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John Wayne at His Writing Desk

The Origins of Professional Journals, 1878–1910

Dr. J. P. Clark

The Army faces an array of challenging missions while struggling to keep pace in a rapidly changing world. Although this is a fair description of our current moment, it also describes the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is, therefore, not surprising that military professionals at that earlier time turned to writing. As the articles in this special issue make clear, writing is a great way for individuals to make sense of the problems they face while also contributing to potential solutions. While

our task today is to revitalize professional journals, our predecessors had the additional burden of creating these initial venues for professional discourse. A look back at the four phases of professional writing from the 1870s through the 1900s provides a broader context to the challenges of professional discourse, illuminating potential lessons for today.

Echoes of Today

In the popular imagination, the Army of the late nineteenth century had only one mission—policing the frontier—and that required nothing more than hard riding and common sense. There are no scenes in *Fort Apache* of John Wayne writing for a professional journal, nor any sense that he should have.

In reality, the time was far more complex. The problems at the real Fort Apache in Arizona would be familiar to Afghanistan veterans. The complex internal dynamics of the Southwest Native American nations created a shifting mosaic of friendly, neutral, and hostile factions. The situation was further complicated by adversaries' ability to exploit a porous border, across which was a sometimes helpful, sometimes antagonistic neighbor.

Moreover, the frontier was not the Army's only mission. This was also the era depicted in the television series *The Gilded Age*, a time of intense technological and social change. In the last years of the nineteenth century, the Army actually devoted most of its resources to coast defense as artillerymen, engineers, and ordnance officers developed state-of-the-art optics and electrical systems, intricate hydraulic gun carriages, and advanced propellants and explosives to meet the challenge of defeating fast-moving, armored warships at great distances.[1] Technology also indirectly created a mission for the Army through the profound societal disruptions of urbanization and economic upheaval during the Second Industrial Revolution. The Regular Army and state militia were called upon so often during labor disputes that some officers argued that the Army should make urban constabulary duty its primary role.[2]

In the decade after the Civil War, however, the Army lacked the means to systematically think about and devise solutions to these varied problems. Professional military education was limited to West Point, and there were only a few schools where junior engineers and artillerymen could learn purely technical skills. The field army conducted virtually no training at anything larger than the company level. The greatest problem, however, was isolation. The Regular Army's roughly twenty-seven thousand personnel were scattered over more than a hundred different locations; most individuals served at posts garrisoned by just a handful of officers and one hundred or two hundred soldiers.[3] Personnel policies that limited interchange among the various staff bureaus, corps, branches, and even regiments within a branch were exacerbated geographic dispersion. Finally, the Army had no general staff to direct effort and no doctrine to provide a common tactical framework. In sum, despite the Army being small, it was exceptionally difficult across vast distances to share best practices, debate important issues, and develop solutions.[4]

The Military Service Institution in the 1870s: Top-Down Generalists

In early 1878, a group of officers serving in the various units stationed around New York City and at West Point resolved to address the problem of the Army being "brought together only by war."[5] Without some mechanism for sharing ideas, isolated organizations would develop along diverging lines and generally lose knowledge of the other elements and larger whole. The group also believed that warfare had reached a state of complexity such that a single mind could no longer grasp all of its elements. This required intellectual cooperation as described by the West Point superintendent, "It is only by united and harmonious effort that the many may even approach to that degree of excellence which [ensures] success in war."[6]

To enable such a united and harmonious effort, this group of reformers created the Military Service Institution of the United States (MSI). The MSI was patterned mainly on a British equivalent that still exists today, the Royal United Services Institute, though it was also inspired by the U.S. Naval Institute and built upon an existing professional study group within

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the West Point faculty. In addition to its *Journal of the Military Service Institution* (*JMSI*), the MSI also supported a library and a museum of U.S. Army artifacts.[7]

The MSI benefited from high-level support. Most of the founders and members of its governing council were relatively senior veterans of the Civil War, while the MSI's first president was the commander of all Army forces in the eastern United States, Maj. Gen. Winfield Scott Hancock. With the permission of the secretary of war, Hancock provided the MSI office space within his headquarters on Governors Island. The superintendent at West Point delivered the inaugural address, and the commanding general of the Army, William T. Sherman, wrote several letters commenting on military law that were subsequently published in the first few issues of the journal. With such backing from senior leaders, it was not surprising that within a year, as many as one-fifth of the regular officers were members.[8]

The *JMSI* helped focus intellectual energy through its annual essay contest, with all entrants writing on a topic selected by the MSI's council. It is possible to plot the Army's operational and institutional challenges by tracing the evolution of the essay contest questions over time. The MSI's topics went from "The Indian Problem" and the military features of the U.S.-Canadian border in case of war with the United Kingdom in the 1880s to the lessons of the Spanish-American War and whether military training should be part of public-school curricula in the 1900s. Of course, some topics are evergreen and still relevant today, such as recruiting, fostering esprit de corps, and the army's strategic role. The stature of the first award committee members indicates the contest's prestige: a former secretary of war, a serving general officer, and Rep. Joseph E. Johnston, a West Pointer and former Confederate commander.[9] Surviving letters from some of the Army's leading thinkers suggest that the competition truly motivated them.[10]

The success of the MSI in fostering a vibrant professional culture is exemplified by the career of Arthur L. Wagner. According to historian T. R. Brereton, after several years of garrison duty, Wagner was bored and close to resigning his commission. The twin opportunities of serving as a professor of military science at what is today the University of Florida and winning the 1884 MSI essay contest reinvigorated Wagner's professional interest. He went on to make a number of critical contributions and rise to the rank of brigadier general before his premature death in 1905. For example, he introduced modern tactics instruction at the nascent Fort Leavenworth school; wrote textbooks that taught many of the future senior commanders of the First World War the basics of reconnaissance, security, attack and defense; and oversaw the conduct of the Army's first large-scale realistic field-training exercise, at which he also conducted perhaps the first modern after action review.[11]

Branch Associations in the 1880s: Bottom-Up Specialists

The MSI remained a mainstay of U.S. Army professionalism until World War I, though there were limitations to its generalist approach. In the first issue of the *JMSI*, the institution's secretary urged readers to track developments in other branches: cavalrymen should read about coast defense mines and artillerymen should read about the saber in mounted operations.[12] Yet specialists found they needed outlets within which they could speak to other specialists. The second phase of branch journals reflected this need; it was a bottom-up effort primarily driven by the faculty at branch schools.

It was not coincidental that the growth of professional journals occurred around the same time the Army was significantly expanding the scale and scope of professional military education. Senior leaders like Sherman and Phil Sheridan were responsible for the growing the number of schools by reopening the Artillery School at Fort Monroe, Virginia, and founding new ones such as one for engineers at Willet's Point, New York, and another for infantry and cavalry at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.[13] The senior leaders, however, had a limited vision of professional education; they wanted the schools to do little more than teach basic technical and administrative skills to junior lieutenants.

The expansion in what was taught was due to a bottom-up effort driven by faculty members like Wagner and Emory Upton, who were not content to teach drill regulations and basic unit administration. Sometimes against explicit guidance from senior leaders, these midranking officers pushed the boundaries to teach more advanced, staff college-like subjects. Upton's "Art of War" course at Fort Monroe—going far beyond

ballistics and the employment of guns, students also studied strategy, history, military law, and what today would be called combined arms tactics—was one inspiration for the founding of the Naval War College. The schools also pioneered the use of techniques such as wargaming, map exercises, and terrain walks.[14]

As intellectual hot spots, schools became natural homes for branch journals and associations. The physical proximity of individuals engaged in thinking about common problems created the intellectual stimulus, the presence of libraries to conduct research provided the means, and, at least for the faculty, the need to develop course content also gave some motivation. Cavalrymen at Fort Leavenworth led the way with the formation of the Cavalry Association in 1885—just seven years after the MSI—and with the first issue of its journal appearing in 1888.[15] Within a year, artillerymen at Fort Monroe were ready to follow suit, claiming that the occasional article in the *JMSI* was not sufficient, particularly as they often wanted to discuss highly technical issues that would be of little interest to the other branches.

The prospect of multiple journals potentially competing for authors and readers caused concern, at least among some. Tasker H. Bliss, aide to the Army's commanding general and himself a future chief of staff, warned the editor of the *JMSI* that something had to be done to co-opt the fledgling branch associations before they grew so large as to choke out the parent tree. The editor, however, disputed Bliss's premise that there was a fixed lump of content and subscribers. He noted that the MSI's Fort Leavenworth chapter had gained membership since the creation of the Cavalry Association, while overall article submissions to the *JMSI* remained robust.[16] At least within the Army of the 1880s, there was a reinforcing cycle of intellectual energy and output that created more energy and output.

The Lyceum in the 1890s: Mandatory Writing

Though Bliss was incorrect in believing that the Army could not sustain more than a single journal, there were limits to the intellectual output as demonstrated by the next stage in the development of professional writing—the "officers' lyceum."

The lyceum was the initiative of the Army's top commanding general, Gen. John M. Schofield, who had been one of the early supporters of the MSI. Schofield's ambitious plan was to expand professional writing across the entire officer corps through top-down direction. In 1891, he issued a general order that directed every post commander to establish a lyceum—what today we might call a study group—with two functions. The first was to prepare individuals for their promotion examinations through classroom review of regulations. The second, more ambitious function, was to "to gradually bring the line of the Army to [a] high standard of professional acquirement" by having every lieutenant and captain write an essay on a topic of their choice but approved by the post commander. Due to the *much* slower promotion rates at the time—most officers were not promoted to major until their fifties—the essay requirement applied to all officers with about thirty years of service or less. Over the course of the year, all the officers at any given post would discuss their various essays within the lyceum.[17]

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The results were mixed. Supportive commanders with the intellect and temperament to mentor officers and facilitate discussion produced some successes. Even without such support, motivated officers produced quality papers, some of which were published in the *JMSI* or branch journals. Yet the historical evidence suggests that the lyceums fell far short of Schofield's objectives.[18] Many post commanders did not care or simply did not know how to create an atmosphere of inquiry;

particularly at the smaller posts, there were not sufficient research resources available; and many individuals did not have the skills to conduct worthwhile independent research. As described by one officer who would go on to write the standard American military history textbooks during the early twentieth century, the result was "a constipation of ideas in a flux of words."[19] The Army had not created the conditions for success.

The Infantry Association in the 1900s: Writing for Organizational Advantage

Not all the branches organized their associations and journals at the same pace. The laggard was the infantry, which formed a society in 1893 but did not begin publishing a journal until 1904.[20]

A lot happened in those intervening years. The United States became a global power with the Spanish-American War, which in turn led, directly or indirectly, to a significant expansion of the Army and accompanying influx of new officers; the development of the Army's first comprehensive, tiered system of professional military education; and the creation of a general staff to manage it all. One unfortunate byproduct of these rapid expansions of people and organizations was fighting among the branches for force structure and power.[21]

The *Infantry Journal* was a product of this intraservice rivalry period. As opposed to the first two phases of associations and journals, which came respectively out of geographic concentrations of units and schools, the early editorial staff of the *Infantry Journal* mainly consisted of infantrymen assigned to the newly founded general staff. The rough modern equivalents would be if the MSI were founded at Fort Liberty, North Carolina; the early branch journals at places like Fort Sill, Oklahoma; and the *Infantry Journal* coming from the Pentagon.

The *Infantry Journal* reflected this Washington, D.C., context. Like the other branch journals, most articles were on broad professional topics like techniques for training understrength units or translated extracts from the new Japanese doctrine. The extensive editorial section, however, was openly combative; the same issue as the articles just mentioned also featured complaints about a general marginalization of the infantry and the long period since an infantryman had last served as the superintendent at West Point.[22] The *Infantry Journal* grew so powerful that the Army's chief of staff sent one of his aides to seek the editor's support for pending legislation. Even more startling than the Army's senior officer feeling compelled to win the support of a captain for the service's position was that in this case, the junior officer refused.[23] There is some risk in allowing the flow of ideas, though it is difficult to argue that the Army was not far better for having a vibrant professional culture, even if this did cause some problems for senior leaders.

Implications and Questions for Today

As noted at the outset, there are many similarities between the problems of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, and what we face today. Therefore, it only makes sense that we can find lessons in their solutions as well, particularly considering the emphasis of Army senior leaders on revitalizing professional writing and journals. Writing undeniably strengthens the profession by generating solutions, invigorating individuals, and building communities across space. Yet strangely, military writing seems to come in clusters, even though the work itself is mainly solitary and feeds into virtual communities independent of geography. This was the case in the nineteenth century but is also true today, even in the era of Microsoft Teams and Google Docs. Personal connections matter in multiple ways: colleagues help generate and refine ideas while also providing encouragement and support to see a writing project through to completion. Schools will likely remain intellectual engines because faculty and students regularly wrestle with the problems of their functional communities and have many of the resources necessary to write. But as this brief history demonstrates, other locations and organizations can also become clusters of thought, so long as there is the right combination of leadership, enabling resources, and talent.

The past offers less of a guide in relation to the need to have common places for professional communities to share ideas. In the nineteenth century, the problem was how to sustainably staff and publish a journal. Publications require much work and resources, but those came through a combination of top-down support and bottom-up organization. Today, the bar to publishing in any one of a variety of formats—prose, audio, or video—is little more than a laptop or smartphone with a few apps. But the ease of publication is offset by the difficulty of reaching a significant portion

of the professional community. We need "watering holes" where members of the community can all go for quality content that will persist longer than the refresh of a timeline or feed. In meeting this challenge today, we will have to find our own way.

The final lesson is that one size will not fit all. Even the nineteenth-century Army required multiple forums for professional discussion, each catering to a different set of issues and problems. Some dealt with broad issues of concern across the profession, others dealt with more specific topics of interest to only some subset of specialists. Today's Army has even more specialties, some of which are also in conversation with like specialists in other services, academia, or business. At the same time, there is the opportunity for sharing ideas and tools in more formats: yes, articles but also spreadsheets, code, interactive maps, podcasts, and video. The consistent factor, however, is that these discussions are fundamental to a strong profession, which so long as the forums are oriented around communities confronting shared problems, will never have a lack of material in today's world. ■

Notes

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