



# Lost in Transmission

## *How the Army has Garbled the Message about the Nature of Its Profession*

First Lieutenant Anthony M. Formica, U.S. Army

**J**OURNALIST SEBASTIAN JUNGER'S 2010 book, *War*, chronicles the time he spent in 2007 and 2008 with a company in the 173rd Airborne Brigade in eastern Afghanistan in a self-described effort to "convey what soldiers experience" in combat. Even with such a seemingly straightforward objective in mind, Junger inadvertently set off a debate about the Army's concept of professionalism. Both officers and enlisted personnel found something to argue about in Junger's work: either the soldiers Junger depicted were not professional at all, they said, or they were professional only where and when it mattered. The book either demonstrates that Army professionalism is an obsolete art, or it shows the consequences of the Army allowing it to atrophy. (The film *Restrepo* is a two-hour documentary covering the same subject material and roughly the same themes as the book.)<sup>1</sup>

The vocabulary used and the arguments made in the debate are often ill-conceived and confused. Professionalism usually seems to mean little more than well-kept haircuts, shaved faces, bloused boots, and saying "sir" at the end of every sentence addressed to an officer or "sergeant" at the end of every sentence addressed to an NCO. The word "professionalism" is generally synonymous with "irrelevant." That, at any rate, is the dialectic in Junger's book, in which "soldiers make a distinction between the petty tyrannies of garrison life and the very real ordeals of combat. . . poor garrison soldiers like to think it's impossible to be good at both."<sup>2</sup> Scant consideration is given in *War* or *Restrepo* to the profession of arms being anything other than ground combat, and the dichotomy between the garrison soldiers and soldiers in the field says something about how the Army has come to view its own professionalism. Junger's book has brought a murky problem into very sharp focus. The Army has poorly managed the message of what it means to be a member of the profession of arms, and its clientele, American society, subsequently misinterpreted the message; consequently, the identity of the institution as a profession has been degraded.

### **Soldiers versus Warriors**

Being in the profession of arms entails more than simply conducting the business of ground combat. This being the case, a working definition of the word *profession* is required, and we need to apply it to the Army as an institution to understand how the Army fits into the cognitive framework of a profession.

First Lieutenant Anthony M. Formica currently serves as the public affairs officer for 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry Regiment, 1/25 Stryker Brigade Combat Team. Previously he was responsible for training the Afghan National Police in Dand District, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan. He holds a B.S. from the United States Military Academy, West Point.

PHOTO: A U.S. Army soldier from 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team, halts for security in the Kunar province of Afghanistan, 20 March 2008. (U.S. Army, SSG Tyffani L. Davis)

The theory of the U.S. Army professional originated in Samuel Huntington's *The Soldier and the State*. Huntington provided an early, prolific definition of the term profession, defining it as "a peculiar type of functional group with highly specialized characteristics."<sup>3</sup> Professions are distinct from other vocations by virtue of their intrinsic characteristics of expertise, responsibility, and corporateness.<sup>4</sup> Notably, Huntington highlights that education is essential in fostering expertise: "professional knowledge has a history, and some knowledge of that history is essential to professional competence." The fact that society is the primary client and responsibility of every profession implies that obligation and duty reign supreme over monetary reward in a professional's motivations. It also implies the importance of "a sense of organic unity and consciousness [among members of a profession] as a group apart from laymen."<sup>5</sup>

Three of Huntington's observations on the Army as a profession are relevant here:

- First, the military meets the professional requirement of expertise by having skill in the "management of violence."<sup>6</sup> Huntington emphasizes that the management of violence is "neither a craft (which is primarily mechanical) nor an art (which requires unique and nontransferable talent)," but rather "an extraordinarily complex intellectual skill requiring comprehensive study and training."<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the military professional's skill revolves around "the management of violence not the act of violence itself."<sup>8</sup> True military professionals are something more than warriors. They are distinguished not so much for their skill in wielding swords as for their skill in equipping, training, and leading sword-wielding warriors in combat.

- Second, the professional's motivation consists of "a technical love for [his] craft and the sense of social obligation to utilize this craft for the benefit of society."<sup>9</sup> The military professional "is not a mercenary who transfers his services wherever they are best rewarded, nor is he the

temporary citizen-soldier inspired by intense momentary patriotism and duty but with no steady and permanent desire to perfect himself in the management of violence."<sup>10</sup> Military service matters more to the professional for its nonmaterial benefits than for its limited paychecks.

- Third, the professional military is an exclusive and relatively tightly policed corporate body, entrance into which is permitted only after acquiring "the requisite education and training and is usually permitted only at the lowest level of professional competence."<sup>11</sup> Military professionals are "permitted to perform certain types of duties and functions by virtue of . . . rank; [they do] not receive rank because [they have] been assigned to an office."<sup>12</sup> Essentially, professionals earn their status within the military, and maintain and increase it only through continued professional experience and demonstrated competence.

Huntington viewed only officers as true military professionals. As far as he was concerned, enlisted personnel were distinct from officers because they only received technical training, not intellectual training, and only had to obey their superiors in the service while the officers had a professional responsibility to society. While that was probably true in the pre-Vietnam Army of which Huntington wrote and with which he was familiar, such distinctions are no longer accurate in an Army that invests tremendous time and resources in developing "strategic" noncommissioned officers. Throughout this article, the term *professional* refers to a service member possessing Huntington's requisite expertise, responsibility, and corporateness, as either an officer or an NCO.

A second crucial work for understanding the nature of the profession of arms is Andrew Abbot's *The System of Professions*, which examines how various professions relate to and compete with each other. Abbot says the "link between a profession and its work" is its jurisdiction. Because all professions essentially serve the same client—society—their

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(U.S. Army, SGT Angelica G. Gollindano)

**LTG Robert Caslen, Jr., the former commander of the Combined Arms Center and Fort Leavenworth, was the principal speaker for the Institute of Land Warfare panel discussion on the Army as a profession of arms at the 2010 Association of the U.S. Army Convention in Washington, DC, 26 October 2010.**

jurisdictions overlap and create friction points.<sup>13</sup> While professions try to establish jurisdictional supremacy for a “heartland of work over which [they have] complete, legally established control,” in practice this is impossible. As a result, power-sharing and responsibility-sharing arrangements come into being through bargaining at the highest echelons of the competing professions.<sup>14</sup> Because civilians ultimately determine the jurisdictional boundaries for the Army as a profession, it is vital that Army leaders capably and honestly represent the service at negotiations that determine those boundaries.<sup>15</sup>

In such negotiations, the Army significantly contributes to the process that decides whether Stryker vehicle maintenance will be the primary responsibility of the Army or contracted out to foreign civilians, whether the training of future officers will be handled exclusively by active-duty members of the officer corps or shared with contracted former service members, or whether the Army will take primary responsibility for training Afghan National Security Forces or relinquish this task to civilian agencies.

The above examples are all questions of professional jurisdiction, and the short-term settlements that strategic leaders reach in answering them affect the Army’s long-term professional identity by sending cues to service members as to their proper roles and to American society as to how the Army views itself and its relationship to society. The bargaining process thus becomes a vehicle for communicating the Army’s view on its reason for existing. That *raison d’être* in the last decade has been widely described as emphasizing ground combat, the warrior role—at the expense of the service’s professional identity. While retaining autonomy in ground combat in its jurisdictional negotiations with other professions, the Army has allowed its expertise, responsibility, and corporateness to atrophy. As an institution, the Army has essentially relayed the message that it prizes warriors over soldiers, and that if it could rid itself of the burdens associated with professional soldiering to better pursue the samurai ideal, it would do so, thereby abandoning professionally critical jurisdictional ground.

## The Flagging Expertise of the Experts

The Army is signaling that it does not consider the generation and application of abstract knowledge to be its responsibility. While the service has generally prevailed in maintaining a jurisdictional monopoly on ground combat, this in and of itself does not constitute professional expertise so much as represent technical competence. As Lloyd J. Matthews points out, most of the prominent defense experts within American society are not actually uniformed military but a menagerie of retirees, journalists, think tankers, and contractors affiliated with the larger defense community.<sup>16</sup> The range of responsibilities and activities that these groups now cover in territory that could justifiably be called the Army's intellectual jurisdiction spans an impressive gamut that runs from the mundane, such as preparing and conducting surveys and analyses, to the downright alarming, such as writing doctrine and designing war games.<sup>17</sup> Civilian academics are increasingly receiving accreditation in studies related to national defense, and because they tend to be "better writers than military officers, more motivated to write, better educated, closer to research facilities, and blessed with more time to devote to intellectual inquiry," they are dominating both the direction and scope of national debates on defense policy—despite their general acute lack of military service.<sup>18</sup>

These manifestations of abstract knowledge in actual practice are the intellectual activities that ought to be primarily, if not exclusively, the realm of the Army, and through these activities the Army exercises adaptability, regenerates itself, and retains institutional memory. Some indicators show the Army is aware of and concerned with these challenges, particularly the substantial improvements in opportunities and incentives for NCOs to pursue further education and the option for officers to attend graduate school in exchange for additional years of service. In addition, advanced degrees and demonstrated proficiency in a foreign language are now *de facto* requirements to attain the higher ranks.

Yet, when contrasted against the predictable timetable for promotion among senior officers and NCOs, the net result of all of these opportunities and incentives has not been to foster the "capacity

to perform serious study in the degree field," or a continuous tendency to adapt and apply specific disciplines to the profession of arms, but to instead foster degree-collecting and a mentality that sees "the degree field [as] irrelevant—just get the sheepskin."<sup>19</sup> The master's degree, whether in international relations, physiology, civil engineering, or Arabic, has become analogous to the Ranger Tab for the Infantry officer—something expected and necessary for career progression—and not evidence of a proclivity for serious thought about the military profession.

Part of the reason for this check-the-block approach to higher education may be because the Army has deliberately separated men of action and men of thought, with clear objective and subjective preference going to the former over the latter.<sup>20</sup> While that may partially be true, this assumption is also somewhat undermined by the celebrity of such individuals as General David H. Petraeus and Brigadier General H.R. McMaster, which is in large part due to their intellects.

Rather than attributing the profession's failure to maintain primacy in its jurisdiction to a biased promotion system that inherently discriminates against intellectualism—a battle cry trumpeted more by professional intellectuals than by intelligent professionals—a more plausible explanation is the fact that the Army has been fighting a two-front war for a decade with an increasingly younger force. Those with the requisite intellectual credentials to serve as stewards of our abstract knowledge base have retired, and those who have risen to take their place have not had the same opportunities for intellectual development while deploying multiple times, taking care of their families, and meeting all of the requirements for career progression.

Thus, if the current message the Army is sending is something along the lines of "We don't value professional knowledge, nor do we have an exclusive claim to it," it is doing so not so much because the Army dislikes intellectuals, but because in the current operational environment, expertise in ground combat—experience—is more valuable in the near-term than abstract knowledge. That rationale might be reasonable given the task set before the Army, but such myopic thinking has degraded the long-term professional identity of the service and clouded our civilian counterparts'



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understanding of that professional identity. Once significant combat actions have ceased the Army must begin to regenerate masters of the profession's abstract knowledge base to reclaim its lost intellectual jurisdiction.

### **We Fight for Pay: The Rise of the Mercenaries**

At the same time that an increasingly civilian thinking apparatus is taking over the Army's jurisdiction in the realm of intellectual expertise, the Army's claim to professional responsibility and its obligation to American society are losing significance for the members of the profession. Service in the newly minted all-volunteer Army was once about personally contributing to national security and the preeminence of the American way of life. The Army enforced that perception through the slogan "Be All You Can Be" and the Soldier's Creed, which emphasizes subordination of the self to the nation, the Army mission, and Army comrades. To be sure, soldiers fought less for the professional identity of the Army or its ideals of service and more for the buddy to the right and left or simply to get home, but even so, they took great pride in their professional status as members of an exclusive body with a crucial responsibility to the Nation.<sup>21</sup> This is the Huntingtonian professional ideal of responsibility to the client: service for service's sake, rather than for financial remuneration.

The Global War on Terrorism injected an entirely different generation of American youth into the armed services, altering that basic professional identity. In an essay examining the effect of increased privatization and outsourcing of defense on the Army, Deborah Avant notes, "Military service has come to be seen by many of those serving as just a job or a means to

achieve side benefits."<sup>22</sup> A primary culprit is the proliferation of defense contractors in the past decade and the corresponding message the Army is sending to its own personnel by leaning so heavily on privatized services.

Contractors' responsibilities cover a wide swath of functions that in earlier times were exclusively in the purview of active-duty personnel. This alone erodes the Army jurisdictional claim to expertise. However, such erosion does not occur in isolation, but in full view of the active-duty members of the profession, who observe contractors doing jobs similar to their own while receiving visibly better benefits, greater freedoms, and higher compensation.<sup>23</sup> Soldiers "take pride in conducting missions that only soldiers can do," but that distinction increasingly applies to a limited range of operations compared to the potential span of Army responsibilities.<sup>24</sup> As a result, soldiers make statements to the effect that they eagerly await serving out their contract so they can get a contracting job where the pay is substantially higher, the lifestyle more agreeable, and the work almost as rewarding.<sup>25</sup> This is the antithesis of Huntingtonian professional responsibility to the client: it is the textbook definition of an individual "who transfers his services wherever they are best rewarded," rather than an individual who exhibits a "steading and permanent desire to perfect himself in the management of violence."<sup>26</sup>

As was the case with erosion of the Army's claim to expertise in its knowledge base, ten years of ongoing combat could partially explain this trend—but not entirely. Outsourcing Army tasks is a conscious decision that leaders make during jurisdictional negotiations in Washington, and the clear result of that process has been a willingness by the Army's leadership to divest itself of many functions not directly related to ground combat.

When Army personnel strains are no longer as pressing, the profession must consider what sort of message it is sending to its junior officers and NCOs by having “for-profit companies staff [key training] programs with retired officers” and contractors.<sup>27</sup> In a profession that alleges to live by the mantra of Duty, Honor, Country, how far is that professional ethos compromised by introducing junior members of the profession to the competing benefits of private life at such an early stage in their development? As the Army “increasingly employs marketplace incentives to attract and retain officer [and NCO] talent,” how much further will it continue to erode the professional ethic of selfless service to the nation?<sup>28</sup>

### Would You Like to Fast Track That? The McDonaldization of the Junior Officer and NCO Corps

George Ritzer’s “McDonaldization” thesis gave a name to a long-noticed phenomenon in post-industrial societies around the globe.<sup>29</sup>

McDonaldization is “the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world” by causing bureaucratic institutions to elevate as cardinal virtues the principles of efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control to the exclusion of less rational, yet arguably more critical, professional values.<sup>30</sup> In their essay examining the effect of McDonaldization on the Army, Remi Hajjar and Morten G. Ender note that “McDonaldization dilutes a profession’s essence and core (i.e., expert knowledge practiced in relatively autonomous and discretionary settings by human experts) by creating rigidly over-controlling, bureaucratic management systems and procedures.”<sup>31</sup>

The McDonaldization tendency and its detrimental effects are apparent in the professional development of Army leaders. The need to efficiently distribute talent within the junior officer and NCO personnel pool causes these leaders to shuffle from short-duration leadership positions to obligatory staff jobs at the expense of personal development, leading to feeling “slighted . . . by the limited number and



(U.S. Army, SGT Taresha D. Neal)

U.S. Army SGM Ronald L. Russ records responses to questions as soldiers participate in a focus group in support of the Army-wide Profession of Arms Campaign at Fort Bragg, NC, 8 April 2011.

short duration of developmental assignments” and the fear that “they are less capable leaders.”<sup>32</sup> Similarly, the constant movement of senior officers and NCOs into predictable duty assignments along a rigidly controlled career path, a consequence of the Army’s relentless pursuit of efficient personnel management, tends to foster a “lack of experiential diversity [which] impairs the professional performance [of] . . . many strategic Army leaders.”<sup>33</sup>

The same tendency to relocate talent throughout the institution that impairs the personal development of junior leaders also handicaps senior Army leaders by making it virtually impossible for them to gain any unique perspectives or capabilities about the profession and simultaneously survive into its senior ranks. As Matthews puts it, the fact that most senior officers and NCOs “have not negotiated every wicket in a general officer qualification course that could only have been designed by Genghis Khan’s G3 [operations officer]” makes it extremely difficult for leaders with the requisite skills for success at the strategic level to make it to the jurisdictional negotiating table.<sup>34</sup> The acquisition of such skills requires sufficient time for military intellectuals to experience, reflect upon, and write about their own profession. Regrettably, such time is simply lacking because of the strain caused by the War on Terror and the highly bureaucratic Army personnel management system.

My personal experience and that of my fellow infantry lieutenants shows McDonaldization has penetrated the Army personnel system down to the lowest levels. Almost across the board, infantry lieutenants know that, after graduation from the Infantry Basic Officer Leader’s Course, they will go to Ranger School, and if they want a decent shot at leading a platoon, they had better get their tab. They then know, regardless of the unit they’ll be posting to, they will go to Airborne School. Once a lieutenant gets his platoon, he understands that, in addition to actually doing his job of leading 32 to 43 soldiers, if he wants to experience positive career progression, he must make a good enough impression on his superiors to merit being selected above his peers to serve in either the scout recon or mortar speciality platoon or as a company executive officer or battalion assistant S-3.

Where they fall in that ranking system of jobs gives infantry lieutenants a pretty good idea of how the Army rates their competence, because Officer Evaluation Report rater comments that determine future job assignments are extremely predictable; as Hajjar and Ender point out, “the websites of the Army personnel commands abound with verbatim comments that raters must use if they wish to get subordinate officers promoted.”<sup>35</sup> That system also will determine who will be in the first-round draft for selection to attend the Maneuver Captain’s Career Course or a similar qualification course to enable newly minted captains to command companies. Alternatively, for those officers more interested in the nonconventional face of the Army, many lieutenants start building their packets for Special Forces or Ranger battalion assignments before they even arrive at their first unit—not because they don’t care about being platoon leaders, but because the timeline is that oblivious to variances in experience and uncompromising in scope.

The Army should see the McDonaldization dilemma as relevant when certain types of personalities start to predominate over others because of the personnel system. The McDonaldized Army timeline brings four general types of leaders into sharp relief: careerists, who focus primarily on making their timeline hacks and checking the boxes on the way to general officer; the disgruntled, who are typically either very smart, very competent, or both; the stalwarts, who dedicate themselves heart and soul to mastering their segment of ground warfare; and

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the ambivalent, who do the job the Army tells them to do, but not as well as the other three.

Through a combination of vitriolic politicking, the occasional case of incompetence, and a wounded ego that seeks immediate acclaim and glory for even the most mediocre accomplishments, the careerists tend to fall on their swords and get out at an early stage.

The disgruntled occasionally share the same wounded ego complex with their careerist peers, but more often than not are under the opinion that the Army “hates smart people” and does not reward them nearly as well as the civilian world does for what they see as their innovative, common-sense thinking. Consequently, they leave shortly after their term of service expires.

This leaves the stalwart and the ambivalent as the predominant surviving population in the Army. In spite of their best efforts, the stalwart rarely have ample time to master the complexities of combined arms, joint firepower, and full-spectrum operations and still develop into truly strategic thinkers capable of interfacing with their civilian colleagues at the highest echelons of the national security community.

By comparison, the ambivalent typically lack the motivation to acquire the experiential diversity essential to the Army for defending its intellectual jurisdictions and preserving its professional ethos.

McDonaldization thus departs from the Huntingtonian ideal of corporateness, in which professional status within the military is earned through professional experience and demonstrated competence. A system that can accurately predict professional status five years out inevitably starts to become less professional and more bureaucratic, and its members view themselves less as stewards of a body of abstract knowledge and more as experts for hire to the best-rewarding master. If the Army wants to maintain a core of highly qualified, expert personnel, it needs to figure out a way to retain talent while also allowing its leaders to realize their professional ambitions without risking their careers.

## Where Are the Washingtons?

When considering the nature of the profession of arms and what it means to be a member of that profession, the Army would do well to revisit its memories of the American Revolution, a time when Congress delayed paying its soldiers, a time of costly and prolonged war when strains in the personnel and supply systems of the Army caused innumerable tensions among the officers immediately around General George Washington, forcing him to convene them to discuss the issue of pay. Pulling out from his pocket a document from Congress addressing the subject, Washington reached for his spectacles, and then apologized: “Forgive me, gentlemen, for my eyes have grown dim in the service of my country.”<sup>36</sup>

This is a relevant frame of reference for discussing professionalism in the American Army. Our leaders need to put their eyeglasses on. In their strategic negotiations with other jurisdictional actors, they have demonstrated a clear preference for being seen as ground warfare experts, a title that implies more vocational occupation than professional domain. They have willingly yielded significant jurisdictional territory. As a result, the media and our political leaders seem at a loss in comprehending the service as a profession. If the Army, through its actions, is not communicating its devotion to its expertise, dedication to service, and promotion through merit, it will appear to be nothing more than a trade in which minutia such as haircuts and shaves represent professionalism.

The Army has lost its professional identity, and it is of vital interest both to national security and the institution’s historic character that it figure out how to recapture that lost spirit. Anything less risks consigning the Army to a position of secondary importance. An institution in such a position ceases to attract the best available talent and becomes only a place of employment of the last resort. The American people may continue to support and respect their armed services—but in the years after major combat operations end, the Army must translate that support into motivated, dedicated, professional service to the Nation. **MR**

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### NOTES

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