

Strengthening the Backbone

Reexamining the Operational and Strategic Role of Today's NCO

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Why do noncommissioned officers (NCOs) have limited roles in the strategic and operational planning process? To answer this question, one must go back decades to Samuel Huntington's argument in his seminal work *The Soldier and the State*. He argued that officers were "managers of violence" while likening enlisted soldiers and NCOs to tradesmen, perpetuating a gap in opportunities between officers and enlisted soldiers that persists to this day.¹ Officers and NCOs are equally culpable on this issue. Most fellowships and broadening opportunities are open to officers; qualified NCOs are seldom considered. This preference for officers has also diminished the role of NCOs in civil-military relations, which may partially explain the growing civil-military gap and the American public's unfamiliarity with the role of the NCO. In addition, NCOs have not established a culture that values staff experience, which in turn contributes to the reluctance of some officers to consider NCOs as assistant managers of violence. This last point is especially acute on senior Army and joint staffs, as some NCOs may have billets on the staff but no description as to their specific role. Unfortunately, Huntington's relegation of NCOs to the tactical level of war is often a reality in the Army today.

The NCO corps has evolved into a profession capable of handling the management of violence. Officers' reluctance to accept NCOs as assistant managers of violence may also be the reason why NCOs have limited billets on strategic and operational staffs and limited broadening opportunities. This is problematic as it contributes to the growing gap between the tactical level of war and the operational and strategic levels. The expertise of senior NCOs, developed from decades of warfighting experience at the tactical level, is underutilized at both the operational and strategic levels. After all, tactical knowledge is an essential link to strategic and operational planning. NCOs should be recognized as assistant managers of violence to support a military strategy that is dependent on preparing and executing complex multidomain operations. The link between NCOs and officers at the operational and strategic levels can be strengthened by opening more broadening opportunities, creating additional billets on operational and strategic staffs, or, at the very least, providing specific expectations and descriptions of existing billets for NCOs. Furthermore, it is worth defining a role for NCOs in civil-military relations as this will contribute to bridging the gap between the NCO corps and the American public. Perhaps a clearer, more defined image



Senior enlisted advisor to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Ramón Colón-López dials in from the Pentagon to share his experience with staff NCOs of U.S. Space Command (USSPACECOM), NORAD/U.S. Northern Command, and other surrounding units during a senior enlisted advisors NCO development course on 27 May 2022 at USSPACECOM in Colorado Springs, Colorado. (Photo courtesy of Command Sgt. Maj. Edward A. Cummings, U.S. Army)

of the NCO corps and its role in the military will stimulate future recruitment of soldiers who aim to become professional NCOs. With a new, clearly defined role, we can replace the outdated Huntingtonian definition and change how roles and responsibilities are taught in officer and enlisted professional military education.

NCOs Are Professionals and Assistant Managers of Violence

In *The Soldier and the State*, Huntington argued that expertise, responsibility, and corporateness distinguished the officer corps as a profession with the management of violence as its central skill. He made a clear distinction between officers and enlisted personnel, describing the enlisted profession as a vocation and trade and thus specialists who were the applicators of violence.² Huntington's description of enlisted soldiers may have been valid in the Army of the post-World War II era as most drafted service members likely did

not have the same dedication and commitment as officers who chose to make the military their profession. As illustrated in *The American Enlisted Man*, Charles Moskos described the enlisted man during World War II as one who lacked commitment to the war effort and sought to wait the war out.³

Post-World War II, the NCO corps lacked the institutions and systems necessary to retain and improve on expertise built during the war. Although there were early versions of NCO professional development in the Army training program beginning in World War I, the modern professional and educational development of NCOs originated with the Noncommissioned Officer Education System in 1971.⁴

A facet of professionalism that was well established post-World War II was the corporateness of the NCO corps. The earning of stripes through evaluations, the traditions of the NCO corps, and even the bitterness that NCOs held against some officers were early



Sgt. Maj. Khalia Jackson, operations sergeant major, 74th Troop Command, works along side Col. R. Brian Deaton, chief of staff for the District of Columbia National Guard in Washington, D.C., during the sixtieth presidential inauguration on 19 January 2025. At the request of civil authorities, National Guard service members provide critical support such as crowd management, traffic control points, CBRN (chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear) response, civil disturbance response, and sustainment operations. Their expertise and collaboration with interagency partners helped ensure a safe and peaceful transition of power during this event. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Tyrone Williams, U.S. Army National Guard)

evidence of a uniform, corporate body.⁵ The establishment of a noncommissioned officer academy in 1966 allowed specially selected recruits to advance directly to their first unit as a sergeant and is further evidence of a selective system that reinforced the corporateness of the NCO corps.⁶

Today, the NCO corps takes professional responsibility over equipment, training, and leadership of its soldiers. For example, sergeants and staff sergeants in armored units are responsible for a few million dollars' worth of equipment as they sign for tanks, items associated with the tanks, weapons, optics, and other special equipment. Furthermore, senior NCOs

are more highly educated than in the past, with more than 59 percent of senior NCOs entering the U.S. Army Sergeants Majors Course in 2022 with a bachelor's degree or higher.⁷

Discussion

A possible explanation for why NCOs lack roles on strategic and operational staffs is that officers write and influence doctrine. Therefore, it comes as little surprise that responsibilities for planning at the strategic and operational levels are officer centric. NCOs are not included in planning strategic and operational missions because of a low number of billets for NCOs on strategic and operational level staffs, and they do not hold the pen that defines their role. At the operational and strategic levels, NCOs primarily serve in the signal, intelligence, and sustainment roles. NCOs are the collectors of data, executors of tasks, and internal trainers of the organizations and are seldom consulted prior to making decisions. Often NCOs stay within the comfort zones of their specialty or service rather than branching out to other areas. Many operational or maneuver NCOs are not afforded staff opportunities at the operational and strategic levels until they are selected for a senior

enlisted command position. Commanders have long trusted the counsel of their senior enlisted advisors, but staff primaries or directors at the operational and strategic levels do not have enlisted advisors due to a lack of billets. For example, of the approximately 1,200 military billets on the joint staff, there are approximately 150 NCO billets with only one official senior enlisted advisor billet. Directors do not have senior enlisted advisors to assist with developing policy.⁸

Furthermore, the exclusion of NCOs in most civil-military relations scholarship and in formal decision-making processes can be somewhat self-inflicted, as NCOs are often uncomfortable in articulating their thoughts at the strategic and operational levels due to a lack of experience and education in working above the tactical level of war. Much of this is attributed to the culture of the NCO corps in which there tends to be an aversion to staff assignments. NCOs make up just under 40 percent of active-duty service members and lack roles on strategic and operational staffs.⁹ There are limited broadening opportunities for NCOs, and those broadening opportunities such as staff positions are not highly regarded and possibly considered risky.

Current broadening opportunities for senior NCOs are insufficient in preparing them to advise commanders on strategic and operational decision-making. Out of fifteen broadening opportunities in the Army's FY24 Broadening Opportunity Program Catalog, only two broadening opportunities—the congressional and White House fellowships—are available to NCOs.¹⁰ Outside of the broadening opportunities in the catalog, NCOs are not considered for the Joint Chiefs of Staff internship. Additionally, NCOs have opportunities to teach academic courses and military science courses at service academies and ROTC programs but are not offered dedicated time and resources to pursue advanced degrees. NCOs

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have access to the Training with Industry program and have exclusive access to the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy (SGM-A) fellowship, which provides sergeants major the opportunity to earn a master's degree in education. As we see here, the only routes to earn graduate degrees through broadening programs are through the SGM-A fellowship and the congressional fellowship. Evident in this cursory analysis of opportunity programs is that NCOs do not have nearly the breadth and depth of opportunities as officers to broaden their thinking, pursue higher education, and adequately prepare for strategic and operational staff assignments.

There are potentially significant implications to military effectiveness and recruitment given a continuing absence of the role of NCOs in civil-military relations and in planning phases of strategic and operational level decision-making. First, an absence of the role of NCOs in the strategic and operational levels of war

may degrade military readiness and effectiveness. As the backbone of

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the military, the NCO corps is an essential link between the tactical level of war and the operational and strategic levels of war. Military readiness and effectiveness are enhanced through the harmony among the three levels of war. A scarcity of NCOs at the strategic and operational levels of war results in more disharmony between tacticians executing current operations and the strategic and operational staff planning future operations. In other words, without an increased presence of NCOs at the strategic and operational levels, strategies may fail due to a lack of understanding of tactical capabilities at the strategic and operational levels. Through their decades of service at the tactical level, senior NCOs are often the source of wisdom and common sense, which is invaluable to tactical operations but also necessary for the proper planning of strategic- and operational-level operations.

Secondly, the traditional role and identity of the NCO corps as selfless servants may partly account for a growing gap in civil-military relations. The gap between American society and the military exists partly because the very values that define the U.S. military—such as selflessness, discipline, and humility—are discordant with societal values such as individuality, liberty, and fame. A 2023 National Opinion Research Center–*Wall Street Journal* poll found that only 10 to 20 percent of survey respondents identified patriotism, community involvement, religion, and having children as very important compared to the 50 to 70 percent just twenty-five years earlier.¹¹ If this sample size included only veterans and military service members, we may see higher percentages valuing patriotism, community involvement, religion, and having children, further highlighting the gap between the military and society. There are fundamental differences in values between civilians and military service members that account for a gap in civil-military relations. This civil-military gap is acceptable as the values of the military, exemplified daily in the NCO corps, allow for the security and prosperity of the civilian population.

Policy Recommendations

To more fully recognize NCOs as professionals able to serve at the highest levels of command, the Army should consider several changes to current policies to address the need for a more educated NCO corps. This need is based on the increasing complexity

of the modern battlefield that requires senior leaders to have a broad knowledge on topics ranging from international relations to the impact of emerging technologies such as AI and robotics. Just as changes to federal policy and technology in the past necessitated adjustments to Army policy, so too should the Army of today adapt our force to meet the challenges of tomorrow. This begins with increasing opportunities for our senior NCOs.

The first change the Army should make is to create more cross talk between the Army's SGM-A and the Command and General Staff Officers Course at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Due to physical constraints on housing and space on Fort Leavenworth, it is likely not feasible, at least in the short term, to collocate the two schools. The ingrained history of the respective schools at their current locations also argues against moving either one. Instead, each school should modify its curriculum to highlight areas of cooperation between officers and NCOs during the military decision-making process and other planning processes. The schools could also exchange faculty for guest lectures to familiarize officers and NCOs with their counterparts' respective roles on the staff. This may help officers better understand how NCOs can contribute to staff planning while giving NCOs confidence to take a more prominent role in operations planning. These lectures could also take place virtually, possibly even pairing small groups at the SGM-A with those at the Command and General Staff Officer Course. Finally, as part of culminating exercises, each school could exchange a small cohort of leaders to take part in staff planning exercises that furnish additional opportunities for cooperation between officers and NCOs.

More cooperation between these two schools would help clarify the role of the NCO on the battle staff and prepare NCOs to contribute to planning efforts in operational and strategic staffs. It may also help change a culture that is averse to serving on staff, creating instead an NCO corps that views staff time as integral to long-term success in their careers rather than relegating it to the "officer lane." The desired effect of eliminating this stigma and demonstrating the worth of the NCO as an active participant in the planning process is to make the transition to more senior staff roles less of a culture shock, building the necessary confidence for more active involvement.



This process can begin in earnest at the SGM-A or even on battalion staff.

The second recommended change is opening all or most broadening opportunity programs to NCOs. This would positively impact the quality of our senior NCOs and prepare them to better serve as senior leaders within our military. If the Army expects NCOs to serve at the highest levels of command and staff, it should make them eligible for broadening assignments currently only available to officers. It is important to note this recommendation does not suggest reserving slots for NCOs but allowing qualified NCOs to apply. This change would open more fellowships and advanced educational opportunities to NCOs in the grades of E-7 and above. While there are many options for officer fellowships, those for NCOs are somewhat limited and do not include those that would enable them to effect strategy. While we acknowledge that officers making high-level decisions should be afforded the majority of fellowship opportunities, we argue that some of these billets should be opened to senior NCOs on track to impact national security decisions through service on senior staffs or in advisory roles to general officers.

Gen. Gary Brito (*left*), U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command commanding general, listens as Staff Sgt. Michael Jackson, an instructor with the Petroleum and Water Department, explains how he thinks the students benefit from using the Digital Training Enablers on 22 March 2024 at Fort Gregg-Adams, Virginia. (Photo by Ryan Sharp, U.S. Army Combined Arms Support Command)

Finally, the number of billets on strategic and operational staffs for NCOs should be increased and their roles on those staffs more clearly defined. Most members of operational and strategic-level staffs do not clearly understand the role of an NCO on the staff. While it is understood that officers drive the planning process, they also seek the advice of NCOs to test planning assumptions, analyze feasibility of the plan, and ensure that plans evolve into action. A limited role for NCOs on staff hinders the staff's overall effectiveness. Pairing staff primaries and directors with senior enlisted leaders may bridge the gap among the tactical, operational, and strategic levels and further develop senior enlisted leaders who are better prepared to advise combatant commanders and chiefs of staff. In

conjunction with the educational opportunities, we argue that creating more billets on these staffs would provide valuable insight from NCOs that may be lacking at the upper echelons of strategic planning.

Many of the changes to policy suggested here will be moot, however, without also incentivizing NCOs to pursue these opportunities. This involves considering how time spent on staff as an E-7 or E-8 can contribute to promotion and opportunities for advancement. The goal is to see service on tactical staff as desirable and impactful, making later transition to operational and strategic staff easier. It also involves marketing these opportunities so that enlisted leaders who are interested in planning and strategic thinking can take advantage of staff experiences at the earliest possible time in their careers. This is also an issue among the officer corps and may be more pronounced among NCOs as staff assignments are usually considered less relevant to their careers. This fact speaks to the culture within the enlisted ranks and their view of serving on staff at any level. Like junior officers, there is an understandable desire among NCOs to remain in direct leadership roles of soldiers. The goal of these policy recommendations is not to dissuade NCOs from serving as senior enlisted advisers at the tactical level but to encourage long-term contributions of the “Army’s backbone” to the defense of the Nation.

Conclusion

In a session of the House Armed Services Committee, Michael Grinston, the former sergeant major of the Army, stated that one of the reasons many young Americans were dissuaded from service was that they did not want to “put their life on hold” while serving as enlisted members of the military.¹² This highlights the difference in opportunities afforded to officers and NCOs in the military. We are not suggesting that there needs to be parity in opportunities. Rather, we argue that given the complexities of warfare and civil-military relations today, NCOs should be afforded more educational and broadening opportunities to better prepare them to be senior enlisted advisers in multidomain operations.

Finally, practitioners and scholars should pay special attention to the role of senior NCOs at the operational and strategic levels. How can they better serve on operational and strategic staffs and advise commanders in multidomain operations? Do senior NCOs play a role in civil-military relations and, if so, how can they contribute to bridging the gap between civilians and service members? Perhaps a renewed focus on the NCO corps may provide growth to the backbone of the armed forces that is necessary to prepare for the future ahead. ■

Notes

1. Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1957), 14–15.

2. Ibid., 15.

3. Charles C. Moskos Jr., *The American Enlisted Man: The Rank and File in Today's Military* (Russell Sage Foundation, 1970), 4–5, <https://www.russellsage.org/sites/default/files/American-Enlisted-Man.pdf>.

4. David S. Davenport Sr., “Where the NCO Professional Development System Began,” Army.mil, 27 February 2017, https://www.army.mil/article/182534/where_the_nco_professional_development_system_began.

5. Moskos, *The American Enlisted Man*, 5, 14.

6. Ibid., 59–60.

7. Noncommissioned Officers Leadership Center of Excellence, “Student Demographics,” email message to authors, 7 November 2023.

8. Based on one of the author's experience and internal personnel structure of the Joint Staff.

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10. “Broadening Opportunity Programs FY24 Catalog,” U.S. Army Human Resources Command, last modified 23 March 2023, <https://www.hrc.army.mil/asset/21563>.

11. Aaron Zitner, “American Pulls Back from Values That Once Defined It, WSJ-NORC Poll Finds,” *Wall Street Journal*, 27 March 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/americans-pull-back-from-values-that-once-defined-u-s-wsj-norc-poll-finds-df8534cd>.

12. *Senior Enlisted Leader Perspective: Hearing Before the Military Personnel Subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee*, 118th Cong. 1 (2023) (statement of Sgt. Maj. Michael Grinston, Sergeant Major of the Army), <http://armedservices.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/republicans-armedservices.house.gov/files/Grinston%20Testimony.pdf>.



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