

# Leadership in a People-First Army



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*People are always my number one priority: Our Army's people are our greatest strength and our most important weapon system ... It is our people who will deliver on our readiness, modernization, and reform efforts.*

—Chief of Staff Gen. James McConville

The clear prioritization of people above all else marks a shift from recent Army senior leader messages to the force, which focused on readiness as the number one priority.<sup>1</sup> While Army senior leaders never intended for soldiers to be harmed in the name of readiness, the Fort Hood Independent Review Committee (FHIRC) revealed that harm occurs all too frequently. Among its findings, the FHIRC stated that at Fort Hood, Texas, “readiness was the primary focus of all activities, while the [Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention (SHARP)] Program and the general well-being of Soldiers was a distant second. Mission readiness completely overshadowed the SHARP program.”<sup>2</sup>

## A People-First Mindset

While the findings of the FHIRC generally focus on the Fort Hood SHARP program, the conclusion that readiness overshadowed and obfuscated all other priorities came as no surprise to many Army leaders because readiness was the number one priority. The finding of the FHIRC regarding the adverse consequences of single-minded concern with readiness is a difficult lesson that must be inculcated in the Army's readiness-centric culture to strengthen the Army long term and serve as a catalyst to place higher priority on ensuring the safety and security of people in the ranks. To maximize the commitment, talent, and true readiness of the Army to deploy, fight, and win the Nation's wars, Army leaders

need to embrace a people-first mindset, implement people-first systems, and create a people-first culture throughout the Army.

Effective leadership in the Army is a function of the compliance and commitment of a leader's subordinates.<sup>3</sup> Commitment is defined as the “willing dedication or allegiance” to the mission, unit, or Army, while compliance is the mere act of “conforming to a requirement or demand.”<sup>4</sup> A committed soldier will expend more effort, exercise creativity, and be intrinsically motivated to continue to serve and accomplish the mission, while a merely compliant soldier will expend a minimal amount of effort to meet the minimum standard. Though, in the real world, this dichotomy of behavior exists on a spectrum, an idealized Army would be comprised of soldiers wholly committed to the Nation, the Army, and its mission. Given the realities of human nature, the optimally motivated Army will never be achieved, but leaders can act now to cultivate commitment in their subordinates. Fostering the commitment of talented soldiers for future service starts with individual leaders prioritizing people over readiness.

For the past two decades, readiness has been the standard, target, and focus of all Army activities. Generally, the

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readiness of a unit is reported as a function of deployable personnel present, the operational status of unit equipment, and the unit's training status using several objective and subjective measures.<sup>5</sup>

A unit that has a higher percentage of deployable personnel, has better maintained and functional equip-

a wedding versus a field exercise, or the birth of a child versus a combat training center rotation, commanders need to consider the welfare and needs of the soldier first. Prioritizing the soldier and exercising that consideration fosters the soldier's long-term commitment to the Army. It breeds loyalty, dedication, and motivation. The com-



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ment, and has trained to a higher proficiency level will be categorized more favorably (i.e., more ready) than a similar unit with lower ratings of readiness. Given that readiness metrics provide quantified points of comparison between commanders, these metrics are a source of primary and intense focus at all levels of command and are highly scrutinized by senior commanders in evaluating units. It is not too much of an exaggeration to say that readiness is everything to many commanders; to some, it is the only thing. However, this readiness-centric culture can lead to negative outcomes for the Army when leaders choose achieving high readiness metrics over taking care of the needs of the Army's people.

Choosing readiness over people may pay immediate readiness metric dividends to a commander, but it also may come at the Army's expense in the departure of a soldier in which the Army has invested much. Chief of Staff Gen. James McConville understands this tension inherent within his priorities and, at the 2020 Fires Conference, provided a hypothetical to illustrate this point.<sup>6</sup> The question was whether a commander should take a soldier to the National Training Center, an important readiness measure, or allow the soldier to miss the rotation to witness the birth of his child, negatively impacting the unit's readiness metrics. McConville advised that in a people-first Army, commanders should let the soldier miss the National Training Center rotation, saying, "We shouldn't have Soldiers missing really important events in their life. If we're showing we're willing to invest in our people, they will be with us for the long term."<sup>7</sup> McConville's intent is clear; whether it is a doctor's appointment versus a mandatory training class,

commitment gained through leaders adopting a people-first mindset will improve the true readiness of the Total Army for its national mission.

## People-First Systems

Prioritizing people across the Total Army takes more than just a leadership mindset. It requires systems built on law and policy to change to reflect the Army's new priority.<sup>8</sup> There is ample space to incorporate a people-first prioritization in the systems and policies that manage assignments, promotions, and even separations. Generally, current Army personnel management systems have been built on laws and policies established following the transition to an all-volunteer force post-Vietnam and have been heavily influenced by the Army's needs during the Cold War.<sup>9</sup> While these systems still function, there are legitimate questions about whether lockstep promotion management combined with the proverbial "up or out" requirements of the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act maximize the utility of the officer corps.<sup>10</sup> Enlisted personnel management systems share many similar concerns.

This perspective on Army personnel management is not an outsider's opinion, but the opinion shared by the Army Talent Management Task Force (ATMTF), the organization created by the Army in 2016 to develop, pilot, and implement a new officer personnel management system throughout the Army.<sup>11</sup>

Many of the personnel management system changes spearheaded by the ATMTF are already well underway. The Battalion Command Assessment Program is transforming how battalion commanders are selected. A

version of the Battalion Command Assessment Program is being instituted to assess and select senior enlisted leaders, and individual officer objective assessments are being incorporated into professional military education curricula.<sup>12</sup> All of these initiatives are part of a systemic shift to prioritize people. Each program described

only occurs at the option of the soldier. The last two decades of armed conflict contributed to an exodus of talent from the Army, especially among the officer corps.<sup>17</sup> A 2011 survey of recent West Point graduates found that 93 percent believed that half or more of the best officers in the Army do not serve twenty years and retire.<sup>18</sup> While

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provides the Army and the individual soldier with better data with which to make personnel decisions that maximize the value of soldier talent to the Army. The initial success of these programs combined with McConville’s intent led to the release of the first *Army People Strategy* in October 2019.

The stated purpose of the *Army People Strategy* is to provide a roadmap on how to shift from “distributing personnel” to using a deliberate talent management model for all soldiers and Department of the Army civilians.<sup>13</sup> The Army describes this change as a shift to a “21st Century Talent Management system” that “will acquire, develop, employ, and retain ... talent needed to achieve Total Army readiness,” by building cohesive teams capable of accomplishing the mission of the Army.<sup>14</sup> This strategy reconceptualizes readiness as a function of people. While readiness statistics have always relied on soldier-based training metrics, never has readiness attempted to measure or even contemplated maximizing individual soldier talent. This connection is a positive first step, and the Army’s lines of effort to acquire, develop, employ, and retain talent outlined in the document will fulfill the vision laid out in the strategy.<sup>15</sup>

Out of all four lines of effort, retaining talent is the most critical. Acquiring talent for the Total Army is challenging and highly dependent on the ever-shrinking pool of eligible applicants and outside economic variables.<sup>16</sup> Developing talent can be done through policy and changes to the professional military education system, and employing talent is a function of branch and Army management completely within the Army’s sphere of control. But, in an all-volunteer force, retaining talent

this survey was not without criticism, former Secretary of Defense Ash Carter acknowledged that retention of talent is a real problem that needs to be addressed, and despite the Army typically meeting its congressionally mandated end-strength, the Army’s own studies confirm that retaining quality throughout the Total Army matters just as much as the quantity.<sup>19</sup>

Despite this critical need, the personnel management reforms described above do not directly address retention. Current reforms objectively identify talent but do not necessarily incentivize retention. Selecting better commanders, gathering objective data, and refining promotion systems will ensure talented commanders get promoted, but at face value, none of these programs keep a soldier in the Army. To put it simply, people-first personnel management reforms need to focus on long-term retention of soldiers by directly incentivizing soldiers to explicitly *choose* to continue serving in the Army. Two potential options that can empower officers to make this choice are through an empowered assignment process and receipt of retention bonuses. The Army Talent Alignment Process (ATAP) (i.e., the assignment marketplace), introduced in 2020, is the first step on this path but still falls short of empowering officers to be the managers of their careers.

While the assignment marketplace begins to incorporate choice, officers are still not given ultimate control over where they are assigned. Only 55 percent of officers received their first-choice assignment in the initial iteration of using ATAP.<sup>20</sup> When discussing assignments in the Army, it is axiomatic to say that “the needs of the Army” come first.<sup>21</sup> However, too often, when the Army

and an officer reach the intersection of the proverbial needs of the Army or the future retention of a talented officer, the assignment management system fills the billet and loses the officer.

Each of the top five reasons soldiers desire to leave the Army relates to the impact Army assignments have on a

Polk, Fort Leonard Wood, and Fort Irwin were less preferred by the officer corps than operational-minded posts in preferred geographic locations such as Fort Carson, Joint Base Lewis-McChord, and Hawaii.<sup>23</sup>

This ill-preferred status naturally results in individuals assigned to these installations who did not choose to go

“ In 2007, the Army offered retention bonuses to junior officers to incentivize retention during a mass exodus caused by repeated deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, but these bonuses did not necessarily retain talent. ”

soldier and his or her family.<sup>22</sup> No one knows the needs, desires, and challenges of an individual soldier or family better than the individual, but Army systems continue to manage those issues for the soldier, not with the soldier. In the at-will employment structure found in most U.S. employment situations, an employee is always free to quit and walk away, and employers must incentivize the employee to stay through pay, benefits, or other measures to retain that employee's talent.

In contrast, due to the contractual or appointed nature of employment in the U.S. military, the Army does not have to grapple with this employer-employee dynamic, but by relying on its authority to assign soldiers against their preference, the Army is knowingly contributing to the conditions that cause soldiers to leave the Army. To minimize talent loss, the Army can take a lesson from the private sector and apply it to retain talent.

By incentivizing individual assignments and empowering soldiers to direct their careers, the Army will better retain talent long term. Further, a soldier choosing his or her assignment will be more committed to the Army and to the role the soldier is fulfilling than one who is assigned needs of the Army with no regard for personal preference. This proposed method of assignment management is quintessentially people-first. However, the proposed system of choice must be able to account for less desirable positions and assignments that need to be filled.

In the context of officer assignments, the ATMTF published officer preference statistics for assignment locations in 2020, and it should come as no surprise that remote, small, and training-centric posts such as Fort

there (i.e., assigned based on the needs of the Army). However, instead of assigning unwilling officers to assignments they did not choose, the Army can incentivize assignments at these posts and empower officers to make this choice themselves.

To illustrate this idea, consider the following hypothetical: a \$100,000 assignment bonus is offered to field-grade officers who choose a three-year assignment to Fort Polk. Fort Polk is preferred in the assignment marketplace at a much higher rate; eventually, an officer is offered the position and *chooses* the assignment.<sup>24</sup> This hypothetical officer has *chosen* to serve for three more years. The use of a demand-informed incentive model in the assignment marketplace ideally leads to every officer *choosing* further service. The intent of this proposed people-first system empowers soldiers to make their own assignment choice, increasing the commitment of the officer to the Army and simultaneously lessening the reasons soldiers leave the Army. However, incentives need to target quality talent, not just quantity.

Retention bonuses for continued service are not new. In 2007, the Army offered retention bonuses to junior officers to incentivize retention during a mass exodus caused by repeated deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, but these bonuses did not necessarily retain talent.<sup>25</sup> Officers who were already likely to stay in stayed, and officers who were likely to leave left as well.<sup>26</sup> These bonuses were flawed; the bonuses were offered to everybody, and to effectively retain talent, retention bonuses need to target the most talented soldiers. The Army would have more effectively retained talent had it doubled the size of the bonus and only

offered it to the top 50 percent of captains, but in 2007, the Army did not have the data it needed to achieve this solution. Defining and measuring the target talent is the hard part.

## Changing the Evaluation System

While currently, most comparative officer evaluations are done through a centralized board process, this is beginning to change. The ATMTF is developing a holistic set of officer evaluations that will generate objective data about officers to be referenced throughout their careers.<sup>27</sup> This data in combination with standard officer evaluation reports can be used to create officer order-of-merit lists by branch, functional area, or any other skill, and will allow the Army to better identify and thereby incentivize retention of talent. Like choosing an assignment, a soldier's decision to accept a retention bonus based on talent is a choice to continue to serve, and the empowered choice of the decision fosters commitment. Individual leaders can practice a people-first mindset, and Total Army personnel systems can incorporate a people-first priority, but the Army can only become a people-first organization through the transformation of its culture.

## People-First Culture

Army culture is the “shared set of beliefs, values, norms, and symbols that unite [the Army],” and it “evolves slowly; it is deeply rooted in long-held beliefs passed from one generation of Soldiers to another and communicated in Army policies, doctrines, customs, traditions, songs, and ethos.”<sup>28</sup> Current Army culture strives to foster unity, cohesion, and trust; it rewards loyalty to its leaders, units, and the institution, and it promotes excellence within established boundaries and norms.<sup>29</sup> The heart of Army culture can be found in its expressed values of loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage.<sup>30</sup> These values are taught to soldiers upon initial entry, are reinforced throughout the entirety of their service, and form the foundation of soldiers' commitment to the Army. But

there is an inherent tension between these values and culture and the concept of a people-first Army.

Loyalty, selfless service, and duty all stand for soldiers placing the Nation, the Army, and the mission ahead of personal needs, desires, and priorities, and Army culture willingly ostracizes individuals viewed as self-aggrandizing or careerist. However, this aspect of Army culture is not absolute and willingly accepts enlistment bonuses, individuals hand-picked for assignments, and even early retirements. The mindset and systems proposals outlined above may mildly challenge several tenets of Army culture but are mere extensions of current policies already incorporated into Army culture. Just like in any organizational culture experiencing transformation, there will be friction.

The very idea of a people-first mindset, systems, and culture is likely anathema to many current and former soldiers. The Army, like many organizations with a long history, has a well-developed and entrenched cultural establishment that can point to mission accomplishment in the past under existing culture, policies, and attitudes as evidence of future success and lack of need to change.<sup>31</sup> McConville himself joked that taking soldiers' preferences into account in assignments was “almost blasphemous.”<sup>32</sup> However, as Carter pointed out, the talent pool for the Army is shrinking, and retaining talent is now more critical than ever. An Army culture that prioritizes the welfare of its people above all else will retain the best the Nation has to offer, and by exemplifying a people-first mindset, leaders can accelerate this cultural transformation within the Army.

A people-first mindset, people-first systems, and a people-first culture will enhance commitment throughout the Total Army, which in turn directly increases the readiness of the Total Army to deploy, fight, and win the Nation's wars. The practice of leadership in a people-first Army does not lead to an Army that is less ready for its mission but merely to changes on a spreadsheet. What creating a people-first Army will accomplish is the long-term retention of the most talented soldiers the Army can recruit, the real readiness metric of the Army. ■

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## Notes

**Epigraph.** U.S. Army, “40th Chief of Staff of the Army Initial Message to the Army Team,” Army.mil, 12 August 2019, accessed 28 March 2021, <https://www.army.mil/>

[article/225605/40th\\_chief\\_of\\_staff\\_of\\_the\\_army\\_initial\\_message\\_to\\_the\\_army\\_team](https://www.army.mil/article/225605/40th_chief_of_staff_of_the_army_initial_message_to_the_army_team).

1. "Chief of Staff of the Army Gen. Mark A. Milley said the readiness of the Total Army is his no. 1 priority. [...] 'I need to raise your readiness,' Milley said. 'I am going to consciously and willingly raise your readiness levels.'" Timothy Hale, "CSA Milley: 'Readiness is my No. 1 priority,'" Army.mil, 18 May 2016, accessed 1 April 2021, [https://www.army.mil/article/166838/csa\\_milley\\_readiness\\_is\\_my\\_no\\_1\\_priority](https://www.army.mil/article/166838/csa_milley_readiness_is_my_no_1_priority).
2. "Fort Hood Independent Review," Army.mil, 6 November 2020, accessed 1 April 2021, <https://www.army.mil/forthoodreview/>.
3. Army Doctrine Publication 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], 25 November 2019), para. 5-7, accessed 9 June 2021, [https://armypubs.army.mil/ProductMaps/PubForm/Details.aspx?PUB\\_ID=1007609](https://armypubs.army.mil/ProductMaps/PubForm/Details.aspx?PUB_ID=1007609).
4. Ibid., para. 5-6, 5-7.
5. Army Regulation (AR) 525-29, *Force Generation–Sustainable Readiness* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2019), para. 1-1, accessed 9 June 2021, [https://armypubs.army.mil/ProductMaps/PubForm/Details.aspx?PUB\\_ID=1004921](https://armypubs.army.mil/ProductMaps/PubForm/Details.aspx?PUB_ID=1004921). Army policy on readiness has undergone major revisions several times over the past twenty years but generally focused on similar metrics regarding individual unit readiness reporting.
6. Marie Pihulic, "CSA: Put People First, Winning Follows," Army.mil, 1 October 2020, accessed 1 April 2021, [https://www.army.mil/article/239597/csa\\_put\\_people\\_first\\_winning\\_follows](https://www.army.mil/article/239597/csa_put_people_first_winning_follows).
7. Ibid. The question to Gen. James McConville appeared generally about the strain on units by deployments, but McConville answered the question using the National Training Center hypothetical.
8. This article focuses on officer personnel management systems, but the same prioritization and philosophy can be incorporated into enlisted personnel management systems in similar ways to achieve the same goal: commitment. Further, the personnel systems changes described in this article likely require statutory changes to Title 10 of the U.S. Code. A discussion of these statutory changes is outside the scope of this article.
9. Bernard D. Rostker et al., *The Defense Officer Personnel Management Act of 1980: A Retrospective Assessment* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1993), 1–3, accessed 6 June 2021, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/reports/R4246.html>. Describing the passage of the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act based on lessons drawn from World War II drawdowns and the Cold War.
10. Ibid., 7.
11. U.S. Army Talent Management Task Force (ATMTF), *Annual Report: 2019-2020* (Washington, D.C.: ATMTF, 8 March 2021), accessed 6 June 2021, <https://talent.army.mil/annual-report/>; "Talent Management," Army.mil, accessed 1 April 2021, <https://www.army.mil/talent#org-about>.
12. ATMTF, *Annual Report: 2019-2020*.
13. *The Army People Strategy*, Army.mil, accessed 1 April 2021, [https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/the\\_army\\_people\\_strategy\\_2019\\_10\\_11\\_signed\\_final.pdf](https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/the_army_people_strategy_2019_10_11_signed_final.pdf).
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ash Carter, "What I Learned from Transforming the U.S. Military's Approach to Talent," *Harvard Business Review* (website), 23 May 2017, accessed 1 April 2021, <https://hbr.org/2017/05/what-i-learned-from-transforming-the-u-s-militarys-approach-to-talent>.
17. Tim Kane, "Why Our Best Officers Are Leaving," *The Atlantic* (website), January/February 2011, accessed 30 March 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/01/why-our-best-officers-are-leaving/308346/>. Highlighting the unexpected retirement of Lt. Col. John Nagl, a well-known counterinsurgency expert, and the apparent exodus of officers from the Army.
18. Ibid.
19. Frederick J. Kroesen, "Losing the 'Best and Brightest' Again," Association of the United States Army, 1 March 2011, accessed 28 March 2021, <https://www.ausa.org/articles/losing-best-and-brightest-again>; Carter, "What I Learned from Transforming the U.S. Military's Approach to Talent"; Thomas Brading, "Army Surpasses End-Strength Goal Despite COVID-19 Pitfalls," Army.mil, 12 October 2020, accessed 1 April 2021, [https://www.army.mil/article/239845/army\\_surpasses\\_end\\_strength\\_goal\\_despite\\_covid\\_19\\_pitfalls](https://www.army.mil/article/239845/army_surpasses_end_strength_goal_despite_covid_19_pitfalls); Casey Wardynski, David S. Lyle, and Michael J. Colarusso, *Towards a U.S. Army Officer Corps Strategy for Success: Retaining Talent* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2010), 1–2, accessed 1 April 2021, <https://talent.army.mil/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/SSI-Volume-3.pdf>.
20. Sean Kimmons, "More Than Half of Officers Receive Top Choice in First ATAP Cycle," Army.mil, 28 January 2020, accessed 1 April 2021, [https://www.army.mil/article/232041/over\\_half\\_of\\_officers\\_receive\\_top\\_choice\\_in\\_first\\_atap\\_cycle](https://www.army.mil/article/232041/over_half_of_officers_receive_top_choice_in_first_atap_cycle). There is no data on how many soldiers received their first choice assignment under previous assignment systems.
21. David Ruderman, "HRC Expands Assignment Tool for Active Duty, Enlisted Soldiers," Army.mil, 14 December 2016, accessed 1 April 2021, [https://www.army.mil/article/179562/hrc\\_expands\\_assignment\\_tool\\_for\\_active\\_duty\\_enlisted\\_soldiers](https://www.army.mil/article/179562/hrc_expands_assignment_tool_for_active_duty_enlisted_soldiers). Describing how assignments are prioritized according to the needs of the Army, and soldier preferences come second.
22. ATMTF, *Annual Report: 2019-2020*.
23. U.S. Army Human Resources Command, "AIM2 Marketplace Training: 22-01 Distribution Cycle" (presentation, U.S. Army Human Resources Command, Fort Knox, KY, 25 March 2021), accessed 1 April 2021, <https://www.milsuite.mil/book/docs/DOC-609865>.
24. Please note that \$100,000 is an arbitrary number only picked for illustrative purposes, and the proposed system should dynamically incentivize assignments by responding to preference rates.
25. Wardynski, Lyle, and Colarusso, *Retaining Talent*, 26. The Army also heavily relies on reenlistment bonuses to target retention of soldiers in certain military occupational specialties.
26. Ibid., 27.
27. ATMTF, *Annual Report: 2019-2020*.
28. AR 600-100, *Army Profession and Leadership Policy* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2017), para. 1-7, accessed 6 June 2021, [https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/pdf/web/ARN3758\\_AR\\_600-100\\_FINAL\\_WEB.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ARN3758_AR_600-100_FINAL_WEB.pdf).
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid., Glossary.
31. Kroesen, "Losing the 'Best and Brightest' Again."
32. Kimmons, "More Than Half of Officers Receive Top Choice in First ATAP Cycle."