



Growing Military Professionalism Across Generations

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PHOTO: U.S. soldiers on a search-and-destroy patrol in Phuoc Tuy province, South Vietnam, June 1966. (U.S. Army)

THE ARMY'S EXPERT knowledge can be broadly categorized into four capacities: military-technical, moral-ethical, political-cultural, and human development. Of the four, the human development capacity sets the Army apart as a profession. As officers enter, develop, lead, and eventually retire, they have a profound impact on the institution as a cohort. This impact stems from generational influences on the organization and its leadership. This article examines how generational differences help and hamper the human development capacity that the Army must have to socialize, train, educate, and develop the Army officer corps to be good stewards of the profession.

Three generations of current Army leaders coexist at any given moment, bringing with them different formative experiences and views on professionalism. The procession of these three groups of people will profoundly shape the operation and legacy of the institution long after their respective tenures. The manner in which each group of leaders shapes the Army will have much to do with their own formative experiences rising through the ranks. In the halls of the Pentagon today, these generations are called, "Gulf War Generals, Bosnia/Kosovo Colonels, and Iraq/Afghanistan Captains and Majors." A closer look at these three populations reveals much about the formative experiences that shaped their professional view:

Boomers. Born between 1946 and 1964, this group of around 77.3 million individuals came of age during a period of significant social and political transition.¹ The generation itself straddles two distinctly different periods: the 1950s, when society was still deeply rooted in traditional values of stability and responsibility, and the 1960s and 1970s, a time of significant social and political turmoil in our society. From the Civil Rights Movement to the Vietnam War, this generation witnessed and experienced the effects of the rebellious counterculture lashing back at authority. Within the officer corps, the Boomers make up most of the senior general officers, with the youngest of this generation reaching 30 years of service by 2012. While the oldest

members of this cohort were commissioned during the Vietnam era, most of the Boomers' careers as officers started in the 1980s at the beginning of the Reagan administration's new military build-up. They experienced the post-Vietnam professionalization of the Army with large investments in new technology and equipment. As lieutenants and captains, they trained and prepared for the Soviet invasion through the Fulda Gap, only to see their adversary collapse without a shot fired. Instead of the Soviet armored columns, this generation of officers fought in the desert against Saddam Hussein during the Persian Gulf War as senior captains and majors. Their careers continued as lieutenant colonels and colonels with some of the older members promoted to the general officer ranks during the periods of operations in Somalia and Kosovo and before 9/11.

Generation X. Born between 1965 and 1980, this group of 46 million individuals is sometimes known as the "MTV generation."² While the Boomer generation came of age during a period

of dramatic social change, Generation X came of age during a time of dramatic technological change. New innovations in technology such as faxes, copiers, and computers fundamentally changed the way people lived and worked. Within the officer corps, Generation X currently makes up most of the field grade officers with some of the older members starting to become general officers. Mostly commissioned after the Cold War, the Persian Gulf War was the first testing ground for some of the older members while "Military Operations Other Than War" (MOOTW) became the norm, somewhat reluctantly, for the younger ones. Unlike the Boomers and other generations, this population of officers did not share a common experience of war in the traditional sense of having a monolithic adversary. While experiencing an increase in operational tempo, they were engaged in variety of peacekeeping, peace enforcement, and humanitarian missions. This changed after 9/11 when this generation of officers provided the bulk of tactical leaders in Afghanistan and Iraq. Almost



U.S. Army

Military personnel examine a Scud missile shot down during Operation Desert Storm by a Patriot tactical air defense missile, 26 May 1992.

all have served multiple combat tours by the time they reached the rank of field grade officer.

Generation Y. Also known as “Echo Boomers,” “Millennials,” and “Generation Next,” this group of individuals were born between 1980 and 1994. Most are just beginning to enter the work force. At approximately 76 million, they constitute one of the largest generations since the “Greatest Generation” of World War II.³ Whereas the previous two generations were digital newcomers who had to learn and adapt in the information age, the Millennials are digital natives. They do not remember a time without computers, the Internet, cable TV, and cell phones. For the Millennials, multitasking is the norm and they feel perfectly comfortable simultaneously watching YouTube, reading an email, chatting on instant messenger, and updating a Facebook status, all while listening to music on an iPod. Most do not remember a world before 9/11 when people did not have to take their shoes off before boarding a plane. Most Millennials joined the Army at war and have little concept of a peace-time Army. Making up almost the entire

population of lieutenants and captains, Millennials bear the brunt of the tactical fight in Iraq and Afghanistan. They do not understand when older generation officers talk about a “normal” rotation through the national training centers. For the Millennials, counterinsurgency and counterterrorism are the norm. Generation Y officers are highly tactically competent, battle-hardened, and confident in their ability to conduct operations independently of higher level command and control. Because of this, they are understandably “irreverent” to hierarchical command and control. They are tactically talented as battlists but often immature in their understanding of and appreciation for the operational and strategic level.

One difference between the Boomers and Generation Y is highlighted above—the degree of autonomy that each generation is comfortable with. Boomers grew up in an Army where the platoons and companies often moved with the brigades and divisions as a whole. Generation Y is comfortable working autonomously even apart from their own battalions; they see that as the



SGT Edward Westfield from Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment, U.S. Army Europe, leads his fire team back to base after a dismounted patrol mission near Forward Operating Base Baylough in Zabul Province, Afghanistan, 20 March 2009.



CSM Anthony Mahoney, U.S. Corps of Cadets Sergeant Major, talks with the cadets about responsibilities of the NCO, Camp Buckner, NY, 1 July 2009.

norm. As a result, Generation Y feels even more “distanced” from the senior leadership than previous generations.

Transitions. One’s generational perspective profoundly influences future decision making and leadership style. The promotion from company grade officer to field grade officer is one of the more difficult transitions one must make during an Army officer’s professional career. Some never quite make the transition and continue to operate with perspectives stuck at the tactical level. The Army’s promotion and command selection system reinforces this behavior by (over) relying on tactical performance as key indicators for strategic potential. It should not be surprising then, that field grade officers look back and rely on their tactical experiences, consciously or subconsciously, to help them analyze new situations. This world view, formed early in the career progression, provides professional perspective on different courses of action. As such, while difficult—and in some cases counterproductive—to label individual officers based on their generational background, understanding the formative milestones for these different populations can help us better understand aggregate behavior and interactions among the various levels of the officer corps.

In the face of the coexistence of these three vastly different generations under the aegis of the “current Army leadership,” how do we communicate and

develop a single contemporary professional ethos? As an organization, the Army must maximize the transmission of each cohort’s expertise among the other generations. For example, the senior leadership brings years of experience that it must relay in a top-down fashion to the younger cohorts, while the junior leadership brings knowledge of the current fighting force that is of use to its superiors. How is this knowledge best communicated as a means of shaping the current and future Army profession?

The Importance of Teaching, Learning, and Mentorship

Dialogue and discourse among the generations are the keys to shaping a cohesive professional ethos within the Army. Generally speaking, institutions must allow for generations to teach and learn from each other in formal and informal settings. Moreover, this teaching and learning must occur from the top down, the bottom up, and from peer to peer.

These relationships and communication styles must take on a *mentorship*, as opposed to *coaching*, model. Coaching involves the passing of knowledge from previous generations to the next under the assumption of a stagnant environment in which there exists a known and finite answer that can be imparted to the next generation. Such coaching is usually undertaken by those no longer in the profession. In contrast, mentorship involves the distillation of an approach to incorporating knowledge and cultivating a way of thinking as one adapts to a changing environment. Here, there is no known or finite answer, but there is a right way to think about problem solving and the cultivation of ethics to shape behavior. Such mentorship is usually undertaken by active but senior players in the profession.

Case Studies of Interwar Periods

To emphasize the importance of mentorship and dialogue across and within coexisting generations, we present short examinations of the key advances in the cultivation of Army professionalism during three interwar periods. Interwar periods allow time for self-reflection and collection of lessons learned from the most recent conflict. Interestingly, leaders cannot obtain an adequate assessment of these lessons unless there is communication between and among the different generations of officers—fighting forces

on the battlefield, midlevel officers commanding on the ground, and key leaders strategizing from a certain distance. These vignettes highlight what we can learn about the importance of teaching, mentorship, and dialogue in the cultivation of the professional ethos from each of these formative periods.

Post-World War I to World War II. Budget cuts made the Army a hollow shell throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The National Defense Act of 1920 authorized a force of 18,000 officers and 280,000 men, but the actual strength of the Army was less than half this number. It was common for a rifle company to have only seven or eight men available for duty. In 1932 the chief of staff, Douglas MacArthur, reported that both Belgium and Portugal had larger armies than the United States.⁴ Forced to do more with less, the officer corps renewed its focus on professionalism, building on the reforms of Secretary Elihu Root in the days following the Spanish-American War. Mentorship from above played a key role in officer development. Junior and mid-level officers, many of whom were veterans of the recent conflict,

were encouraged to research and publish articles in military journals, which flourished during this time. In two famous examples, both George Patton and Dwight Eisenhower were encouraged by Brigadier General Fox Conner to publish articles in the *Infantry Journal* in 1920.⁵

The War Plans Division of the General Staff undertook a review of the Army's officer education system, based on input from Newton Baker, the Secretary of War. Reflecting on the American experience in World War I, Secretary Baker wanted officers for the General Staff who possessed a "broader knowledge, not only of their purely military duties, but also a full comprehension of all agencies, governmental as well as industrial, necessarily involved in a nation at war."⁶ At every level, officers were encouraged to question basic assumptions and develop critical thinking skills through the Army's educational institutions. During this time, at the U.S. Military Academy, under the leadership of Herman Beukema—a professor of economics, government, and history—cadets began to study international relations for the first time, using a comparative methodology.⁷



Ceremony at Camp Murphy, Rizal, marking the induction of the Philippine Army Air Corps. Behind LTG Douglas MacArthur, from left to right, are LTC Richard K. Sutherland, COL Harold H. George, LTC William F. Marquat, and MAJ LeGrande A. Diller, 15 August 1941.

The Army War College was separated from the General Staff and two schools for junior officers were reestablished at Fort Leavenworth. All three schools emphasized the need for effective staff planning to collaboratively solve a hypothetical military problem, culminating in a war game exercise. Not all officers were prepared for such a curriculum. Of the 78 officers in the Army War College class of 1920, 10 did not complete the course and did not receive credit for their attendance. Three others completed the course but were not recommended for either command or duties on the General Staff.⁸

During this interwar period, budget constraints and the organization of the Army's institutions provided a space for the different generations in the officer corps to teach and learn from each other in both formal and informal settings. The mentorship approach, which is distinctly different from a coaching communication style, facilitated and reinforced bonds of camaraderie and trust that would establish a cadre of professional officers as World War II began.

Post-Vietnam through the Gulf War. The period immediately following the Vietnam War was a tumultuous time for not only the U.S. Army but also the entire Nation. Racial tension, rampant drug use, and growing disillusionment of the political system following high profile assassinations and political scandals, all served to undermine the institutional foundation of our society. It was during this turbulent and chaotic time that the Army shifted to an "all volunteer force" (AVF). This began a series of reforms within the U.S. Army that significantly altered the future of the force and necessitated a reliance on mentorship and education of its ranks.

Increasing reliance on women to fill the ranks of the AVF became an emerging trend resulting from the end of the draft on 1 July 1973.⁹ The initial recruits in the AVF failed to meet expectations in quality and quantity, with a record number

of category IV recruits (the lowest category of enlistment on the Armed Forces Qualification Test). Integrating women into the ranks brought in highly qualified recruits, most with high school diplomas. Women made up for the shortages in qualified male recruits.¹⁰

Despite the best efforts of the Army, the 1970s became known as the lost decade. An internal report by BDM Corporation for the Pentagon stated in 1973 that the Army was "close to losing its pride, heart, and soul and therefore [its] combat effectiveness."¹¹ In 1979, General Shy Meyer, Chief of Staff of the Army, informed President Carter, "Mr. President, basically what we have is a hollow Army," as he had neither the divisions nor the lift capability to reinforce U.S. forces in Europe in case of a Soviet attack.¹² Only four of the ten active divisions in the U.S. were capable of deploying overseas in an emergency, and the force was plagued by chronic drug and alcohol abuse as the number of recruits with a high school diploma fell to its lowest point since transitioning away from the draft.¹³

The impact of this stress on the force in this transition period opened lines of communication between midlevel officers and their superiors. With their recent combat experiences fresh in their minds, midcareer officers became increasingly vocal in expressing their dissatisfaction with senior Army leaders and the bureaucracy. Some of this feedback made its way to a select number of senior officers who saw the need for extensive reforms and were willing to listen to the suggestions of their subordinates. One such officer was General William DePuy, who oversaw a drastic reorganization of the Army in which the Continental Army Command was divided into Forces Command and Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC). Breaking TRADOC away into a more independent center for learning and development allowed it to flourish. New doctrine and radical new ideas on training emerged including

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the development of National Training Centers that incorporated realistic war games using high-tech training aids like MILES (Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement System). This was a drastic departure from the traditional training model of ranges and classroom instructions.

Leaders also reacted to changes in the Army by creating new loci for study and reflection and by trying to reshape the identity of the youngest members of the force. Key leaders were empowered by the chief of staff of the Army to spearhead the effort to reinvigorate the study on leadership and professionalism. One was Lieutenant General Walter Ulmer, who risked his career with a scathing rebuke of the Army in *Study on Military Professionalism*. To boost the number of quality recruits joining the Army under the AVF, General Max Thurman better aligned recruiting strategies and tactics with the motivations and interests of younger generations with a new marketing message, “Be All You Can Be.”¹⁴ These leaders acted as champions for new and progressive ideas emerging within the ranks. They invested time and energy in listening and building upon the advice of their subordinates and, in some cases, risked their careers to shift the culture of the Army profession. Ultimately, they were successful in establishing a new framework from which to remake the Army, and they paved the way for younger generations.

Post-Gulf War to 9/11. On 28 February 1991, coalition forces led by the U.S. defeated Saddam Hussein and the world’s fifth largest Army in just 100 hours after the start of the ground invasion.¹⁵ In many ways, it validated the strategic shift and the investments made over the previous two decades. Doctrine, training, equipment, personnel, and leadership all came together to signify the rebirth of the U.S. Army from the shadows of the Vietnam War. The stunning success reinforced the traditional view of war as conventional threats requiring advanced technology and overwhelming use of force. Development of unconventional capabilities to meet asymmetric threats was largely marginalized even as the Army deployed on an increasing number of MOOTW missions.

The domestic political landscape in the immediate aftermath of the first Gulf War was challenging and reflected the typical American postwar reaction—a dramatic downsizing of the force in



(U.S. Army)

General Maxwell R. Thurman.

expectation of a cost-saving peace dividend that could be applied to pressing domestic needs as the economy emerged from recession. Indeed, given the overwhelming military success, America’s leaders and citizens considered the armed forces to be overly capable for the perceived future security environment.

The absence of any clearly recognizable threat during this period of time encouraged the perception that it was prudent to reduce the armed forces. Thus, budget constraints forced the military to balance its efforts between maintaining readiness and fielding new capabilities to deal with the growing array of unknown, but suspected, threats. These conditions compelled the Army to man, equip, and train a military force capable of providing for the common defense, but “on the cheap” and in a traditional mechanized force-design fashion.

During this interwar period, the Boomer generation served as field grade officers and members of Generation X served as platoon leaders and company commanders. Training, education, and mentoring was robust, with most units conducting Officer Professional Development and Non-Commissioned

Officer Professional Development sessions on a regular basis. Almost all of this training, however, was within the context of the success the Army enjoyed in Operation Desert Storm. As units increasingly became involved in MOOTW, the prevailing mentality continued to view these operations as a sideshow to the main event, a major regional war.

The Road Ahead

A review of Army introspection during three key interwar periods highlights the necessity of education and intergenerational communication as the military reacts to an ever-changing landscape.

Moreover, the vignettes emphasize the importance of focusing teaching, training, and mentorship on the internal dynamics of the institution, especially concerning the creation and maintenance of a professional organization.

The Army will enter another transformative interwar period as we approach the end of operations in Afghanistan. The generational gap in this period will be exacerbated by post-9/11 conditions of new enemies, new battlespaces, and new kinds of wars. It will also be affected by the force redesigns of “Army Transformation” and the shift from the Army of Excellence airland-battle designs, premised on the division as the basic warfighting unit, to the “modular force,” where “plug-and-play” is the operational and organizational metaphor, and the brigade combat team is the new baseline warfighting unit. Clear from the case studies above is that every generation of junior officers has a sense of disconnect from the older generation, a feeling that their elders “don’t get it.” Communication, education, and mentorship go a long way toward ameliorating this sense of disconnect. However, the generational gap is more stark today than it has ever been. The Army must create a climate of communication across its three generations of leaders

to develop an officer corps that will lead the “next Army,” leveraging the expertise and experiences of each of these cohorts.

As important as the method of dialogue across and within the generations of leaders coexisting within the Army at any given moment is the substance of those discussions. As such, we conclude this article with six key topics and underlying questions that can help inform contemporary and future consideration in the development of the professional Army officer:

- The Soldier and the Policy Process. What does it mean to be a military professional in the 21st century? How do we instill a notion of professionalism in the current and future officer corps? How can the military officer provide policy advice borne out of expertise while maintaining partisan neutrality and avoiding partisan policy advocacy?
- The Soldier and the Military-Industrial-Congressional Complex. Does the nature of military professionalism change in war versus peacetime and how does perpetual war affect this dynamic? What are the consequences on national security policy of either the obsolescence of military professionalism or eroding objective control?
- The Soldier and the Strategy-Making Process. How does the changing threat environment impact the strategy-making process? Does the military have the necessary jurisdiction, legitimacy, and the expertise to fulfill our professional obligation to our nation in respect to “new frontiers,” for example, cyber security?
- The Soldier and the Political Campaign. What is the proper balance between the professional soldier and the active citizen as embodied by the citizen soldier? Should military professionals abstain from voting in elections determining their commander-in-chief? What are the effects of the contemporary coexistence of the perpetual campaign and the perpetual war?

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- The Soldier and the Military-Media Complex. What is the role of the media in shaping perceptions of the military in the policy process and of military professionalism? What challenges do contemporary war and military coverage pose to the state-soldier relationship? How can we balance the media's natural inclination toward openness with the military's often necessary desire for the secrecy and security of information?
- The Soldier and Society. What are the effects of changing military demographics on the military's

relationship with and integration into American society? How does the military adapt to changing social mores and how does this influence the military's role in the policy process and in society at large?

Dialogue and debate among the three generations of leaders concerning the proper role and function of the professional military officer within these six areas will help allow for the Army to adapt to a changing world while not losing its core mission and respected place within the republic. **MR**

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NOTES

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