

Argumentative Essay on the Evolution of the American NCO

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Non-Commissioned Officers in the United States Army have not always enjoyed the prestige and been viewed as the professional Soldier they have come to be. Non-Commissioned Officers were once looked down upon by Commissioned Officers and snubbed by their allied counterparts. Since the birth of the Continental Army in 1775, the American NCO has undergone many changes. Specific factors, dating as far back as the Revolutionary War, have played significant roles in the development and empowerment of the NCO. Every war and every campaign throughout the Army's history has brought about change.

The NCO has evolved over time due to many factors. Technology, pay and NCO training have been the major factors in the evolution and empowerment of the American NCO.

Throughout history, technology has been the catalysis for the empowerment of the American NCO. The various weapon systems used throughout history have led to more and more responsibility. During the Revolutionary War, the American-French made musket was more accurate than the smooth bore muskets used by the British. Due to this fact, the NCO was placed in charge of well-aimed fire. The Gatling gun, used during the Civil War, was later replaced by the machine gun. This improvement in technology was instrumental in breaking up large formations of Soldiers into smaller groups. This spread Soldiers across the battle field, leading to even more responsibility for the NCO as a small-unit leader. Since World War II, improvements in technology have led to a need for more NCOs with specialized skills in order to sustain and employ the various weapons systems being fielded.

The invention of the internal combustion engine was a major breakthrough in technology. As early as 1916, horse-drawn wagons and mules were being replaced by motor vehicles. The internal combustion engine led to the invention of tanks and airplanes. With these new systems came the need to train and develop crews who could function as a team. These new systems created many opportunities for NCOs to step forward and lead from the front. More specialized training was needed to man and fix this equipment and the NCO was at the forefront. Systems have changed over the years and with every change, there came a need for skilled NCOs to take responsibility. Each vehicle platform was unique, requiring different levels of manning and different types of training.

Technology has always been one of the leading factors in NCO empowerment. Technology has placed the NCO in more positions of greater responsibility than any other factor. The horrific losses of Soldiers caused by improvements in weapons technology created many opportunities for the growth and advancement of the NCO corps. The invention of the internal combustion engine was instrumental and at the forefront of empowering the NCO. With improvements in technology came the need for specialized NCOs who could fix, arm, and man these systems. The NCO corps had a great opportunity to capitalize on technology throughout history. The ever-changing needs created through technology gave many NCOs an opportunity to step up and take charge.

Money is another leading factor. The power of money has always created a social barrier among men and the U.S. Army has not been immune. NCOs would often step down or decline promotion due to the low wages. The NCO has fought a hard battle over

the last 200 years to be rewarded with pay associated with being a tried and true professional Soldier. In the beginning, a Sergeant in the Continental Army was paid 48 shillings a month while a private was paid 40 shillings a month; A difference of only 8 shillings. The Army also took back a small amount of pay for clothes while requiring the Soldier to pay for their own arms and blankets. NCO status was really viewed as a little bit better than the privates and it reflected in the low monthly pay.

Army leaders realized by 1870 that in order to have a professional NCO corps, sergeants pay would not only have to increase but they would also need to pay them better than a private. In 1870, Congress enacted a complex pay bill but it did not address the concerns of army leadership about the low pay of an NCO. This pay act actually allowed a private to make more money than an NCO by allowing the private to receive additional money for extra duty or special details. The NCO was not authorized to perform such duty. Realizing this, sometimes Soldiers would shy away from promotion and others, already pinned to Sergeant, would request a demotion. This pay bill demonstrated to the NCO corps that their worth was still viewed by the majority as a little better than a private.

In 1907, Secretary of War William Howard Taft felt so strongly about the issue of low pay in the Army that he decided to address it with the President. Taft basically argued that to recruit and hold skilled workman such as foreman, mechanics, and clerks, men who could become NCOs, the Army had to compete successfully with industry. If a business man expected to hire and keep foreman who could train unskilled laborers and make them work effectively together, he had to pay them far more than the unskilled laborers. The Army needed to be no different than private industry. Taft's plea inspired

Congress to pass the first Army wide pay bill since 1870. Sergeants pay increased to 30 dollars a month and widened the gap of pay between a sergeant and a private. The private now earned eighteen dollars a month. This pay act showed the NCO corps they were viewed as a needed entity within the Army.

Following World War I, antiwar sentiment was alive. Soldier salaries were cut and the gap in pay between the NCO and private shrunk. The American Great Depression followed and pay remained relatively low until 1943. Pay continued to grow through the Korean and Vietnam War but not at a level that showed the true worth of the American NCO. Following the Korean War, the Army added the pay grades E8 and E9. This change demonstrated the need and importance to retain and reward quality E7s. The Army as a whole was in a slump following the Vietnam War and pay was seen as one of the ways to help fix the problem. It took the Army awhile to figure out the true importance of pay. Many Soldiers and NCOs left the service due to low pay and many refused promotion but today's NCO is paid as a professional Soldier. Congress, fueled by Army leadership finally came to realize the importance money played in retaining quality Soldiers and NCOs.

Another factor of importance is training and education. The Army has paid dearly in blood throughout our history due to the lack of formal NCO training and career progression for enlisted Soldiers. This lack of training prevented the American NCO from reaching his full potential. Officers have always received training in leadership and technical skills while the NCO was mainly seen as a disciplinarian. Many Army leaders thought the NCO corps needed the same professional training as one would expect of professional civilians. Major General Emory Upton wrote "a good noncommissioned

officer can no more be improvised than an officer” as noted in his 1878 book The Armies of Asia and Europe.

Since the birth of the Army in 1775 and throughout the years leading to the Vietnam War, on the job training was the preferred method in teaching NCOs their skill set. Commanders figured they knew their men best and could train them. Time and time again throughout history, some Army leaders would raise the alarm to train the NCO corps but would make little head way. Courses that were available weren't standardized and NCOs often didn't attend them. The Army paid the price time and time again throughout history due to lack of formal training. NCOs were often killed over the course of a battle and there was no one trained to replace them. At the start of just about every conflict, NCOs weren't trained and it resulted in the death of fellow Soldiers as the NCO learned the craft from actually doing it. Courses of instruction used during war time went away following the conflict. Institutional knowledge was lost as NCOs retired or exited the system.

In 1971, the Army instituted the start of our current Non Commissioned Officer Education System. This system included formal training requirements for its Soldiers and NCOs. On 1 October 1975, the Enlisted Personnel Management System was implemented which laid the foundation for upward mobility in different MOSs by creating a career map for Soldiers to follow. In 1980, the Non Commissioned Officers Development Program was instituted which stressed the need for commanders to implement formal leadership training at all levels. It took the Army a long time to realize that on the job training or informal training was inadequate if they wanted a professional army. The Army learned its' lesson and today's NCO Corps is better then it has ever been

before. It owes a lot of this to the formal training opportunities and career progression made available to the enlisted Soldier.

There are many more than the 3 reasons I stated for the empowerment of the NCO. Tactics alone played a profound role in the evolution of the NCO. If you look throughout history though, you will see that technology was the driving factor in the change of tactics. The changes in tactics however, did place a lot more responsibility on the NCO as a small-unit leader. Another reason is leadership opportunities. Although important as leadership has been to the NCOs evolution, it's been as simple as someone stepping up to take charge in the absence of an officer. The NCO has been doing this and performing as a small-unit leader dating as far back as the Militia. Many factors have helped the American NCO evolve. Regardless of the level of importance each factor has played, the combined effort has helped the American NCO evolve into what it is today.

The empowerment of the American NCO has come along way in 200 plus years. NCOs started out with very limited responsibilities. They learned their skill by on the job training, were paid little better than a private yet were always there to pick up the pieces. Technology paved the way and thrust the NCO into more areas of responsibility than any other factor. It took the Army awhile to figure out the importance of pay but today's NCOs are paid top dollar for their service. Lastly, the Army finally realized the need for a better trained NCO corps that could take them into the future. Today's NCO is a highly skilled, well respected, professional Soldier who receives excellent training. The Army has learned its lessons well and there is no going back to the old ways of doing business. The American NCO will only get better in time and will lead the Army well into the future.

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