



The Specter of Military Writing

There is a specter overshadowing communication in the military—the specter of poor writing. Most military writing falls short of its intended goal of effective communication. One basic reason for the generally poor level of military writing is an overwhelming concern on the part of the military writer, reviewer, and reader for the form of the correspondence rather than its content.

Military writing employs a formulaic style. It is that simple. Generally, formulaic writing is poor writing. It is a lesser form of communication. The point of this discussion is not to bring out the dilemma of an organization that unknowingly encourages poor writing practices; rather, it is to contend that the current military style of writing has a detrimental effect on the professionalism of the officer corps. It is the nature of this less obvious degradation that is of concern.

Prior to considering how the shortcomings of the current military writing system affect its members, it would be beneficial to examine the concept of formulaic writing and be aware of at least two assumptions underlying this approach. The idea of formulaic writing is more than drafting a letter to be sent to several people in whom the organization has a common interest; more than devising an all-purpose form with appropriate blocks to be checked which correspond to all possible responses; it is the concept that there exists a “standardization” of words, phrases, and ideas, in addition to form, that is available and must be used in order to communicate clearly.

This system produces writing that is geared toward the common, more general comments that fall about an intended meaning rather than convey a specific, definitive thought. There is little doubt, however, that this form of writing has an advantage when one’s thoughts are not clearly formulated or the writer has little knowledge of the subject.

The assumptions underlying the formulaic style need to be considered. First is the idea that the form was the best available, and, second, that the condition that existed when the choice of form was selected has not significantly changed. While the first assumption may be accepted with mild trepidation, the second cries out to be questioned. Armed with this brief background of the concept of the formulaic style and inherent assumptions, let us continue.

A major result of the formulaic style is that it tends to perpetuate itself. Most organizations determine their mode of operation in major functional areas. Included in the communications mode of operation are guidelines stating what the organization considers good writing. The organization insures successful implementation of this mode of operation by rewarding desirable practices and punishing undesirable ones in this area. This gets the idea of adhering to the organization’s viewpoint across to all employees in a most effective manner; thus, each organization continues to perpetuate those practices it considers desirable.

The danger inherent in this practice is that it discourages change, even when needed, and, over a period of time, the system tends to perpetuate itself. If change does not occur when conditions warrant it, the organization and its members are not operating in the most efficient manner. At least since 1956 when I became associated with the military, this style of writing has prevailed; what, then, are the consequences on its members.

Contributions to the Reader Forum should be addressed to: Editor in Chief, Military Review, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas 66027.

The very nature of this style of writing lulls the users into poor writing habits. Once the writer learns the appropriate “standardized jargon” and the correct format, he has the key to “GOOD” military correspondence at least for that assignment. But in utilizing the key, he has forfeited the opportunity to fully develop his ability to express himself. The more this easier road is followed and the longer it is traveled, the greater is the writer’s loss.

A common example is the use of the term “outstanding.” Several years ago, this word had a reasonably definitive meaning; however, now in the military, it is an overused word that connotes, at best, all degrees of things that are good. Currently, it can be used in any situation to describe any degree of good. As a result, when it is used, the writer is granted the privilege of getting by without clearly expressing himself. In this manner, talent for good writing will quickly fade away through a lack of use.

Recent studies of the Army school system point out that the typical Army officer needs to improve his writing ability. In the Haines Board Study, this point was brought out by the comments of senior officers subjectively evaluating the writing ability of their subordinates. The same theme is illustrated in a more objective manner at Fort Leavenworth where the general writing ability of the incoming 1971-72 Command and General Staff College’s regular class was evaluated by means of a nationally recognized standard testing device. The results indicated that, even among the “above the Army average” CGSC officers, there is a recognized need for a significant portion of the class to improve their writing skill.

It is a fair contention that the officers that scored low on the CGSC writing evaluation are considered highly qualified by the Army to perform all normal duty assignments to include the associated writing. This is a strong indication that the current writing system in the Army does not demand or develop a high level of writing proficiency. From this same line of reasoning, it can be concluded that writing is not necessarily a significant part of the professional development of the Army officer. The specter of poor writing overshadows the military. There is strong evidence that military writing which emphasizes a formulaic style is responsible for development of bad writing habits, maintaining the writing status quo, and retarding a significant area in the

professional development of the officer corps. When one considers the scope and mission of the Army and the resulting impact of a lesser form of writing, there is no choice but to improve written communications.

MAJ David L. Pinson, USA

Strategic “Superiority”

Colin S. Gray (“Strategic ‘Superiority’ in Superpower Relations,” December 1971) has, I believe, got just about everything wrong.

His article is essentially a plea to the United States to accept in a gentlemanly fashion a permanent slippage in its defense capability or, to say it differently, to accept Soviet ascendancy.

Mr. Gray not only argues for a sophisticated appeasement of the USSR, but also for a blind refusal to consider Soviet aims in its buildup of strategic power.

He colors his polemic with emotional and biased statements about his opponents. For instance, anyone who attempts to make a case for strategic superiority is damned as a member of the “radical right” or a “more traditional” military thinker. He ridicules the idea that a Schlieffen plan of the nuclear age may be acceptable to some power. He cites the discredited (by operational research specialists) critic, Dr. Jerome B. Weisner. He harps on Kahn’s rung 44 as if it were the only possible scenario for a power with strategic superiority. And he calls plans for modern war “strategic theology.”

It is clear that Mr. Gray is not an objective analyst, but, rather, a partisan of a particular view. He cannot, for instance, find any reason for the drive by the Soviet Union for strategic superiority which might include damage to, or destruction of, the United States. He cannot bring himself even to consider the vast and repeated statements about the upsurge in the anti-imperialist movement by Soviet leaders.

Mr. Gray looks at the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) through Western liberal eyes and assigns Western arguments to Soviet leaders. Even then, however, he is unable to conceive that the Soviet leadership may view SALT as a means, certainly not an end, by which Soviet superiority—and Western inferiority—will be enhanced. SALT may thus prove to be “of enormous value” not to the stability of the strategic relations of the superpowers, but, rather, to the Soviet drive for augmented superiority.

READER FORUM

One must agree with Mr. Gray that we should all view Soviet arms buildups in terms of foreign policy capabilities. That is just what Mr. Gray fails to do.

He gives us an argument for looking at Soviet power and possible Soviet strategic superiority as if these were really desirable from the Western viewpoint. It is one thing to be forced into becoming a second-rate power. It is something else to clasp the concept to one's bosom and call it good.

As Secretary Laird, Admiral Moorer, and many others have stressed, if the current trend on both sides continues ... the time may not be far off when the Armed Forces of the United States may not be able to guarantee the security of this country. This is the situation that Mr. Gray asks us to view as improving strategic stability and as providing light and encouragement through parity.

The task of our military planners in providing minimum security in these times is difficult enough. If we were to follow Mr. Gray's advice, it would be impossible.

Walter Darnell Jacobs
College Park, Maryland

Irresistible Weapon

Major Theodore Vander Els ("The Irresistible Weapon," August 1971) has at long last vindicated the conclusions of the Drum and Baker Boards reports of the 1930's. He has proved that "autostrategic interdiction" (meaning, airstrikes on targets selected by air generals) achieved only "superficial results" in three wars. Thus, as these reports so sagaciously

predicted and subsequent wars proved, when air generals are given control of weapons and targets, they invariably place first emphasis on bomber aircraft which they then diddle around in behind the lines thinking to inflict "casualties and destruction" on the enemy when, in truth, all they accomplish is to "reap hatred abroad." Consequently, if we are not to "condemn ourselves to repeat [these] valuable lessons [sic]" of history, we must reshuffle Air Force priorities for war readiness.

Current Air Force belief that surprise attacks on America with nuclear-armed ballistic missiles and bomber aircraft constitute the primary threat and require retaliation in kind obviously perpetuates the myth of the "irresistible weapon." And since Major Vander Els has convinced us that "massive strategic interdiction" if it does come cannot "ever [be] a successful one" anyway, resolution of the problem is equally obvious.

What we should do is plan to simply absorb nuclear air attacks without offensive response, and, then, much later, when the enemy thinks us dead of explosion and radiation and tries to come ashore, destroy him on the beaches with the help of our world's finest tactical air force. This is the way the antiheavy bombardment officials visualized it in the 1930's, and if they, instead of Generals Marshall and Eisenhower, had got the chance they so clearly deserved to run things in World War II, our Air Force might have done a better job of it these many years hence.

Thomas A. Sturm
Office of Air Force History
Washington, D. C.

MILITARY REVIEW—Published monthly by the US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, in English, Spanish, and Portuguese. Use of funds for printing of this publication has been approved by Headquarters, Department of the Army, 24 May 1971.

Second-class postage paid at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Subscription rates: \$5.00 (US currency) a year in the United States and US military post offices; \$5.25 a year for those countries which are members of the Postal Union of the Americas and Spain; \$6.00 a year in all other countries; single copy price, 50 cents in the United States, and 60 cents in all foreign countries. Address subscription mail to Military Review Subscription Service, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas 66027.