the Army's active duty commissioning cohort. Both Congress and senior Army leaders have expressed concern about what this might portend for both the Officer and NCO Corps.

There has been growing recognition in many quarters that the Army needs both a deep and broad distribution of talent in its Officer Corps to meet the demands of the future. At the beginning of the century, the emphasis was on accessing and developing "technologically savvy" officers capable of understanding and managing complex weapons systems. More recently, the call for technologically educated officers has been joined by a demand for culturally sensitive leaders. The study of foreign languages and cultures has consequently gained a new salience.

Refinements have continued to be made to the OPMS. The latest version, introduced in September 2006, replaced the four career fields of OPMS III with three new functional categories, namely: Maneuver, Fires and Effects; Operations Support; and Force Sustainment. As in past revisions of the OPMS, however, the changes effected were essentially incremental in nature. The task force that accomplished the revision took what it collectively considered to be a "proven system" and tweaked it so that it could better address current needs.²⁸

Over the last decade, calls have been made with increasing frequency to replace the old personnel management system, rooted as it is in the methods and assumptions of the Industrial Age, with one focused on officer intellectual abilities, bringing the Army on line with the best practices in human capital and enterprise management. It took several centuries for armies to adjust to the new socio-economic arrangements that replaced the feudal system and decades for armies to adjust to the demands of the Industrial Age. How long it will take for armies to adjust to the requirements of the Information Age is a matter of current speculation.²⁹

Conclusions.

There is a strong strand of continuity running through the way the Army has managed its Officer Corps over the last century. The Army's officer management policies have undergone frequent revision since 1900, primarily to address issues of contemporary importance. In effecting these revisions, the Army, and in some cases Congress, have taken the existing system as their base and tweaked it to achieve immediately desired outcomes. As a consequence, the current system of officer management has an administrative superstructure consisting of disparate policies and procedures that have accumulated over decades to address specific problems. This patchwork rests upon a foundation built by Elihu Root and firmly rooted it in the Industrial Age. Such an incrementally arrived at officer management system is the antithesis of a coherent strategy. It relies upon a collection of legacy practices when it should instead flow from a conscious and thoughtful planning process designed to meet strategic requirements.

Among other potential causes, the frequent rotation of senior Army officials, however, has disrupted the continuity of leadership needed to formulate and execute such strategic planning. It has also prevented the emergence of a consensus among key leaders about the most fundamental

issues affecting the Officer Corps, the absence of which seems particularly debilitating. Key leaders cannot agree: (1) if there is a need for such a strategy; (2) if needed, what elements must be included in that strategy; and (3) if needed, what adjustments are necessary to bring that strategy in line with the Information Age as the Army looks to the future. In regard to this latter point, some conceive of the Information Age almost exclusively in technological terms. In their opinion, the Army merely needs to streamline and update a proven system. Others view the Information Age in the context of a broader social, technological and economic transformation that demands fundamental changes in the way the Army accesses, develops, retains and employs talented officers.

Which way the Army will eventually decide to go is not at this time clear. Certainly, evolutionary change in its officer management practices has rarely wrought revolutionary results. While the latter has occurred, it has usually taken a military catastrophe or a manifest and dramatic change in external circumstances to induce it. Regardless of which policies emerge from the current debate, one thing is clear – they will shape the Officer Corps for better or worse, and throughout much of the ensuing century.

¹ Edward M. Coffman & Peter F. Herrly, "The American Regular Army Officer Corps Between the World Wars: A Collective Biography," *Armed Forces and Society*, Vol. 4 (1 November 1977): 57.

² Interv. Auth with Mr. William Epley and Mr. Ed Raines, 19 Aug 09; Coffman & Herrly, *Op. Cit.*, 55-73; John W. Masland & Laurence I. Radway, *Soldiers and Scholars: Military Education and National Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), 86.

³ Donald P. Snow, The Golden Age, Vignettes of Military History No. 92, U.S. Army Military History Institute, March 6, 1978.

⁴ George R. Iverson, Officer Personnel Management: "A Historical Perspective," Study Project (Carlisle PA: US Army War College, 12 May 1978), 10.

⁵ Coffman & Herrly, *op. cit.*, 55-73.

⁶ R. R. Palmer, *The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2003), 87-88; Department of the Army Pamphlet No. 20-211, *The Personnel System in the United States Army* (Washington, DC: August 1954), 234.

⁷ Palmer, *op. cit.*, 100-101.

⁸ DA Pamphlet No. 600-3, Career Planning for Army Officers (Washington, DC: 15 October 1956), 7; Snow, *op. cit.*

⁹ Thaddeus Holt, The Army Officer Corps and the Pentagon in 1965-1967: Miscellaneous Observations, 7; found in Thaddeus Holt. Papers. 1 Box. Archives of the U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center..

¹⁰ Masland & Radway, *op. cit.*, 20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹² Officer Personnel Act of 1947, Hearing on H.R. 3830, 80th Congress, 1st Session, Senate, Committee on Armed Services, Washington, DC, July 16, 1947, 1-3.

¹³ Iverson, *op. cit.* 26.

¹⁴ Peter Cappelli, *Talent on Demand: Managing Talent in an Age of Uncertainty* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2008), 34.

¹⁵ Holt, *op. cit.*, 14.

¹⁶ Iverson, *op. cit.*, 29 and 34.

¹⁷ David D. Haught, Officer Personnel Management in the Army: Past, Present, and Future (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 7 April 2003), 1.

¹⁸ Robert J. Keivit, US Army Executive Development (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 1 May 1984), 1.

¹⁹ Peter Schirmer, Harry J. Thie, Margaret C. Harrell, and Michael S. Tseng, *Challenging Time in DOPMA: Flexible and Contemporary Military Officer Management* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2006), xiv.

²⁰ James J. McLeskey, III, The U.S. Army Professional Development Of Officers Study: A Critique (Carlisle, PA: USAWC, 22 March 1986), .

²¹ Haught, *op. cit.*, 2.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Mary French, "OPMS XXI--An Integrated Strategy," *Army* 47 (February 1997), accessed at http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3723/is_199702/ai_n8738957/pg_2/?tag=content;col1 on 21 August 2009.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Lloyd Matthews, "The Uniformed Intellectual and his Place in American Arms," *Army* (August, 2002), 40.

²⁶ William Steele, "Training and Developing Leaders in a Transforming Army," *Military Review* (September-October, 2001), 3, Haught, op.cit., 17.

²⁷ David C. Hill, "Junior Officer Institutional Leadership Education: Is the Basic Officer Leadership Course (BOLC) Meeting the Challenge?" (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 1 July 2008), 17.

²⁸ Robert P. Stavnes, "Is the Army's Current Force Management System Working?" (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 15 March 2008), 3.

²⁹ Anthony G. Wallace, *Future Directions In Leadership – Implications For The Selection And Development Of Senior Leaders*, Master's Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, March 2003, 67.