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Over 60 percent of first-term enlisted Marine marriages end in divorce. Married first-term Marines (corporals and below) encompass two-thirds of the enlisted population and command over 500 million per year in associated costs. Ultimately, cognitive immaturity of the pre-frontal cortex is the root culprit which is underdeveloped until age 25. Consequently, Marines under age 25 lack advanced skills in cause and effect relationships and critical thinking to properly maintain a successful marriage in addition to the rigors of initial assimilation into the Marine Corps. This paper advocates command notification and mandatory pre-marriage counseling for first-term Marines in order to promote good decisions and reduce divorces.

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*United States Marine Corps
Command and Staff College
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2076 South Street
Marine Corps Combat Development Command
Quantico, Virginia 22134-5068*

MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

TITLE: Confronting the Costs of First-Term Marine Marriages:
A Plan for Coping with Reality

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

AUTHOR: Major Jason T. Barnes, USMC

AY 15-16

Mentor and Oral Defense Committee Member: Dr. J. William Gordon

Approved: _____

Date: _____

Oral Defense Committee Member: Dr. Lauren Mackenzie

Approved: _____

Date: 31 Mar 16

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Executive Summary

Title: Confronting the Costs of First-Term Marine Marriages: A Plan for Coping with Reality

Author: Major Jason T. Barnes, United States Marine Corps

Thesis: In order to prevent premature marriages and high divorce rates due to cognitive immaturity, the United States Marine Corps should institute mandatory pre-marriage counseling using existing unit mechanisms and on-base family and individual advocacy agencies for first term Marines who are under age 25.

Discussion: High divorce rates among first-term enlisted married Marines are nothing new in the Marine Corps or among the population of Staff Non-Commissioned Officers and Commissioned Officers who married young. What is shocking, however, is that over 60 percent of first-term enlisted Marine marriages end in divorce. Married first-term Marines (corporals and below) encompass two-thirds of the enlisted population and command over 500 million per year in associated costs.

The number of military marriages through present day is higher compared to civilians of the same demographics. Military members are more likely to marry and have children at younger ages as a result of financial benefits and job stability. Marines tend to marry early to avoid barracks living and associated responsibilities. Money, subsidized childcare, medical care, and off post housing have induced young Marines to exceed manageable stress levels, financial resources, and their cognitive ability to make rational decisions.

Therefore, increased marriages lead to increased divorces. Factors contributing to high divorce rates among first-term marriages include poor decision-making, alcohol abuse, domestic abuse, financial ignorance, isolation, child care, extended family disconnection, and the general stress of military life on both spouses. Ultimately, cognitive immaturity of the pre-frontal cortex is the root culprit which is underdeveloped until age 25. Consequently, Marines under age 25 lack advanced skills in cause and effect relationships and critical thinking to properly maintain a successful marriage in addition to the rigors of initial assimilation into the Marine Corps.

Conclusion: Previous efforts to reduce divorce and the Marine Corps welfare state have included marginal financial incentives for single Marines to remain unmarried, full benefits and pay equal to married Marines, mandatory pre-marriage counseling, and institutional prohibitive measures to deny first-term Marines the right to marry. This paper advocates command notification and mandatory pre-marriage counseling for first-term Marines in order to prevent the perpetuation of poor decisions and divorces and to reduce costs.

DISCLAIMER

THE OPINIONS AND CONCLUSIONS EXPRESSED HEREIN ARE THOSE OF THE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT AUTHOR AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF EITHER THE MARINE CORPS COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE OR ANY OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCY. REFERENCES TO THIS STUDY SHOULD INCLUDE THE FOREGOING STATEMENT.

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Preface

I became interested in marital dissolution at the end my first deployment in the Marine Corps with a Marine Expeditionary Unit. I became well aware that up to ten marriages ended in divorce shortly after our return. As a product of parents who remain married at present date, I began to wonder why couples marry, how young do they marry, and what circumstances lead them to divorce. After all, my parents have sustained a relationship for over 50 years.

During a subsequent tour, I received a brief that linked age and cognitive development to automobile insurance rates. Studies indicate that full brain maturity is achieved, on average, at age 25 when most individuals are capable of advanced critical thinking skills, understanding cause and effect relationships, and maintaining long term commitments.

Research on Marines and divorces span over 25 years and expose many characteristics and solutions regarding young Marines and marriages. The common thread not discussed is cognitive immaturity provided by brain research. While it is well understood that maturity and good decision-making develop over time, it is my desire to provide science in an effort to understand cognitive immaturity, educate young Marines, and prevent unnecessary divorces in the Marine Corps.

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Introduction

The author's interest in junior Marine divorce rates stems from his previous experience as Executive Officer of a Marine Helicopter Squadron. As part of the command team that included the Family Readiness Officer, as well as frequent visibility of other squadrons in the Marine Aircraft Group, it was apparent that there was a problem and that young Marine marriages were failing. Discussions with adjacent executive officers revealed the recurrent theme of poor decision-making among young Marines and spouses as the root cause of marital failure. Subsequent conversations with former platoon and company commanders about young Marine marriages reveal similar frustrations especially in time devoted to related judicial matters. Additionally, the author has noted the abundance of historical research concerning Marine Corps marriages, divorces, and preventative measures to alleviate failure. At present date, the Marine Corps has mechanisms in place to assist commands with young couples desiring marriage. In an effort to make robust use of existing resources and promote good decision-making, this paper advocates the following action: Require command notification and mandatory pre-marriage counseling for first-term Marines desiring marriage.

The demographics and statistics of divorce among junior Marines appear relatively unchanged since 1989 (with understandable increases post-2001 wars in the Middle East) as evidenced by the abundance and frequency of written material on the subject matter. Generally, the Marines Corps' population majority is age 25 or younger and has a higher percentage of Marines at the rank of Private (E-1) through Lance Corporal (E-3) than the other three services.¹ Consequently, the Marine Corps leads all other services in the average youngest age of enlisted married Marines, spouses, and age at first child birth.² The resulting divorces in Fiscal Year

2014 (FY 2014) showed that “More than 90% of all Marines who were divorced this year were enlisted and almost half were Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs).”³

In the early 1990s, the high divorce rate among junior enlisted Marines culminated with Marine Corps Commandant General Carl Mundy’s ALMAR 226/93, which sought to restrict recruiting to only single Marines. It further required those seeking marriage in the junior enlisted ranks to notify their commander.⁴ The ALMAR resulted in congressional and public outcry against Marine Corps leadership and subsequently, the Secretary of Defense ordered the ALMAR rescinded. Media outlets soon weighed in against General Mundy and the Marine Corps. Several negative reactions reflected a sour tone during a socially conscience period in the United States as recounted by *The New York Times*: “The Marines restriction could have been challenged by Congress or in the courts on the ground that it discriminated against married people.”⁵ *The New York Times* further conveys the sentiment from the American Civil Liberties Union; “the announcement raises concerns about the rights of privacy,” said Kathy Parrent, a spokeswoman for the American Civil Liberties Union, before reversal. “It would appear to be based on stereotypes and it seems to be intrusive meddling unrelated to performance.”⁶ Not to be outdone, Pat Schroeder, Representative for Colorado from 1973-1997 remarked about the policy in question: “If they are not allowed to be homosexuals, and they’re not allowed to be married, what are they supposed to do, take cold showers?”⁷ Although a public relations nightmare for the Marine Corps, the subject of junior Marine divorce rates garnered an abundance of published literature, solutions, Department of Defense (DoD) studies, and increased funding toward family readiness programs.

In the wake of the rescinded ALMAR, proposed solutions to high divorce rates included monetary incentives to remain single, equal pay for all first-term single or married Marines, and

mandatory marriage counseling programs. These alternatives have failed to be implemented Marine Corps wide. Furthermore, no solution has addressed brain development, cognitive growth, and decision-making as a scientific influence toward failed marriages. This paper contends that cognitive immaturity of the pre-frontal cortex, as examined by Rae A. Simpson in the “Massachusetts Institute of Technology Young Adult Development Project, 2008”, is the root cause of poor decision making and renders most if not all general solutions to high divorce rates ineffective. Thus, in order to prevent premature marriages and high divorce rates due to cognitive immaturity, the United States Marine Corps should institute mandatory pre-marriage counseling using existing unit mechanisms and on-base, family and individual advocacy agencies for first term Marines who are under age 25.

For clarification, this paper defines first-term Marines in two parts. First, a first-term Marine is defined as an enlisted Marine within his initial four year enlistment contract. Second, a first-term Marine includes the ranks from private to corporal (E-1 through E-4) and generally between the ages of 18-24. Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) in the Marine Corps are corporals and sergeants (E-4 and E5) and demonstrate another demographic that were married between the ranks of private through lance corporal but dissolved the marriage as corporals or sergeants.

This paper is divided into four sections. The first section frames the problem in terms of a historical overview concerning marriage and benefits with regards to the Career Compensation Act of 1949, fiscal requirements, ALMAR 226/93, problems of first-term Marine divorce, and historical solutions. The second section discloses enduring characteristics and statistics of service members, junior Marines, and civilians as it relates to divorce while applying cognitive growth research as a primary factor for failed marriages. The third section exposes current US military

and foreign military restrictions or prerequisites to marriage and proposes a course of action regarding marriage of all first-term Marines. The last section offers next-generation consequences for the road ahead.

Problem-framing

A contributing factor to service member marriages is the abundant financial benefits associated with dependents. These benefits include but are not restricted to Base Housing, Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH), Basic Allowance for Subsistence (BAS), medical and dental coverage, subsidized childcare, and family separation allowances during deployments. These benefits have their origins in the Career Compensation Act of 1949. LtCol Aaron Weiss in his 2012 article *Equal Pay for First-Term Marines* further explains:

Family problems of young enlisted men are nothing new to the Marine Corps or to the Armed Forces. In 1949 Congress passed the Career Compensation Act, which continued the pre-World War II policy of providing family benefits to career servicemen. This law treated all enlisted men corporal and below with less than 7 years of service as single men. According to the act's own language, this decision followed the logic that unmarried enlisted personnel 'make better servicemen,' are 'less apt to create a social problem when they were not married,' and that any allowances should 'be structured so as to discourage them from marrying.'

The rank restriction was suspended when the Korean War broke out in 1950, however, Congress recognized that it was unfair to deny family benefits to married men who were involuntary inducted through Selective Service and Reserve mobilization. When the draft was allowed to expire in 1973, lawmakers opted to continue the suspension. As the Services transformed back into an all-volunteer force, pay hikes for enlisted personnel became such a key recruiting tool that Congress soon modified the 1949 Career Compensation Act to make them permanent.⁸

Marital benefits provide financial stability and marital resiliency while contributing to unintended consequences of younger marriages, divorces, and higher birth rates. Comparing enlisted and civilian divorce rates, Jennifer Hickey Lundquist cites that marriage rates in military services are extraordinarily high and are a normative process given the unique economic benefits

to those who face poor prospects otherwise.⁹ Alternatively, higher rates of military marriages evolve into higher rates of divorce due to the same institutional characteristics of military life. In this regard, Lundquist states “To the extent that material incentives unite couples who would not otherwise have married, such marriages may be built on weak foundations and divorce may therefore be prevalent.”¹⁰ Lastly, military women show higher birth rates compared to civilian counterparts. Lundquist cites that enlisted women marry earlier and more often than civilians which results in early childbearing.¹¹ Regarding fertility among women in the military Lundquist concludes, “Pregnancies within the military can result from a desire to take advantage of family-friendly benefits, a desire to leave the military, or inadvertence.”¹²

The temptations of marital benefits are inducing to Marines but expensive to fulfill by the Marine Corps. Manpower costs have increased nearly 150 percent since the mid-1990s and account for 60 percent of the Marine Corps Total Obligation Authority (TOA). One example is rising BAH costs especially in high property value regions. BAH in Washington DC, California, or Hawaii at 22,000 dollars per year and additional dislocation allowance of 250 dollars a month for family separation allowance during deployments, costs the Marine Corps over 500 million dollars per year.¹³

Base housing comprises more costs for the Navy and Marine Corps. Financial data from 1997-1998 show construction costs at 260.4 million and 224.9 million respectively.¹⁴ Alternatively, total costs for construction, maintenance, and operations for FY16 are estimated at 370 million per the Department of the Navy 2016 Budget.¹⁵

Healthcare remains an expensive endeavor for the Navy-Marine Corps Team. The DoD Fiscal Year 2016 Budget Overview Request states, “In this constrained fiscal environment, growing health care costs will limit the Department’s ability to fund readiness and modernization

requirements. From a historical perspective, the Department of the Navy has seen health care costs grow from 4 percent of the Department's base budget in 1990 to nearly 10 percent in 2014."¹⁶ As such, the Navy request 47.8 billion dollars to fund medical readiness for all personnel and dependents.¹⁷

The above-mentioned information was similar to the fiscal and military dependent environment in the early 1990s. As a result of studies and point papers during that time, Commandant of the Marine Corps General Carl Mundy issued ALMAR 226/93: "*Fostering Responsible Choices for First-Term Marines.*" Contrary to negative publicity and misleading interpretations, ALMAR 226/93 did not restrict Marines from entering marriage. What ALMAR 226/93 did require was the following: 1) Institute a gradual reduction and elimination of recruiting married, non-prior service regular accessions. 2) Educate and Inform Marines at all unit functions on the rigorous nature of Marine Corps high tempo deployments, separations, stress on relationships, and fiscal burdens associated with marriage. 3) Develop an educational awareness program in support of delaying marriage spanning from recruit training, MOS schools, to final unit assignment. 4) Mandatory notification (not permission) of a first-term Marine's desire to marry to the commanding officer and senior enlisted leadership, and finally 5) Mandatory counseling prior to or after a first-term Marine (optional for spouse) enters a marriage.¹⁸ Despite an honest effort to eliminate divorces, save money, and educate Marines, public and political fallout ensued and the ALMAR was rescinded one week later.

General Mundy's actions coincided with many Marine leaders at all levels who estimated that 90 percent of their time was spent on 10 percent of their Marines and marriage related issues. Over time, historical trends leading to first-term Marine marriages and divorces are apparent: lure of money and the financial illusion to support multiple dependents off base in

expensive local economies; leaving the barracks; the need to feel less isolated; lack of forethought and insight to the rigors of marriage; and lastly, immaturity.¹⁹

For over twenty years, solutions to high divorce rates in the Marine Corps have peppered professional military journals, schools, and adjacent civilian publications. Some historical solutions to reduce first-term marriages and divorces from the last 25 years include the following:

- 1) Major Thomas M. Ochala, USMC, 1990, Marine Corps University Master of Military Studies (MMS): *The Future Marine Corps: Expeditionary Force in Readiness or Day Care Center*. Major Ochala proposes restricting recruits who have dependents and restricting marriage of first-term Marines until re-enlistment with additional command permission. It should be noted that Marine dependents outnumbered actual Marines during the much of the 1980s causing extreme pressure on unit readiness and family services.²⁰
- 2) Captain Thomas A. Wagoner, USMC, 1999, Marine Corps Gazette: *The single Marine Incentive Program*. Captain Wagoner proposes a graduated yearly payment to Marines who remain single up to the end of their first enlistment. His intent was to prevent the financial lure of marriage and provide a “tactical pause” before committing to a legal relationship.²¹
- 3) Major Thomas G. Holden, USMC, 2000, Marine Corps University MMS: *Marine Corps Readiness: The Costs of First-Term Dependency*. Major Holden exposes the costs of first-term dependency while proposing a metric in order to connect first-term marriages and divorces to unit readiness to justify preventative measures to failed marriages.²²

- 4) Captain Alfred B. Connable, USMC, 2002, *Marine Corps Gazette: A New Look at an Old Idea for First-Term Marriage*. Captain Connable proposes the following: married recruits must submit to a thorough financial analysis prior to entering service to ensure survivability on a military pay scale, command screening and permission to marry, and mandatory pre-marital counseling, financial counseling, and follow-up appointments with the chain of command.²³
- 5) Lieutenant Colonel Aaron D. Weiss, USMC, 2012, *Marine Corps Gazette: Equal Pay for First-Term Marines, Touching the Third Rail*. Lieutenant Colonel Weiss recommends that single Marines receive equal pay to that of married Marines thereby reducing the strong marriage incentive that prevails among first-term Marines.²⁴
- 6) Lieutenant Commander Michael E. Foskett, USN, 2013, *Marine Corps University MMS: The Impact of Divorce Among Marines E-5 and Below, on Unit Operational Readiness*. Lieutenant Commander Foskett proposes a robust mandatory training and counseling program prior to marriage in order to educate Marines on relationships, the nature of attraction and compatibility, relationship stress in the Marine Corps, and marital fidelity.²⁵ Lieutenant Commander Foskett's program is currently employed within Third Marine Aircraft Wing and is under review for implementation in the First Marine Expeditionary Force.

The trends in military benefits since the inception of the all-volunteer force remain in place and provide a competitive alternative and attractive option to private sector employment. In

most cases, young military members have the ability to start a family earlier than their civilian counterparts. The byproduct however is that many young couples also divorce at higher rates than their civilian counterparts due to youth, inexperience, and poor decision-making.

Characteristics of First-Term Service-Members, Families, and Cognitive Growth Research

This section will describe general characteristics of first-term service members and Marines who are generally between the ages of 18-24. While considered adults, this section will demonstrate that advanced decision making among young adults remains under construction and not fully developed until age 25 as evident by cognitive growth research.

The Department of Defense recruits quality individuals for service in the active component (AC) force. During recruiting, the DoD requires at least 90 percent of recruits be classified as Tier 1. Tier 1 is defined as high school graduates with a diploma and may include people with additional educational backgrounds such college courses or certified advanced technical training and trade skills. Tier 1 recruits are sought because they are more likely complete their first term of service while those in lower tier categories are less likely to complete a first term enlistment. Additionally, the DoD requires that 60 percent of accessions score at the 50th percentile or higher on the Armed Forces Qualifying Test (AFQT). In FY13, 75 percent of service accessions scored at or above the 50th percentile with the Marine Corps recording at the 74 percent mark.²⁶ Furthermore, it is quite the myth that the majority of military recruits are from lower socio-economics classes. The opposite is true. Military recruits come from predominantly middle class household incomes between \$47,000.00 to \$76,000.00 dollars annually.²⁷ In summary, the DoD recruits high quality members who outperform their civilian counterparts on

basic educational requirements and qualifying tests and are from mostly middle-income families and neighborhoods.

Family formation among military members offers additional differences when compared to the civilian population of the US. Enlisted men are more likely to be married than their civilian counterparts. When compared to civilian males beginning at age 17, a sharp increase in military marriages by age 24 indicates that 49 percent of enlisted men are married compared to 15 percent of 24 year old civilians.²⁸ Additionally, “By their late thirties, about 70 percent of male civilians and 85 percent of male enlisted personnel are married. In contrast, both the female civilian benchmark rate and the rate for enlisted women level off at about 60 percent married. Enlisted women in their twenties, however, are considerably more likely to be married than the civilian comparison group.”²⁹ For reasons previously mentioned in this paper, enlisted personnel historically marry and form families at younger ages than those in the civilian population.

In regards to demographics and population, the Marine Corps is the youngest and smallest of the four military services. Considering young enlisted Marines, 12 percent are teenagers, 23 percent may not legally buy or consume alcohol, 64 percent are age 25 or younger, and 38 percent hold the rank of Private through Lance Corporal (E-1 to E3).³⁰

The Marine Corps family unit is also younger than those of the four services. The average age of a Marine at birth of first child is 24.3. The average age for a married enlisted Marine is 27.8. The average age of a Marine spouse is 29.1. As of June 2015, 16.7 percent of Marines from the rank of Private through Lance Corporal were married while 50.9 percent of Marines of Corporals and Sergeants were married. Additionally, Marines from the rank of Private to

Sergeant claimed over 67,000 dependents and were only second to Staff Non-Commissioned Officers who claimed over 70,000 dependents.³¹

Overall, the department of defense is committed to recruiting intelligent, young personnel to fill its ranks in all military branches. After entering the service, many first-term young adults apply service benefits toward family building with resources that might otherwise be delayed for several years in the civilian sector. While all first term service-members are generally the same age, a first-term Marine and the Marine Corps as a service is traditionally younger than junior enlisted members of the other three branches.

Many young adults entering military service who start families during their first term exhibit general characteristics of poor decision-making that lead to high divorce rates. According to the *2015 Marine Corps Demographic Update*, more than 90 Percent of Marine divorces were enlisted, 17 percent were from the rank of Private to Lance Corporal and 47 percent were NCOs.³² This incorporates ages 18-25. Reasons for high divorce rates in the military and the Marine Corps are financial ignorance, stress, and ultimately youth and cognitive immaturity.

It should be no surprise that the over 30,000 teenagers/young adults that enter the Marine Corps every year have financial difficulty. In fact, Marine and Army enlistees report more financial problems out of all four services.³³ A first-term Marine's path to financial challenge begins at boot camp that includes an automatic enrollment in the direct deposit system. Direct deposit is problematic as most Marines have no hands-on, basic account balancing or financial planning skills. Actual checks or cash are never seen, which leads to a false sense of unlimited spending via check cards and credit cards. Spending and debt becomes so excessive that some Marines write bad checks to cover bills or to increase their spending power.³⁴ Furthermore, concerning the Deferred Payment Plan (DPP) offered by base exchanges, "the Marine Corps has

a higher rate of DPP indebtedness than other services (12%).³⁵ The DPP is closely monitored at all locations. When small items and/or food are purchased under the DPP, it is a key indicator that Marine Families are in financial trouble.³⁶ Furthermore, studies have shown that when families argue about finances once a week, their marriage is 30 percent more likely to end in divorce.³⁷ Other financial complications include new car payments, high interest rate payday loans, and high phone bills.

Stress in the military is a by-product of greedy institutions: the military service and the family. Both institutions demand full attention and devotion making balance hard to achieve. First, the military requires frequent relocation. The physical and mental stress involved with changing schools and spousal re-employment negatively affects a military family obligated to frequent moves which may exaggerate stress more during international relocations.³⁸ A second stressor is separation from family members during deployments. Separations during deployment impose higher workloads and responsibilities on the spouse and are compounded when child care and spouse employment are involved. Without physical presence and assistance from the military member, childcare, health care appointments, discipline, and home repairs overburden the spouse and impose a stressful atmosphere upon all the dependents.³⁹

Financial ignorance, stress, and other issues leading to divorce involve poor decision making which is a result of cognitive immaturity. For many years it was thought that the brain was fully developed during a person's teenage years.⁴⁰ However, brain development research from the past decade indicates the brain is not fully developed until age 25 or older. Researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Young Adult Development Project have identified three major development shifts in brain maturation: Adolescence (early to middle teens), Young Adult (late teens and early twenties), and Later Adulthood (middle twenties and

after).⁴¹ A description of the three shifts in development and physical brain maturation will explain why young adults and first-term Marines make poor decisions that lead to divorce.

Adolescent years are marked by abstract thinking, more intense emotions, increased sensation seeking, sensitivity to alcohol and drugs, and changes in sleep cycles. Adolescents during this stage demonstrate limitations in “right and wrong thinking, ‘Instrumental focus’, and emotional regulation.”⁴² Young Adults demonstrate the following traits: “Greater complexity of thinking, critical thinking, more integration of the cognitive and emotional, relationships based on shared values and mutuality, respect for diversity, modified risk taking, decisions based on consequences and impact to others.”⁴³ However, young adults are limited in “abstract principles, following versus shaping rules and roles, and external versus internal basis for decisions.”⁴⁴ Later adults show advanced thinking and decision making in all categories especially in the areas of complexity, big picture thinking, self-evaluation, and internalized commitment to work and relationships.⁴⁵

The three shifts in development are related to current accepted patterns of brain development. It was long thought that brain development was complete at an early age possibly due to the fact that by age six, the brain has reached 95 percent of its full adult size.⁴⁶ Current research from the past decade demonstrates that the brain continues to grow and change in young people and is only 80 percent developed during adolescence. This growth process involves the largest part of the brain called the cortex. The cortex is divided into two lobes and matures from back to front. As grey matter thickens at the onset of puberty, the overabundances of synaptic connections are pruned back by the brain in order to create specialized brain regions and make information transmission more efficient. The next step is myelination that provides a sheath of fatty cell material around neuronal axons providing higher speeds of transmission and increased

integration of brain activity. Myelination is inferred through the presence of white matter that propagates during brain development from back to front while replacing grey matter.⁴⁷ The last section to mature is pre-frontal cortex, which reaches full development sometime in the mid-twenties. Doctor Sara Johnson explains in her article about adolescent maturity and the brain, “The prefrontal cortex coordinates higher-order cognitive processes and executive functioning. Executive functions are a set of supervisory cognitive skills needed for goal-directed behavior, including planning, response inhibition, working memory, and attention. These skills allow an individual to pause long enough to take stock of a situation, assess his or her options, plan a course of action, and execute it. Poor executive functioning leads to difficulty with planning, attention, using feedback, and mental inflexibility, all of which could undermine judgment and decision making.”⁴⁸ Additional studies indicate that drug and alcohol use can hinder this period of growth for young adults and cause irreparable damage.⁴⁹

While it is common knowledge that teenagers and young adults are still maturing in brain development and decision-making, historical and present day evidence pertaining to age centric policies remains commonplace. Doctor Johnson recounts a historical age centric policy, “in 13th century England, when feudal concerns were paramount, the age of majority was raised from 15 to 21 years, citing the strength needed to bear the weight of protective armor and the greater skill required for fighting on horseback.”⁵⁰ A present day example is automobile insurance rates. Drivers at age 25 witness a substantial drop in rates compared to drivers between ages 16 through 24. In the past, renting a car was afforded only to drivers age 25 and over. Currently, drivers under 25 may rent cars but at higher rental rates. The legal age for buying and drinking alcohol was raised from 18 to 21 in the US throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Similarly, the

minimum age to be elected to political service varies by office in the U.S.: 25 years for the House of Representatives, 30 years for the Senate, and 35 years for President.

Based on age, one would assume that a military member from age 18 to 24, bearing dangerous responsibilities with dire consequences, could successfully navigate the complexities of marriage in conjunction with high tempo deployment cycles. Brain development studies in conjunction with timeless statistics and characteristics of adolescents and young adults, demonstrate that a legal age is not synonymous with maturity.

Course of Action

Restricting Marines from marriage is not an issue to take lightly. The political fallout from ALMAR 226/93 may have been prevented if efforts to gain congressional support (similar to the Marine Corps battle for survival), and socialization with the Secretary of Navy and Secretary of Defense were undertaken. At present date, restrictions on marriage are in place in two aspects of the US military. First is the restriction of marriage within Marine Security Guard (MSG) units. According to policy, Sergeants and below may not have legal custody of any dependents and may not be married. This is due to the austere and dangerous locations assigned to these Marines during their first two assignments and the absence of normal family security, support, and quality standards of living.⁵¹ The second restriction on marriage remains at the military service academies. No cadet is allowed a spouse during the four-year tenure in order for cadets to focus on the rigorous academic program and plethora of extracurricular activities during the school year and summer breaks.⁵²

Compared to other countries, most do not restrict marriage to first term junior members. However, in certain countries, military members living with a civilian in a “state a marriage,”

may apply for a “recognized relationship” from the command in order to receive benefits without entering into an official state of matrimony. The commanding officer may grant the relationship and/or refer the case to a chaplain for appropriate counseling to satisfy the requirement.⁵³ While no restrictions exist for the officer corps, one mantra from the Australian Army that demonstrates the progression of maturity and responsibility regarding the appropriate rank to be married states: “lieutenants can’t, captains can, majors should, and colonels must.”⁵⁴ Lastly, in response to Representative Pat Schroeder’s opinion that General Mundy’s proposed marriage policy was stricter than the Vatican’s Swiss Guard rules of marriage, Commander E.T. Gomulka, Navy Chaplain, states in a *Chicago Tribune* editorial, “The truth is that the Swiss Guards do not accept married Swiss recruits. Swiss Guards, recruited between the ages of 19 and 25, cannot marry until they have achieved the rank of corporal.”⁵⁵ Commander Gomulka further writes, “If the Marine Corps followed the lead of the Swiss Guards, our 17-18-year-old enlistees would have to wait until they were 23 to 24-years-old before they could marry.”⁵⁶ One could surmise that age appropriate responsibilities are recognized nationally and internationally but developing and enforcing policies that define adulthood remain inconsistent.

Previous solutions to reduce first-term marriages and divorces outlined earlier in this paper had some merits to thought and intent. However, any money provided to Marines as an incentive to remain single is against the Marine Corps’s interest as a service that espouses a “stewardship of the peoples’ money.” The national economy and the Marine Corps will benefit in the frugality of policies that enhance manning, training, and equipping the Marine Corps as the nation’s “Force in Readiness.” This paper also acknowledges the legalities and difficulties in restricting first-term Marines the right to marry. General Mundy’s staff, to include the Staff

Judge Advocate, researched the subject well and ultimately concluded that denying Marines the right to marry would not endure legal scrutiny or congressional inquiry.⁵⁷

This paper advocates command notification and mandatory counseling programs prior to all first term Marine marriages. Once a Marine notifies his supervisor of intent to marry, the command and the couple involved will utilize existing mechanisms at the battalion/squadron and base level in order to save money and prevent poor decision-making that leads to divorce.

The first step for a Marine desiring marriage is to notify his chain of command. Once notification is made, the Marine's supervisor briefs the situation to the unit's Force Preservation Council (FPC). The FPC is a Marine Corps directed body chaired in most cases by the commanding officer and attended by command team members and key unit personnel to include but not limited to, the Family Readiness Officer, Navy Chaplain, Unit Surgeon, and Marine Family Life Counselor (MFLC). The FPC's function is to identify Marines experiencing challenging issues (family, work, mental and physical health), implement solutions, and monitor the progress to resolution. In this case, a candidate for marriage will be briefed to the FPC, placed on the FPC tracker due to a life changing event, and monitored (in most cases) through six months of marriage.

Next, the Marine is issued a pre-marriage checklist and marriage package that includes a brief with the unit Sergeant Major and Commanding Officer to begin his process. At this stage, the section chief monitors the Marine's progress and ensures program completion. The Marine's marriage package includes contact information for the appropriate mandatory counseling programs with the chaplain, counselors, and base financial services. While the Marine Corps may not order spouses to receive counseling, attendance is highly encouraged, especially as some programs are specifically designed for spouses.

This paper envisions a certified counselor as the primary director of the marriage education program who will direct the Marine to a Navy Chaplain or a non-religious advisor. While the delivery may be religious or secular in nature, the counseling program should espouse elements of cognitive brain development contained in this paper, robust financial education, communication training, spousal education program options, and compatibility workshops. The spousal option will be perceived as a positive moral approach to family building and good decision-making toward a long-term successful relationship. It will provide that “tactical pause” for young couples that may have misplaced incentives for marriage and provide an opportunity to apply deliberate critical thinking (similar to the tenants of Operational Risk Management) toward long-term consequences. In an effort to expose the realities and pains of divorce, the program shall conclude by educating young couples on the process of divorce to include costs, divorce rules by states concerned, and the Uniformed Code of Military Justice.

Concurrent with marriage and financial counseling, the Marine and Spouse will conduct the remaining checklist items in order to familiarize themselves with administrative changes to official records, on-base resources for spouses and families, and state/federal government requirements and fees. These items include but are not limited to: Exceptional Family Member Programs (EFMP), Family Care Centers, housing allowances, Family Readiness Programs for spouses, Family Care Plan updates, wills, military ID cards, and medical and dental enrollments.

Once the program and checklists are complete, the Marine will report to his section leader with all documented evidence. The section leader will review and verify accuracy and completion and report the Marine’s progress at the next monthly FPC and for six months post official date of marriage.

The Road Ahead

All research trends and statistics indicate that many first-term Marines will continue to marry young and divorce young. If no program is implemented, the Marine Corps will continue to experience higher divorce rates than the civilian sector of the United States. In addition to economic impacts to the Marine Corps, marriage and divorce rates will adversely impact the children of divorce and perpetuate negative behavior.

Children of divorced families often exhibit low trust in regards to relationships. From adolescent dating to adult relationships, women in particular feel less trust and satisfaction in romantic relationships. Children from divorced families fear being rejected which hinders a deepening of their relationships. Other individuals from divorced families believe that relationships are ripe with infidelity and dishonesty and approach relationships with caution. Persons raised in divorced families tend to have negative attitudes toward marriage and more positive attitudes toward divorce. Thus, the negative attitude toward marriage leads to less commitment to relationships and lower relationship quality.⁵⁸

For younger children, emotional security is more fragile during this time due to feelings of abandonment. Depending on the child's age, insecurities may manifest in the following ways: intense anger towards self and others, rule breaking, sleep problems, defying authority, guilt, withdrawal, substance abuse, violence, and suicidal ideations. Unfortunately, young children are saddled with thoughts of being responsible for their parent's divorce and show a declination in extracurricular activities from apathy or the financial strain of a single parent home. Moreover, the single parent home involves less supervision and mentorship, which leads to the child's potential for poor decision-making and nefarious habits. Consequently, the child of divorce does not learn proper social skills in the home such as cooperation, negotiation, and compromise.

With the lack of proper role modeling, the child's ill-advised behaviors increase the likelihood of future conflict in personal relationships and the forming of satisfying relationships more challenging.⁵⁹ Finally, research indicates that children of divorce are 40 percent more likely to experience a marriage ending in divorce and if a child's parents married others after divorce, the child is 91 percent more likely to experience a divorce.⁶⁰

The culminating effects of divorce will not produce a beneficial return on investment. In the future, the Marine Corps will realize that young Marines and spouses were not returned to society in a better state than initial entry into the Marine Corps due to broken families and the exponential effects of generational divorce on future recruits.

Conclusion

The United States Department of Defense recruits high quality personnel who routinely demonstrate higher proficiency in mental and physical abilities than the average population.⁶¹ Our military service members bear tremendous responsibilities and receive world-class training, abundant quality of life benefits, and robust family support. Still, military life requires long hours at work, long deployments from home, and perpetual stress of combat and mission accomplishment. And yet, for the Marine Corps, first-term Marines maintain a 60-80 percent divorce rate compared to the 40-50 percent divorce rate for the civilian population.⁶²

The current brain research studies indicate that young adults between the ages of 18-24 have not reached pre-frontal cortex maturation. Insurance rates and age related policies and laws indicate this norm associated with brain development and decision-making. While a Marine can be structurally trained for specific war fighting tasks and related problem-solving situations, his

ability to establish and maintain a functional marriage is historically failing due to cognitive immaturity.⁶³

In the past, the Marine Corps came under scrutiny for high sexual assault rates and high suicide rates, which at times, were both above the national averages. Congress mandated robust programs and strict timelines that added to the plethora of well-established annual training regimens. New billets and certification requirements meant more time spent away from standard mission sets to address sexual assaults and suicides.⁶⁴

The Marine Corps must confront the problem of first-term divorces. If it can produce an effort to combat suicides and sexual assault rates that were exceeding national averages, the Marine Corps should commit to reducing divorce rates that are higher than the national average. This effort could prevent the perpetuation of poor-decision making and save money that is essential for other war fighting efforts. The Marine Corps can reduce the rate of first-term divorces by utilizing existing mechanisms to educate Marines about cognitive immaturity, good-decision-making, and lifelong commitments. It is a moral imperative that the Marine Corps preserve the sanctity of marriage, prevent future generation divorces, and maintain its status as a trustworthy steward of the people's money.

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