



Public Understanding of the Profession of Arms

Brandon Robers

“[W]hatever their fond sentiments for men and women in uniform, for most Americans the wars remain an abstraction. A distant and unpleasant series of news items that does not affect them personally. Even after 9/11, in the absence of a draft, for a growing number of Americans, service in the military, no matter how laudable, has become something for other people to do.”

— Defense Secretary Robert Gates¹

“Communication is the real work of leadership.”

— Nitin Nohria, Dean, Harvard Business School²

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PHOTO: Guests shake hands with Marines during the U.S. Marine Corps Community Services-sponsored annual air show, Marine Corps Air Station Miramar, San Diego, CA, 2 October 2010. (U.S. Marine Corps, LCpl Jamean Berry)

IN SEPTEMBER 2010, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates delivered an address to the students and faculty of Duke University on the nature of our modern all-volunteer military.³ During his hour-long speech he repeatedly returned to the theme of the growing disconnect between today’s professional soldiers and the civilian society they serve. Not only, he said, are our military organizations becoming more professional, but they are drawing from an ever-decreasing segment of the American public. A 2009 study undertaken for the Directorate of Accession Policy and cited by Secretary Gates during his address at Duke found that, in 1988, approximately 40 percent of 18-year olds had at least one veteran parent. By 2000, that figure had fallen to 18 percent, and by 2018, only about 8 percent of 18-year olds will have a veteran parent and the exposure to and familiarity with military life that comes from being part of a military family.⁴

Secretary Gates is not alone in his concerns among senior government officials. In his 2010 farewell speech, outgoing chair of the House Armed Services Committee, Congressman Ike Skelton, warned of what he perceived to be a “civil-military gap, a lack of understanding between civilians and the military that has grown in the era of an all-volunteer force.”⁵ This “civil-military gap” is very real and poses a number of substantial challenges to leaders in both the executive and legislative branches of our government.

The existence and importance of a “civil-military” gap has been exhaustively debated in the academic literature and popular media.⁶ I suggest that it exists, but that it is natural and unavoidable. Our focus should not be on “closing the

gap,” but on mitigating its negative effects. To accomplish this, I suggest a broad program of “interface.” Personal relationship building is the key to cultural understanding, and cultural understanding leads to good relations. Cultural understanding is the goal, not cultural homogeneity.

Today’s Army has a number of programs and regulations it could adapt to promote interface without greatly disrupting their existing functions. As of now, no unifying or coordinating structure links these programs, and in most cases, individual regulations contain a variety of material weakness when viewed from the perspective of cultural outreach promotion. This article proposes a framework for analyzing existing programs for interface promotion potential. Then, using the Army Congressional Fellowship Program as an example, it illustrates how the process could work and proposes some changes that can have an immediate, significant, and lasting impact on the relationships between our modern professional Army, our political leaders, and the public they both serve.⁷

The core task is one of targeted outreach. As an organization, the Army must establish new points of cultural interface to supplant those lost during the professionalization of American military forces in recent decades. To do this, the entire military organization must work to communicate to political leaders and the civilian population they serve what it truly means to be a member of the profession of arms.



Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates walks with ROTC cadets at Duke University, Durham, NC, 29 September 2010. (DOD)

The Cultural Divide

Military organizations are unlike any other social institutions in contemporary American society. Virtually all modern military sociologists have come to view modern militaries as highly professionalized social institutions.⁸ In their 2000 commentary on American military culture, Edwin Dorn, Walter Ulmer, and Thomas Jacobs noted that “[g]iven the military’s unique role of managing violence on behalf of society, a strong and incorruptible culture is not only important but essential.”⁹ We have long publically recognized, not only in our popular culture but also in the pronouncements of our political institutions, that the demands of military life require social dynamics that are in many ways distinct from those in civilian society. For example, in its findings in section 571 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1994, Congress declared, “Military life is fundamentally different from civilian life,” and that “the military society is characterized by its own laws, rules, customs, and traditions, including numerous restrictions on personal behavior that would not be acceptable in civilian society.”¹⁰

According to organizational psychologist Edgar Schein, “Culture is what a group learns over a period of time as that group solves its problems of survival in an external environment and its problems of internal integration.”¹¹ The culture that has grown up within the Army, and our other military institutions, derives from the unique demands of war fighting and combat survival.¹² Both the survival and integration challenges our military organizations face are fundamentally different from those faced in most corners of civil society. Unless we intend to fundamentally alter the role of the military in American society, it makes little sense to push our military organizations to reform an aspect of their identity that derives from and contributes to their battlefield success.

Even if it were desirable to attempt to move the cultural norms of our military organizations closer to those of American civil society, it is unclear *which* norms we would choose. The United States is a nation of wide cultural diversity. While many modern sociologists and cultural anthropologists note broad trends towards assimilation and multiculturalism, ours is also a society of many distinct and self-sustaining subcultures.¹³ The key point is

that there is no one “civilian culture” in America. If anything, the unifying aspect of the various civilian cultures as compared to our military organizations is simply that they are not military.

Whatever the predominant civilian culture, it springs from a very different set of needs than those that shaped the culture of the Army. That the cultures are different is not the problem. Rather, the lack of cultural awareness and social understanding should be of primary concern. In short, the military culture derives from the imperatives of combat survival and so should not be changed to more closely conform to civilian society. Civilian culture in the United States varies widely by locale, and even its universally shared elements are in no need of adjustment. The cultures need not conform to each other, they only need be exposed to each other so that a relationship of mutual trust and understand can develop.

Military Participation Rates and Civil-Military Relations

Frank Hoffman described civil-military relations as the set of relationships between four sectors of society: military elites, the military writ large, American political elites, and the American civil society.¹⁴ This is a useful paradigm. It allows us to conceptualize relationships based on their primary participants and discuss policy options to address challenges in relationship categories. For example, poor relations between military and political elites may stem from dramatically different factors than those between rank-and-file military members and the American civil society.

The military has long enjoyed favorable public opinion, and it ranks above other national institutions in public perception surveys.¹⁵ Taken at face value these surveys could indicate a healthy relationship between the military writ large and American civil society. However, a favorable view of an organization does not necessarily indicate understanding of the organization’s culture. Views not based upon a personal understanding of an institution are much more susceptible to change with the political winds.

As of 2009, only 7.55 percent of the nation’s population had served in the military.¹⁶ Of these veterans, 65.2 percent were 55 or older. One hundred twenty members of the 111th Congress have

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served in the military.¹⁷ While this is greater than the proportion among the general population, it has been declining. (There were 126 in the 110th Congress.) As veterans move into retirement, the percentage of congressional representatives with military experience will continue to decline.

The level of understanding of the modern military culture may not be as high as it might appear at first blush even within our veteran population. The military culture that exists today is not the military culture that existed 40 years ago.¹⁸ Perceptions of what life in the military is like that come from service that concluded decades ago may not be entirely in line with the realities of modern service.

Declining public and political military participation rates have a complementary affect on one another in congressional and popular attitudes toward military issues and affairs. Many factors shape legislative vote decisions, not the least of which is constituent demands. To the extent that any congressional district contains a dwindling number of citizens with direct military experience, the policy preferences of that district may be disconnected from the realities of military life. Similarly, as the number of representatives with military experience declines, the tendency to promote and discuss military issues with their constituencies is likely to decline.

Meanwhile, the operational tempo of our armed forces, especially our land forces, has increased dramatically. Since the invasion of Iraq in 2003 slightly more than 2 million soldiers and marines have been deployed into combat zones.¹⁹ Of these, more than 790,000 have served two or more combat tours.²⁰

The War on Terrorism is now the longest conflict in American history, yet in almost 10 years less than one percent of the U.S. population has served in either Iraq or Afghanistan.²¹ This intense operational tempo has helped solidify cultural distinctions between civilian and military societies within a small segment of the total U.S. population.

Interface

The core problem is one of interface. The more interaction a person has with individuals from another culture, the more positive his or her attitudes will be towards people from that culture.²² However the general public has little opportunity to build direct relationships with our military organizations and so has little opportunity to interact with the military culture.

For most Americans, despite fond sentiments for our men and women at arms, “the war remains an abstraction, a distant and unpleasant series of news items that does not affect them personally.”²³ To truly understand military culture requires a point of interface with military organizations. Interface between the civilian sector and the military comes in two forms, direct military service and contact with current or separated service members. Given the general decline in military participation rates, military organizations must actively develop positive points of interface between current service members and the civilian population and leadership. To do this the military must engage a portion of its considerable resources in outreach and promotion efforts apart from its established recruiting functions.

Personal relationship building is especially important for military organizations. Under normal circumstances, members of the public have no opportunity to directly access the services of military organizations, to assess the value of the organizations’ services, or to interact with their members. Much of the current favorable view of the military derives from public perceptions of members of the armed services as protectors of the public good and perceptions that military members are personally admirable and worthy of respect. Much of the public perception of the military may come from the notion that the military is culturally unique in a way that deserves respect or admiration. However, absent direct contact with the military (through service or contact with active or separated members), the popular image of military culture derives largely from portrayals by media and entertainment organizations. In recent years, media treatment of military life has been largely salutary, although this need not always be the case and could easily shift with political temperaments.

The current favorable view is a fickle one based on feelings of patriotism and positive treatment in the media rather than true understanding. By establishing points of personal interface with the public, a military organization can give individuals an opportunity to form first-hand opinions that are much more likely to endure. Contrast the current popular support the military enjoys with the generally poor public perception in the 1960s and 1970s during the Vietnam War. The current “favorability” of military organizations is linked to contemporary policy preference rather than to identification with the organizations themselves.

Most public sector organizations attempt to establish and maintain a level of familiarity with external stakeholders through traditional promotional activities such as the issuance of annual reports, maintaining engaging and informative web sites, publishing newsletters, and purchasing print, television, radio and web media exposure.²⁴ In this regard, the Army as an organization is typical and already does an adequate job of communicating its core capabilities.²⁵ However, because the Army does not provide a tangible good or service in the way that most public sector organizations do, establishing the type of external stakeholder relationships that scholars believe are essential to promotion is difficult.²⁶ Under normal circumstances, a member of the public is not a user of military services in the traditional sense. No point of interface exists where a typical member of the public contacts the Army for goods or services and so they have no opportunity to directly develop relationships.

Contrast the role of the military organization with those of other major public health and safety organizations. The core purpose of the Public Health Service or a local law enforcement agency may be similar to that of the military (the establishment and sustainment of public safety and security), but the functional roles are very different. A member of the public may access the service of a law enforcement agency when reporting a crime or observing police patrolling their neighborhood. At this point of interface, they have the opportunity to assess the value and quality of the service provided and build a relationship with the organization and its representative. Similarly, users of public health services interface directly

with the agency (through the use of community health services) and indirectly (through the adoption of specific health recommendations in their own lives). They establish a relationship with and understand the organization based on personal experience.

The lack of interface between the military and civilian communities is the primary impediment to developing a cross-cultural understanding between the groups. It should be a command priority to establish positive points of interface as quickly and efficiently as possible with civilian political leaders and the public at large.

Using the Army's Established Framework to Improve External Relations

Today's Army has a large, capable cadre of public affairs professionals who could be engaged to design and manage a program of interface development using tools that already exist within the organization. Rather than attempting to do this from scratch, the Army should work to develop positive interface points by interweaving this goal with existing program functions. Public relations personnel should coordinate and design the program. The chief of public affairs should analyze existing programs to identify those the Army can use for interface development. The Army should integrate interface goals with existing program goals wherever it will not significantly detract from a program's primary function.

The process should begin by identifying programs in which interface either already occurs or can be readily developed. For example, the Army Congressional Fellowship Program places Army officers in staff positions in congressional offices where they work with civilian congressional staff within their area of expertise. Besides its primary function of educating selected Army officers in congressional activities, the program provides a point of interface between rank-and-file military members and political elites.

Once identified, we should characterize potential points of interface according to the nature of the relationships they can develop. Every program will fall into one of four categories: military elite to political elite, military elite to civil society, military

writ large to political elite, and military writ large to civil society.

After identifying interface-promoting programs, the public affairs community must do two things—incorporate interface promotion into each program's purpose as a secondary goal and then analyze programs with an eye toward identifying areas to modify to promote interface without significantly detracting from the primary goal. The extent, if any, to which we should allow primary goals to be subordinate to interface promotion is a policy decision for the chief of public affairs and the command responsible for the program.

Finally, once we modify existing programs to maximize interface in ways consistent with their primary purposes, the public affairs community must identify categories of relationships for which significant interface gaps remain. Then, to the extent that resources allow, the Army should develop programs from scratch to promote positive interactions in these areas, a longer and more resource intensive process than modifying an existing program.

Developing Relationships with Political Leaders

As used in this work, political leaders are defined as those elected officials outside of the military chain of command. The most visible group of political leaders are the 535 members of the federal legislature.

The Army interacts with members of Congress in two primary ways: directly and through constituents. Direct relations occur on two primary levels: interaction between the military leadership and members of Congress and their staffs, and interaction between rank-and-file military members and members of Congress and their staffs.

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Organizational and political factors constrain direct relationships between members of Congress and military leaders to a narrow set of stakeholders. Staff interactions are more important because they are both more widespread and less formal. The Army Congressional Fellowship Program provides a unique opportunity for rank-and-file members of the military to closely interact and form relationships with members of Congress and their staffs, a military writ large to political elite interface opportunity. AR 1-202 prescribes policy and procedures relating to the Army Congressional Fellowship Program. The program educates selected Army officers on the importance of the strategic relationship between the Army and the Congress. It is a three-year program that includes pursuit of a master's degree in legislative affairs at George Washington University, service on the staff of a member of Congress, and an assignment to the Army or Joint Staff in a legislative liaison duty position.

From the perspective of interface development, the time that service members spend working with congressional staff is most important. Though the

program's total duration is three years, the time spent working on Capitol Hill is usually less than one year.

As it currently exists, the program primarily educates Army officers. That is, it aims to benefit the individual officer and increase his or her value to the Army rather than to forward the broader goal of improving Army-congressional relations. However, because of the high level of personal interaction between participants and political elites, the interface benefits to the Army may actually outweigh the benefits of officer professional development. By integrating interface into the program's purpose and making several changes to the program structure, we can maximize the interface benefits without detracting from its existing purpose. I recommend the following changes:

- In addition to searching for individual members of Congress to sponsor Army officers, the Army should work with Congress to set up permanent positions on professional committee staffs that Army officers can fill. This will allow a larger number of officers to work with congressional staff each year. In 2011, only 24 Army officers received



(U.S. Army)

Mr. Egon Hawrylak (standing center), representing the Joint Force Headquarters-National Capital Region, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC, with members of the Army Congressional Fellowship Program, 13 August 2010.

congressional fellowships. We should greatly expand this number.

- The program should expand to include an option for a Capitol Hill rotation without the accompanying degree program and legislative affairs assignments. The Army officer corps includes a great many individuals superbly qualified to assist civilian congressional staff members without the benefit of formal legislative affairs education. The Army could adjust eligibility criteria to include expertise in areas related to the work of assigned offices.

- We should open the program to a wider group of Army officers by amending the utilization policy. AR 1-202, Chapter 5 5-1(d) requires that officers not be assigned to a congressional detail as their last assignment before separation. This policy makes sense only if the primary concern is providing skills to officers to benefit the Army in their later assignments. If we amended the program's goals to include improving relations and sharing expertise, an officer's separation immediately following an assignment to Capitol Hill would be of little concern.

- There are several major Army installations in the Washington D.C. area. The Army should be routinely inviting congressional members and staff to on-base events with congressional fellows. This should include not only tours and reviews, but also social events. As this is an outreach effort aimed at improving personal relationships, the events should be informal and structured to maximize face-to-face interaction between congressional staff members and members of the military.

Army Programs

I suggest that we create an office within the Army Office of the Chief of Staff of Public Affairs to analyze existing Army programs for interface promotion potential. This office would characterize existing points of interface, make recommendations as to how to modify existing programs to improve their interface effects, and develop strategies to improve interface in areas where existing programs fall short. I also suggest the Army Congressional Fellowship Program can be altered to promote interface without significantly detracting from its original purpose. **MR**

NOTES

1. Defense Secretary Robert Gates, speech at Duke University, Durham, NC, 29 September 2010.

2. Deborah Blagg and Susan Young, "What Makes a Good Leader?" *Harvard Business School Bulletin*, 2 April 2001.

3. Gates.

4. See Barbara A. Bicksler and Lisa G. Nolan, *Recruiting an All-Volunteer Force: The Need for Sustained Investment in Recruiting Resources—An Update, Strategic Analysis* (December 2009).

5. "Skelton's Farewell Warning: Mind the Civilian-Military Gap," *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 December 2010.

6. See e.g., John Hillen, "Must U.S. Military Culture Reform?" *Orbis* (1999): 43-57; Charlie Lewis, "A New Sparta: America's Threatening Civil-Military Gap," *Harvard Kennedy School Review* (2011); Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, "The Gap: Soldiers, Civilians, and Their Mutual Misunderstanding," *The National Interest* (Fall 2000): 29-37; Elisabeth Bumiller, "Gates fears wider gap between country and military," *New York Times*, 29 September 2010 (www.nytimes.com/2010/09/30/us/30military.html?_r=1).

7. AR 1-202, *Army Congressional Fellowship Program* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2000).

8. Christopher A. Simon and Nicholas P. Lovrich, "Sources of Support for Mandatory Military Service in the Context of the War on Terrorism: Survey Evidence Pre- and Post-September 11, 2001," *Social Science Quarterly* 90 (2009): 368.

9. Edwin Dorn, Walter Ulmer, and Thomas Jacobs, "American Military Culture in the Twenty-First Century: A Report of the CSIS International Security Program 7" (2000).

10. National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1994, Pub. L. No. 103-160, § 571, 107 Stat. 1547, 1670 (1993) (codified at 10 U.S.C. § 654 [2000]).

11. See Edgar H. Schein, "Organizational Culture," *American Psychologist* 111 (February 1990).

12. Hillen.

13. See Mary Beth Leidman and Bradley E. Wiggins, "Developing a Paradigm for Describing Diversity and Multiculturalism in Modern America," *Social Science* (October 2009).

14. Frank Hoffman, "Bridging the Civil-Military Gap," *Armed Forces Journal* (December 2007).

15. Gordon Lubold, "American's Views of Militant Service Improve," *Christian Science Monitor*, 10 November 2008; Karlyn Bowman, "Polls on Patriotism and Military Service," *AEI Studies in Public Opinion* 17 (2009) (PSRA polls indicate that the percentage of the population with a "favorable" view of the military in selected years: 1985: 77%, 1990: 73%, 1996: 82%, 2002: 93%, 2005: 82%, 2008: 84%).

16. U.S. Census Bureau, 2005-2009 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

17. Jennifer E. Manning, *Membership of the 111th Congress: A Profile, Congressional Research Service*, 27 December 2010.

18. See Diane H. Mazur, "Why Progressives Lost the War When They Lost the Draft," *Hofstra Law Review* 32 (2003): 553, 560.

19. Michelle Tan, "2 Million Troops Have Deployed Since 9/11," *Marine Corps Times*, 18 December 2009.

20. *Ibid.*

21. Charlie Lewis, "A New Sparta: America's Threatening Civil-Military Gap," *Harvard Kennedy School Review* (2011).

22. See R.B. Zajonc, "Attitudinal Effects of Mere Exposure," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (June 1968).

23. Defense Secretary Robert Gates' speech at Duke University, 29 September 2010.

24. See Beaufort B. Longest, Jr. and Wesley M. Rohrer, "Communication Between Public Health Agencies and Their External Stakeholders," *Journal Health and Human Services Administration* 28, (2005): 189, 197.

25. For example, DefenseLINK provides access to a great deal of information to Congress, other executive branch agencies, and the general public. As set out in the DefenseLINK The Principles of Information, "It is Department of Defense policy to make available timely and accurate information so that the public, the Congress, and the news media may assess and understand the facts about national security and defense strategy. Requests for information from organizations and private citizens shall be answered quickly." (Enclosure (2) to Department of Defense Directive 5122.5 of September 27, 2000.)

26. See Max B. E. Clarkson, *A Stakeholder Framework for Analyzing and Evaluating Corporate Social Performance*, 20 Academy of Management Review 92 (1995).