

The Talented Gamers

Part 3 – The Fatal Moral Pitfalls in the New System

Maj. Anthony M. Formica, U.S. Army

Bob: “And we are live in three, two, one, cue Casey.”

Casey: “Thanks Bob, and good evening everyone here at home and wherever you might be streaming from around the world and cyberspace! I’m your host Casey Raymond, and for those of you just tuning in, tonight we’re speaking with retired Army Colonel Jacques Russell, who has become well known over the past decade for his vociferous criticism of the current American defense establishment, especially the Department of Converged Forces. Col. Russell, it’s an honor to have you with us tonight, and may I also thank you for your service?”

Col. (R) Russell: “Sure.”

Casey: “Now, Col. Russell, I think it’s fair to say, you’re among the last of an increasingly spare breed ...

Col. (R) Russell: “You can take the fig leaf off. I’m the last of a dying breed.”

Casey: “Well, you look fit enough to me! But point taken. There are not many like you left: people who commissioned from West Point, fought in Iraq or Afghanistan ... somehow finagled an advanced degree in there. Actual warfighters with, if you’ll pardon the expression, ‘mud on their boots.’ To my knowledge, we don’t have anyone serving in the upper echelons of command today who graduated from one of the military academies. Is that right?”

Col. (R) Russell: “Well, we first cut the Air Force Academy back in 2029 ... and then Annapolis went away in 2031 ... West Point and all the ROTC programs ... what? Three years after that? It was all that congressman from New York, what was his name, Williams? I don’t remember, isn’t important. Point

is, we’re living in the year 2044 ... and we haven’t commissioned a single officer in ten years. And yeah, to answer your question, no, not a single person wearing stars in our current defense establishment is a product of what I’d call a reputable commissioning system.”

Casey: “Now, hold on there, don’t you think you’re being a bit unfair? After all, we might have done away with the academy system, but we still certainly commission people—”

Col. (R) Russell: “Based on something called knowledge, skills, attributes, yeah, I know. Don’t make the sales pitch to me, I’ve got it.”

Casey: “Right. Our defense establishment fans out across the entire civilian population who are interested in military service, finds the folks who have the right combination of knowledge, skills, attributes ... and then hires the right person for the right job at the right time. Sounds efficient to me.”

Maj. Anthony M. Formica, U.S. Army, serves as the 82nd Airborne Division’s Information Warfare Task Force. He holds a BS from the U.S. Military Academy and an MA from Yale University’s Jackson Institute for Global Affairs, which he obtained through the Downing Scholars Program. Formica deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom with 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, and in support of Operation Atlantic Resolve-North as a company commander with the 173rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team (Airborne). He has also served as an observer-controller at the Joint Readiness Training Center.

Col. (R) Russell: “There’s no disputing that since the advent of TPA, and in stark contrast to the Army I grew up in, America has, authoritatively, won the wars it has decided to undertake. But I attribute that to the technology we’ve leveled, not the people we’ve hired. And when you fight wars based on technological capability—when you conflate what you can do with what you should do—all you ultimately end up doing is building a time bomb.”

Casey: “Because warfare is more complex than a pipe leak?”

Col. (R) Russell: “That goes without saying. But warfare’s complexity is matched by that complexity’s fecundity. Wars have antecedents, and they establish precedents. The stuff that goes into making them is a combustible mixture of social pressures and political passions—and wars’ outcomes spur further social pressures and political passions. Countries don’t just

“Countries don’t just go to war because they can. Honor, fear, interest—these are the features, not the bugs, in human nature that lead to clashing armies.”

Casey: “Oh, I think you’re going to have to explain that one, colonel.”

Col. (R) Russell: “If you take a broad look at the conflicts fought between 1776 and today, and your focus is drawn to the march from rifled muskets to your smooth-bore artillery, to your airplanes and submarines and radar and nuclear warheads and SQL injects, warfare is quickly reduced to a soulless management problem for technicians. Skilled technicians, assuredly, but technicians, nonetheless.”

Casey: “And you see this as somehow problematic?”

Col. (R) Russell: “You don’t?”

Casey: “I must be honest, no, I don’t. I might not be appreciating the analogy you’re making, but to my way of thinking, warfare is a very complex problem in need of very smart minds to figure out a solution.”

Col. (R) Russell: “Technicians are trained to see an array of problems and reduce them down to a single solvable one. They are necessarily reductive in their thinking. They also, as a rule, are miserly; they want to accomplish the job with the minimal expenditure of resources. That’s a great business model for a plumber or a watchmaker; make the water flow and the gears turn, and don’t break the bank doing it. It’s a disastrous proposition around which to organize a military ... around which to organize any profession, really.”

go to war because they can. Honor, fear, interest—these are the features, not the bugs, in human nature that lead to clashing armies. There are far more variables of a far more intangible and nonlinear nature than the technicians—who so fetishize the ‘from rifled muskets to tanks’ paradigm—can account for.”

Casey: “All of that to say, a leaky pipe, to return to your plumber analogy, is a flash in the pan ... and, well let’s say, Vietnam, was not that? And that while a technician could fix a leaky water pipe ... they couldn’t fix Vietnam?”

Col. (R) Russell: “The results speak for themselves, especially in Vietnam or any of its asymmetric conflict siblings. Yes, to answer your question. Now, think about what this implies for the distinction between a plumber and a military professional, at least in the classic Huntingtonian definition.”

Casey: “Our viewers from last night might recall this, but for those just catching up, Col. Russell is referring to a mid-twentieth century political scientist named Samuel Huntington, who said that professions are ... and I’m paraphrasing here ... characterized by their members being stewards of an abstract body of knowledge, being motivated primarily out of a sense of obligation to society instead of monetary incentives, and who advance primarily through talent or merit rather than seniority.

“And if I’m following you, Col. Russell, you are saying that today’s military, or at least the Converged

Forces, are not professionals because they predominantly fight for financial incentives and because they solve discrete problems at a specific time?"

Col. (R) Russell: "That's largely correct. On paper, you've described how the Converged Forces are supposed to operate, and on paper, that is not the classic definition of a professional. It's the definition of a mercenary: get hired for a job, do the job, collect the bounty.

"But there's also a degree of insidiousness to the DCF's claims that they hire based on merit over seniority. If you look at their hiring records, what you see is the same handful of individuals constantly completing contracts and then immediately turning around to reapply for a new job back in the DCF. It sort of puts the lie to the notion of TPA, and you must console yourself with one of several conclusions.

"One, perhaps the DCF is not actually looking at the entire population when it's deciding which plumber to hire and is instead trying to mitigate risk by routinely rehiring known quantities; kids who have shown they can play video games better than the rest of us. Or, two, it might be the case that serving with the Converged Forces gives these repeat contractors a sense of fulfillment, of affirmation; they develop a taste for service and keep signing up for more. But if that were the case, the law of large numbers would still suggest that you wouldn't see anything near the rehire rate that we actually see today within the DCF: if the whole population truly were competing in the TPA marketplace for a specific, unique job at a specific, unique time, there's no mathematical way that a full 78 percent of your current commanders were also commanders within the last six months."

Casey: "Well, colonel, could it just be that the repeat hires are being rehired because of the experience they gain, because they have shown they can do the job well?"

Col. (R) Russell: "That sounds almost indistinguishable from hiring on the basis of seniority, not merit. Which, again, is a principle the DCF publicly and emphatically says it does not abide by, institutionally or algorithmically.

"Which leads me to conclusion the third, my own favorite: our rehires have figured out how to game the system. They have learned how to juice up the appearance of their knowledge, skills, and attributes on paper

... and they do so, liberally, whether for financial remuneration or personal affirmation."

Casey: "That's a heck of an allegation, but I'll play along. If that was the case, it suggests, to again defer to Huntington, that these individuals are motivated by something other than an abiding sense of societal obligation?"

Col. (R) Russell: "Bingo."

Casey: "Ok, that's fine, but—and I am not trying to be confrontational—I still don't actually see the problem. The Converged Forces have won this war; Gen. Smith said as much earlier today when she declared Chinese military forces in the Strait of Malacca completely destroyed. As she herself suggested last night, if you're winning the wars you've been asked to fight, are you not fundamentally fulfilling your obligation to society as a profession?"

Col. (R) Russell: "Only if you take the narrowest possible definition of societal obligation."

Casey: "I beg your pardon?"

Col. (R) Russell: "Let me pose it this way: do you know why West Point was a four-year college instead of something more akin to the Sandhurst model?"

Casey: "I have to admit that I do not."

Col. (R) Russell: "It was because its primary purpose, at least at its inception, was not to train professional military officers. It was to furbish our fledgling Nation with credentialed engineers, trained scientists, proficient surveyors. Jefferson's idealism, his fever dream for a nation of engaged, scientifically literate, productive citizens, imbued the very first granite slabs of the little engineering school on the Hudson with something more than their natural drab gray tint. West Point was, at its inception, designed to provide America with the skills it needed in the immediate moment, and the skills our forefathers anticipated they'd need in the decades ahead.

"The Academy's earliest years were, it must be admitted, intrinsically focused on the cultivation of technical skills. But at a certain point, largely coinciding with the advent of technologies that made wholesale human slaughter possible, we also decided to introduce a liberal arts curriculum to officer education: philosophy, political science, literature, history, fields with no direct practical application to the art of war. Someone must've gotten the bright idea that people preparing to wield force on behalf of a 'small-l' liberal democracy probably ought to have a common

conception of the small-l liberal values and ethics underpinning that democracy.

“I apply my West Point schema to my understanding of the grander identity and core functions of the military profession. Societal obligation was once considered a lifelong endeavor, going hand in hand with a lifetime of service and personal growth. It was, at any rate, something more than a fling of fancy to be diligently recorded on a resume.”

Casey: “It’s a compelling and beautiful vision you describe, colonel, but I’d be failing in my job if I didn’t push back on you at least a little bit. You’re describ-

thinking it’s still possible for us all to have shared ideals and aspirations, regardless of background. The military profession is not, should not, be in the business of taking in the nobility and setting them on high; it should instead aspire to take in the normal and ennoble them for the benefit of all of us.”

Casey: “By teaching them skills not directly related to winning wars?”

Col. (R) Russell: “By making them outgrow themselves. By investing in your people, not just financially but spiritually, down to the gears driving their souls—by taking kids who have never really experienced the

“ The military profession is not, should not, be in the business of taking in the nobility and setting them on high; it should instead aspire to take in the normal and ennoble them for the benefit of all of us. ”

ing a very privileged sort of individual, aren’t you? I mean, many of West Point’s earliest cadets came from the ranks of America’s wealthy and influential—the sort of families who could afford to send a son to study philosophy and ethics for four years and then dabble in war for five more. And, perhaps more to the point, wouldn’t you agree that the advent of the TPA system has remedied one of the largest enduring critiques of America’s military? Namely, that it was until only recently a boy’s club restricted to folks who checked the right blocks on gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity? Haven’t we fundamentally made our armed forces more diverse? Don’t you agree with the proposition that the military of a, as you call it, small-l liberal democracy should be reflective of the population it serves?”

Col. (R) Russell: “Again, only if you take the narrowest possible definition.”

Casey: “Of diversity?”

Col. (R) Russell: “No, of societal obligation. Yes, we have an obligation to look like the country we serve—but that obligation extends far beyond summary statistics. Another way of thinking about how we look like the society we serve is to gauge how well we reflect its highest ideals and aspirations—and I’ll admit to a certain degree of antiquatedness in

feeling of overcoming adversity, who have never really tasted success, and giving them their first real, visceral, sweat-soaked, muscle-aching, spirit-lifting taste of it. By turning children into adults. By generating citizens.

“The military’s obligation to society is so much more than just the simple fighting and winning of the Nation’s wars, and I’d posit that the day we made that despicable phrase our organizing principle was the day we started to drift into the abyss. The day we decided ‘Be All You Can Be’ was a less compelling slogan than ‘Warriors Wanted’ was the day we started going downhill.

“The regimentation of the profession of arms, the camaraderie, the crucible experience of overcoming the weakest in yourself ... these are absolute and unquantifiable goods that ultimately, years down the road, benefit our civil society. These benefits only compound over time: a kid who commanded a rifle company in my day had to learn to work with the human resources he was given, to grow and hammer and shape them into something wieldy. And to do that, he had to first acknowledge the fundamental decency and potential in his troopers, before, above, and beyond their raw intrinsic talent.

“What do we do today, by contrast? We find someone who checks the right boxes at the right time, hire

them for so many silver coins, and discard them when they finish fixing the plumbing. Then they go back out there, into our great teeming masses of atomized individuals more absorbed in their digital lives than their physical neighbors, and they're convinced of really only two things: One, that they're great. They were selected once, deemed valuable once, and so have a right to be valuable forever. Two, that their value is pretty much expressed solely in the cold logic of the marketplace—the understanding of which places them fundamentally in competition with the rest of their so-called fellow citizens and which fundamentally conditions them to avoid trusting in those fellow citizens.

“It is for these reasons, Casey, that I accuse the DCF of having abandoned pretty much every component of the professional ideal. They're raising an army of

narcissists, whose mantra seems to be ‘me, my aims, my victories, my supremacy.’ These are all that matter to our so-called modern ‘professionals’ in the Converged Forces. And narcissists will never care as much about defeating our collective enemies than they will about defeating their perceived personal ones.”

Casey: “I’m desperately trying to remember my Lasch, colonel; so many fascinating insights! However, we do need to take a quick break. When we come back, I will be asking Col. Russell for his thoughts on the merits of bioengineered, so-called super soldiers, and the ethical merits of breeding them from early age over selecting them from the available population; that glance you’re giving me, colonel, ensures this will be another great conversation! We’ll be back with that, right after this word from our sponsors.” ■