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Student Essay

OPMS, MILPERCEN and
the Corps: A Commentary

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Kirk Williams

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ABSTRACT

The Officer Personnel Management System (OPMS) was the first significant change to Army officer utilization and career management since 1947. Even though, as of this writing, portions have been in effect for 10 years it remains controversial. The essay reviews the evolutionary development of OPMS, the organizational steps taken to manage it and its reception by the officer corps. A principal theme of the author is that implementation of OPMS cut too many of the traditional human connectors within the personnel structure in the drive to systematize the first truly centralized form of officer management. This concentration on the science of the business overlooked the equally important art of personnel management which created several dissatisfiers. Within recent years there has been a redressal of this imbalance and the essay concludes that OPMS is a better management form and should be left alone to mature.



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INTRODUCTION

"No system of management, no form of words, no structure of organization can be any substitute for the close personal contact between men, in as wide a variety of situations as possible, which is the basis of confidence and trust and the fundamental principle upon which the exercise of the management of men must rest."¹

In 1979 the Army published a remarkably critical paper outlining the perception of the Officer Personnel Management System (OPMS) as determined by a survey of field grade officers in the winter of 1977-78. The Chief of Staff, General Rogers, personally signed the "foreword," the text of which admitted that all was not perceived as being well. Nevertheless he reaffirmed the Army leadership's commitment to it as an evolutionary process and solicited the support of the Army Officer Corps.² One year later the new Chief of Staff, General Meyer, published a White Paper setting down his concept of the needs of the Army for the 1980's. His most important challenge was manning the force³ and, while not wavering from commitment to the new process of officer management, it is no revelation to anyone who has heard him speak as Chief of Staff to say that he has been critical of personnel policies which he considered detrimental to cohesion and therefore to readiness. From the White Paper: "In the longer term we must develop a more effective personnel management strategy. . . ."⁴ Were we better off under the old system? What went amiss in the transition? Was the discomfort of commanders and the officer corps rooted in perception or reality? After 10 years under OPMS, where are we? The scope of this essay is to look at these questions concerning officer management by means of a revisitation of the origins of OPMS, a tour of MILPERCEN from the inside, and a critical commentary on the findings of the 1977-78 MILPERCEN

survey. Be forewarned that the bias of the author was formed by being a participant in all of this for nearly seven years.

EVOLUTION TO OPMS

Several unfavorable events occurring within the Army during the past few years have been a matter of grave concern to me. These have served to focus attention on the state of discipline, integrity, morality, ethics, and professionalism in the Army.

By no means do I believe that the Army as an institution is in a moral crisis. However, these incidents have emphasized the need for a thorough review of certain areas and practices within the Army, and an analysis may indicate that prompt, corrective actions are necessary.⁵

With these rather sobering paragraphs, on 18 April 1970, the Chief of Staff, General Westmoreland, began his directive to the Commandant of the Army War College to conduct what became the Study on Military Professionalism. The study reported back a professional climate in which there was disharmony between traditional, still accepted ideals and the actual, operative standards; that the pervasiveness of this climate in consort with understandable human motives for personal recognition indicated the situation was not self-correcting; and, this divergence between what should be and what is, was condoned or even engendered by certain Army policies regarding officer evaluation, selection for promotion, career concepts and assignment policies.⁶

Among others, recommendations were made to directly assign to field grade command billets, to give stability in command precedence over all other considerations and do something with the standard (successful) combat arms career pattern of command at every level plus high level staff. Rapid rotation in command was seen as one of the variances from the ideal (ticket punching).⁷ The road to OPMS was opened--widely. In subsequent guidance to the DCSPER to examine steps to increase professionalism the Chief of Staff remarked that the study suggested that the personnel system

produced an officer corps which tended "to become a group of jacks of all trades and masters of none."⁸ Accordingly, the first task to be addressed was command assignment matters, but specialization was also to receive attention. "A review of the command system . . . will force us to address our policies for encouraging and permitting specialization."⁹ The ensuing DCSPER study group fielded the original OPMS plan for comment in July 1971. The philosophical basis of OPMS set forth in the covering letter was:

1. Improve the professional climate.
2. Early identification and development of those most qualified for command.
3. Allow for specialization without undue restriction of promotion and schooling opportunities.
4. Provide a satisfying career for that large segment of the officer corps who are neither commanders nor specialists.¹⁰

The philosophical basis of OPMS I was easy to understand compared to the problems of operating it within the structure of Officer Personnel Directorate (OPD). At the time the original plan was staffed many internal organizational problems remained unsolved. In the main these resulted from a squashing down of the new scheme on top of the old with not enough either melded together or thrown out. The traditional OPD Career Branches were to be retained--they were not under the later form--but their turf skirmishes made sorting out responsibility for jointly or commonly possessed MOS a contentious process. Field response was guarded.¹¹ While the goals were applauded a go-more-slowly attitude prevailed. By early 1972 a revised concept had been developed. Centralized designation (selection) of

commanders and stability (18-24 months) in command remained cornerstones of the concept. Following selection for promotion to lieutenant colonel and colonel boards, would be convened to designate these officers for continued command, specialized (the old Specialty Program) or functional (the remaining staff positions) development. Under further scrutiny these latter two were meshed and the dual track concept of a primary and secondary skill evolved. Skill or specialty description of an officer's qualification required similar recoding of all Army position authorizations from branch to specialty. After this was done, the Army had for the first time a logical approach to match faces with spaces--on the basis of the work actually performed. This framework formed a foundation for accessioning, training and utilization that remains in effect.

As progress continued in 1973 towards full implementation, General Abrams became seriously concerned that OPMS would be so inflexible, so complex to manage; and so rooted in specialization due to the narrow mold forced on each officer that the unity of the officer corps would be undermined.¹² He needed reassurance that OPMS had been designed with adequate consideration given the overriding broad interests of the Army. The DCSPER responded with:

The work that has gone into OPMS is good for the Army. This has been the most thorough study of the Army's needs and the officer corps since at least 1947. . . . OPMS is far more evolutionary than revolutionary; and with it or without the title of 'OPMS,' we will probably undertake most of the programs and actions brought together under the aegis of OPMS.¹³

Nevertheless, General Abrams was far from alone in his doubts.

Despite the reservations of many the strong appeal of OPMS lay in its promise to improve the state of officer professionalism. In an article in

Army appearing in December 1971, Hauser and Bradford also saw OPMS as the way to rid the Army of what they considered ethically improper, system driven seeking after command because that was what one did to get ahead as opposed to for its own sake. They also advocated formal recognition of specialists. In fact, it suggested that command be treated as a specialty.¹⁴

With the publication of DA Pamphlet 600-3 in March 1974, the commitment to OPMS was confirmed. In the aftermath of Vietnam, reform and change were powerful forces.

THE MILPERCEN ENVIRONMENT

MILPERCEN was established on 15 January 1973. Although this was well into the transition to OPMS no connection existed between the two events. Prompted initially by intermittent Congressional pressure to reduce the number of activities in the National Capital Region (NCR) and a subsequent recommendation of Staff Management Division, Office, Chief of Staff Army, to consolidate all departmental personnel functions under one roof, the Chief of Staff approved the concept following a Comptroller of the Army study of Class II Activities of the Army Staff.¹⁵ All functional elements having anything to do with the operation of the Army personnel system were consolidated in the Hoffman Building. Officer Personnel Directorate transferred intact from near Ft. McNair and continued as before. It was now, however, no longer part of the Army General Staff and its military work force did not qualify for the General Staff Identification Badge. Besides whatever individual perceptions of the loss of this recognition meant, the visible symbol of which is held in higher esteem by those who don't wear it than by those who do, there began to be a subtle diminution of the new center's relative authority. After a time it became easier to identify who "they"--as in "we" and "they"--were without treading directly on the Chief of Staff's toes.

What sort of organization was MILPERCEN and how were they equipped to handle the on-rushing OPMS?

MILPERCEN was and still largely is set up along product versus functional lines. It had an officer product, an enlisted product, a data product and a Personnel and Records Division then, the only one which arrived organized on a functional basis because it supported both Officer

Personnel Directorate (OPD) and Enlisted Personnel Directorate (EPD). The first three had brigadier generals, the latter a colonel. His life was not an easy one. There was really no staff at the commander's level. The staff which existed at the headquarters level had functional responsibilities of its own. In short, MILPERCEN began as an amalgamation of separate functions who, after consolidation, continued their separateness. As time went on, however, direction and control from the CG became stronger and more evident.

Once committed, the Army's mission in 1975 was to make OPMS work, not the easiest chore of which was selling it to the Officer Corps. This task fell to MILPERCEN. One of the most dynamic and outgoing general officers of his day, MG Bobby Gard, was made the commander at the critical point when the traditional Career Branches were broken up to form the new grade divisions. His predecessor, MG Bill Mundie, had prepared MILPERCEN for the changeover as effectively as possible. In the process he had to come down hard on some of the old Career Branch Chiefs, many of whom were, at best, lukewarm to the whole idea. A few, however, were strong supporters.

The Career Branches and Their Chiefs

Who was this Branch Chief and why was he important? What was the relationship between those who managed system and those who managed people? The relationship is significant. To give it proper description it is necessary to recall the old Career Branches and their Branch Chiefs. Subsequently, we can look at the OPMS counterpart and assess the change.

For several decades the Career Branches had been a powerful force in officer management although by 1962 when the Office of Personnel Operations (OPO) was formed, not as exclusively as is suggested by General Bruce

Palmer who recalled in his memoirs, "Those Chiefs! They ran everything." Even so, they remained a center of influence which was well understood by all. To illustrate, witness the following 1974 prerogatives. The Career Branches:

- "command recommended" lieutenant colonels. General officers in the field made the specific choice after a period of observation but picked a non-command recommended lieutenant colonel at the risk of cutting off the flow. In the smaller branches the designation and assignment was often made directly with field commanders' acceptance based on the Branch Chief's indorsement alone.

- determined all who attended C&GSC. Ninety percent were selected directly by the Branch. The other 10 percent were chosen by a board but this board only considered those recommended by the Branch. (Relative to the other branches this was not as important to the combat arms as it was to the Combat Support (CS) and Combat Service Support (CSS) as a quota system was in effect which over a period of time allowed the combat arms to send as many as 70 percent of their majors while the remainder had to be content with half or less.)

- provided Branch Order of Merit Lists (OML) to both primary and secondary zone field grade promotion boards. These had a major influence on secondary zone selections.

- provided a Branch OML to senior service collage selection boards.

A Branch Chief was a respected member of his branch or arm. Typically holding the position was a potential general officer or one who had passed by the primary window for that rank but was a near miss. He had a close

relationship with the senior representative or "titular head" of their branch who was most likely consulted when time came for a change. It was inconceivable, for example, for the Engineer Career Branch Chief to have been selected without first touching base with the Chief of Engineers. When they spoke during visits, theirs was the voice of authority on branch personnel matters. Direct interchange with general officers in the field was an everyday occurrence. This two-way channel of communication kept many potential differences at low level.

The Career Branch itself was a self-sustaining continuum. It selected its own staff and carefully prepared each new member before permitting him/her to counsel constituents. Over the years a Branch philosophy evolved that was commonly understood and consistently applied. The Branches were far from homogenous at least in the reputation each grew to have. Among the larger ones, for example, Field Artillery was highly regarded; Infantry less so. But all shared a sense of purpose and yes, elitism.

The common denominator among those Career Branches with better reputations was concern for the officers of their branch. These Branches practiced the art as well as the science of the personnel business. This was (and is) not art as in artful, but art in the sense of understanding human nature, allowing for differences among personalities and expectations, exercising mature judgment and clearly most of all possessing empathy. That the pre-OPMS Career Branches were regarded with esteem is supported by several references. One, commenting upon the change to grade divisions under OPMS, had this to say:

There is considerable negative reaction to the perceived loss of branch identification. This is particularly true in the membership of the smaller branches. The belief exists that (career) branches served as the advocates for individual officers and that officers emerged through time and performance into recognizable personalities. This is expected to vanish and the young officer does not like this prospect. He perceives an inability to develop any support with assignment officers and a belief that he will, more than ever, be treated as an "action" rather than a person.¹⁷

The great bulk of the officer corps are very effective performers. Most also correctly believe that the officer himself is his own key to successful development.¹⁸ From time to time, however, they need to be heard, reinforced and thanked for their efforts. The old Career Branches performed a vital function.

The Officer Distribution System

The primary mission of MILPERCEN is to manage the distribution of the officer corps to meet Army personnel needs in accordance with established priorities. The modern replacement system was developed in the late 1940's and was essentially untouched until OPMS demanded a more sophisticated model. But even now the underlying process is the same. It is a pull system. The basic element is the personnel requisition submitted by agencies in anticipation of future losses. "Must move" personnel key the process. Overseas personnel with fixed tours and those going to and from the training base are clearly predictable examples. Rotation of officers in joint activity billets and command positions (more flexible currently) places a demand on the system. Newly validated positions and new organizations are also cycle initiators. An attempt is made to hold CONUS to CONUS moves to the minimum necessary to backfill those completing fixed tours. A move for move's sake, predicated on individual desires, is

disruptively turbulent. Distribution Division closely monitors Branch fill of requisitions as they are responsible for maintaining the gross strengths of Major Commands. In macro terms most officers understand that replacement needs drive the assignment and reassignment process but prefer to think that career management is the first task of OPD.¹⁹ Whether in old or new configuration the assignment officer's mission is to carry out distribution tasking and at the same time develop individuals. Because these two concerns are frequently at odds, a somewhat adversary association exists between Career Branches and the Distribution Division. People are the primary orientation of Branches, and numbers that of the distribution manager.

Over the years a balance evolved which can be described as a function of Branch Chief versus the Deputy for Distribution clout. The "Deputy" status was not accidental. It reflected the proper concern for underlying mission. Nevertheless, in pre-OPMS days, while the main mission was overriding, the Career Branches had "equivalency."

Effect of OPMS on MILPERCEN

First, OPMS forced the distribution system to attain a higher level of self-discipline than heretofore attempted. The main cause, of course, was that the officers with over 8 years service now had two labels. Instead of one branch, he/she had two specialties--in early days a primary and an alternate. MTOE/TDA positions in the Army were coded by the OPMS specialties (which adjusted constantly) and requisitions reflected the same. Validation, however, became enormously complicated. In the final analysis validation (which requisitions are to be filled) is not a sole function of authorized positions, it is a function of both manning level

adjustments to the authorizations to allocate shortages (the DAMPL and PPM) and the availability of manpower (the must-moves). Further, since availables have two specialties, one must be projected in advance in order to drive the validation sub-system and determine Branch will handle it. In addition, add to the matrix the Career Branch requirement to distribute fair shares of officers in terms of promotion potential (quality), ex-battalion commanders, staff college graduates and senior service college graduates. Some of these requirements were not new to OPMS but monitorship intensified as system models and ADP resources were brought on line. The zero-sum pendulum symmetry between system (distribution) and Career Branch swung towards the system. Career Branches were organized by grade which effectively fragmented branch affiliation. Branch desk officers were alone. Even though initially (1975) they might have come from their Career Branch they became individuals instead of a member of a cohesive unit.

But did it make any difference? Those elements of influence held by the old Branches were largely gone anyway. Everything was centralized: command selection, promotion and school input to boards was no more and OML's were eliminated. Interestingly enough, the requirement of assignment officers to measure quality (now called promotion potential) remained. Perhaps most illustrative of the changed environment was the fact that in LTC Division the combat arms desks did not control even half of their primary specialties as for every ten of them that came up for assignment seven were an alternate manager's responsibility.

The OPMS reorganization of 1975 radically changed the visible face of MILPERCEN. The Army had initiated its most highly centralized, complicated and least personalized form of officer management ever.

Impact on Field Commanders

Most commanders didn't look on OPMS for what it was: a calculated modification of the Army personnel sub-system designed to enhance the state of officer professionalism. Or, if he did, he didn't see what that had to do with him personally. A commander views personnel from three perspectives. One, he needs his fair share of people resources just like equipment and money. Second, he is a commander and looks after his soldiers and their problems. Third--sometimes related to the second--he needs a favor.

Let's look at some provisions of OPMS: From the Study on Military Professionalism--OPD direct assignment of commanders to (TOE) units; reduce or eliminate by-name-requests.²⁰ From the final version--assignment of an officer in a specialty with the expectation that the service be in that capacity. For the first time a commander's ability to utilize personnel after assignment was impaired.

All of these provisions impacted on former prerogatives. Problems and misunderstandings arose. "Assignment Majors" to quote General DePuy, seemed to be dictating to general officers. The traditional catalysts, the old Branch Chiefs, were gone. In their place were institutional spokespersons who didn't know their people and whose parameters of flexibility seemed far narrower than before. As the human connections became fewer under OPMS it became easier to vent specific and non-specific frustration on the "System." The more this occurred the more the leadership at MILPERCEN felt they had to "stick to the rules" to make the system work. In the eyes of many field commanders MILPERCEN projected an image of exclusiveness: the personnel business belonged to them and them

alone. The leadership of MILPERCEN in the late 70's did not seem to appreciate the magnitude of the discontent. Art was in decline.

OPMS AND THE CORPS

To provide a vehicle for analysis and commentary of officer perceptions versus the premise of OPMS I will use selected findings of a 1977-78 survey of field grade officers as reported in the May 1979 edition of "Commanders Call." The survey was extensive with more than 7000 field grade respondents who came from the population of year groups 1958 to 1965--the officers most affected by the transition.

Finding A

The trend toward centralization of all selection procedures through centralized boards has caused concern among many field grade officers, in that they no longer believe that they have any effective control over their futures.²¹

Centralization is the fundamental difference between OPMS and the previous management environment. The Career Branch system represented almost the antithesis even though Branches thought of themselves as part and parcel of the HQDA, departmental apparatus. In fact, goals of the Army and goals of the Branches were often at odds. The Branch "way of doing things" actually contributed to the climate which the military professionalism study criticized with far reaching effect. Nevertheless there is evidence to support the belief that given time the officer corps will become comfortable with centralization provided other needs are met. A primary theme of this article is that in the haste to centralize (decisions made by the institution) in order to create a more "fair and impartial" system for the whole, the individual need of human contact--parts and all--was overlooked. In my view this remains the part

of OPMS that needs the most attention. Recent steps to restore this dimension are encouraging.

That the officer corps can adapt to centralization is supported by widespread pre-OPMS acceptance of the centralized promotion process except for the secondary zone aberration of the mid 1970's. A study done by Cozanitis and Higgins in 1978 not only found widespread satisfaction with the then current promotion system but support as well for promotion by specialty as a component of final OPMS implementation.²² Promotion by specialty was seen as logical and necessary by Hauser and Bradford as early as 1971.²³ Unnoticed by most but important in a subtle way was the inspired decision to expand board membership from five to nine in 1974 in order to insure representation of a more diverse range of disciplines. The recent adoption of promotion with specialty floors--still under the "best qualified" criteria meaning that when adjustments are required to the preliminary listing in order to accomplish minimum specialty requirements those picked up in this fashion first must be best qualified in relation to the entire list of eligibles, just as is done in general officer selections--is logically conceived and will be a solidly accepted OPMS sub-system.

Finding B

Most field grade officers do not agree with current Army policies concerning secondary zone (SZ) promotions. They believe that too many officers receive such early promotions and that those who do are not necessarily the most deserving of them.²⁴

The policy of promoting up to 15 percent of the permitted number of selections from the secondary zone has been significantly cut back for it

was an unfortunate, Secretary of the Army driven departure from the traditional 5 percent or less. At the time of the MILPERCEN survey the practice was at its height. Officer perceptions were as stated above; however, the conventional objections of "too many" and "not necessarily the right people" miss the truly insidious impact of this policy on officer corps cohesion. "Not necessarily the right people" can be discounted as that argument is irrefutable regardless of the percentage. And, "too many" was expressed out of concern for those in the primary zone who were displaced and not selected for promotion at all. This concern of "too many" focused on officers on the lower end of the potential curve. Far more hurtful to the officer corps, however, was the psychological effect on the upper end of the spectrum--those upon whom the Army would depend for the several years ahead. The cumulative effect of five years of up to three times the number of previous SZ selects led to a situation whereby a third and more of those serving in a particular grade had been picked up from the SZ. A good many of this group began to be afflicted with delusions of grandeur far beyond the system's capacity to absorb and care for potential "field marshals." When the system didn't continue to produce in the manner to which they had become accustomed disillusionment set in. While this impression was formed while the author was still in MILPERCEN it was solidified by conversations in General Officer Management Office with several general officers who prematurely retired to everyone's regret. Equally debilitating was the impact on the excellent "due course" officers who were eventually promoted but who now were somehow instant second class citizens in their new grade at what should have been a moment of true inner satisfaction.

Finding C

The Centralized Command Selection System (CCSS) process has raised public selection for command to such a level that it is now perceived to be the "make-or-break" point of an Army career.²⁵

The Army adopted CCSS in order to change the organizational setting for command selection which in the opinion of many engendered unprofessional conduct; and, to pick better commanders. The officer corps, however, saw CCSS as another "promotion type" hurdle with a pass-fail connotation and resultant impact on personal esteem. At the same time the Army was saying that command was not the only route to a fulfilling and rewarding career it seemed to enhance its importance by making the selection process a formal event.

While it will never be possible to distinguish between those who want to command because that is the thing to do or because they really want to do it for its own sake, the severe reduction in command opportunity in the post-Vietnam era is both measurable and important. According to the survey analysis, lieutenant colonels in year group (YG) 57 and earlier had a 60-plus percent opportunity compared to a 33 percent for YG 60 and later.²⁶ Within these statistics lie the real basis for permanent change in perception as long as the select rate to colonel remains around 50 percent. If it does it will guarantee selection to colonel from the non-commander population. Not publicized, but not overlooked in the recent decision to extend command tours in order to enhance stability, was the fact that by further reducing command opportunity there would be more lieutenant colonel non-commanders selected to the next grade. To the extent this makes OPMS work, so much the better is an unofficial Army view.

Both a 1980²⁷ and 1982²⁸ US Army War College study projects concerning lieutenant colonel and colonel acceptance or declination of command reflect acceptance of CCSS as an improvement over the previous command selection process. Both report moderate to severe dissatisfaction over the slating subset which seems to be the main current concern. Bad timing, too short notification, disregard of family considerations, wrong type command (TDA versus TOE) and impersonal, inflexible treatment by personnel managers were most frequently cited.

Even though all surveys reflect a preference for CCSS only 5 percent in the MILPERCEN survey said CCSS was selecting the best commanders. Eighty percent said the CCSS boards were selecting the best records, not necessarily the best commanders. As the number of available commands becomes fewer the importance of picking the best commanders becomes even more critical to the future of the Army. Frankly, it is contrary to what I observed during 1975-77 in OPD. The sole mission of CCSS selection boards was to do just that: pick the best commanders. Generally speaking it appeared to us they were doing just that in that both demonstrated outstanding company command and similar fairly recent troop experience in the grade of major were essential. Officers with mostly staff time were sharply disadvantaged. In several cases the CCSS board selected officers who would have never been selected or recommended by a Career Branch. Examples of these were a (then) reserve officer in his 17th year who had a mandatory retirement date at 20 years; or, an officer whose promotion potential to colonel was somewhat shaky even if the prospective command was successful. Career Branches regarded their officers as resources to be developed for the long haul. Command--a developmental step--was not something to be wasted on someone who wasn't going to be around or who

wasn't competitive for the long haul. On the other hand, a CCSS board had no residual proprietary interest in any officer. Its only mission was to select the best commanders and then self-destruct. If the MILPERCEN survey data is correct CCSS boards are not following instructions. Should senior field commanders echo this perception (so far they don't) the process has to be relooked.

Finding D

The majority of officers believe they are knowledgeable concerning OPMS. They further believe there is a divergence between what OPMS says "should be" and what is.²⁹

Knowledgeable perhaps, but rarely viewed with the same knowledge. OPMS even today is seen through the filter of grade, branch and level of expectations.

I. The finding is not surprising. OPMS suffered from an immediate credibility gap among middle management officers as:

- It was founded on a philosophy which made some assumptions that had to be accepted on faith. One of these was that a centralized system would preserve traditional Army objectives better than a decentralized one. Many would question this.

- It could not produce short term results. The proof, if there ever is any, must be judged over the long haul.

- Even though intellectually acceptable, it was threatening to the elite, i.e., combat arms officers who feared having to compete directly with officers of the support branches who had a large head start. And it

was also threatening to the support branches who had niches of expectation carved out but who would now have to face the competition of a trained arms officer.³⁰

• It greatly reduced or took away the power base of the Career Branch human connectors who were the grease of the former system. Words like fairness, impartiality, and equity were repeated until their use became counterproductive. For example, with MILPERCEN very much under the control of distribution managers versus Branch managers the consideration of a request for exception could be measured against the entire population of a certain grade instead of the branch portion. Decisions trended towards preservation of the system. Equity became something hidden behind rather than a basis for case by case judgment at the human level. Science over art.

• It was oversold. Consider the following from a 1974 Army publication: "It is not any particular assignment or combination of assignments that is of overriding importance. What is important is the manner in which an individual performs each assignment, regardless of level or location. If the mission of the Army requires an officer to serve in a particular job, that job must be considered a worthwhile one."³¹ Worthwhile to whom? What does this really say? The key word saving the piece from dishonesty is "overriding" in the first sentence. But can one get the overall impression from this piece that all jobs are to be considered equal? Expression of OPMS philosophy in these terms, and there were reams of similar material, did more to create a credibility gap than any other single facet of OPMS. From the same publication: "This key assignment concept is fundamentally at odds with the OPMS philosophy which calls for excellence in performance, regardless of the type, level or

location of assignment, as being the key to advancement."³² That was a promise that OPMS cannot keep and not many were content to accept it.

The selling of OPMS also created the impression that schooling and promotion opportunities would be improved.³³ What was intended by spokesmen was that selections would be drawn from a more non-traditional base. What was heard in aggregate was that "more" would attend. Those on the margin of promotion and school selection, as always, had the greatest tendency to accept what they wanted to hear.

II. Finally, it is necessary to mention careerism or "ticket punching" in the vernacular, and the extent to which the OPMS impacts on officer corps motivations. Because of the study on military professionalism the perceived problem of careerism weighted heavily in the eventual decision to go with the new system. For clarity's sake careerism is defined as the inappropriate seeking of positions and rewards for the purpose of personal advancement to the detriment of fellow officers and the ability to make a professional contribution for the good of the whole. "Unbridled ambition" General Meyer calls it. By means of dual track development, OPMS intended to force officers (really the combat arms for whom OPMS was built) to acquire the ability to make a professional contribution which could be tapped to the mutual benefit of both the individual and the Army when the officer was no longer or infrequently needed in his basic skill, which is most of the time for the field grade combat arms under any management system. If OPMS philosophy could have been left at this it would have been interesting to see what transpired. But the Army found--it really already knew--that the generalist underpinnings of the majority of the combat arms were so ingrained that the professionalism objective of OPMS came into direct conflict with perceived

traditional means of individual advancement, i.e., don't overly specialize. A body of euphemistic rhetoric evolved, such as all jobs are worthwhile/important, which was aimed at ticket punching. Much of this rhetoric flew in the face of reason. On balance, debates on the presence or absence of careerism has received more attention than deserved. The main attention should be directed to the organization that is the Army. To the extent the Army becomes, in Peter Vaill's model, A High Performing System (HPS)³⁴ with purpose, commitment and a feeling of being special, careerism increasingly will fade away.

Did the Career Branch System as an organization subset contribute more to the cohesion of the Army than the OPMS form? In certain ways already discussed, yes--but in others--no. A Career Branch was its own reason for being, with a definition of what is best for the Army expressed in its own terms. And that was always a derivative of what was best for its own officers. Branches developed a mainstream--a best path to success--built around a succession of branch related jobs that it controlled. Despite years of Army directed attempts to cope with needs beyond the traditional branch confines, Career Branches responded in spirit only when they were pragmatically proven by the rewards system. If not, Branches never did. ADP is an example of success; and, HR/EO of failure. Career Branches openly fostered the association of certain jobs with advancement and if Army interests were at cross-purposes, Army interests came second. Officers in programs like Foreign Area Officer, ADP and R&D have been far better off under OPMS.

CONCLUSION

OPMS is still contentious. There are continued uncertainties and discussion concerning the impact of OPMS on readiness and mobilization, on the proper command tour lengths, on adequate opportunity for "alternate" training and on the proper balance of participatory management. But in time it promises to be a more effective officer management system for the 1980's and 90's.

The Army has taken a giant step towards centralized control and development of officers. Dual track labeling and the distribution process will ensure that essential controls are retained at the departmental operating agency. As yet, no serious argument counters the premise that dual tracking will improve field grade professionalism of its officer corps. To the extent this will also serve to enhance the ethical aspects of professionalism is a question for the future to answer. Indeed, even though I believe the old Career Branches--for all their positive aspects--created a mainstream attitude centered on obtaining certain positions, the state of ethical professionalism cannot be laid at the doorstep of any officer management system. OPMS today is only one of many contributors to the Army environment. Because of the unique mission of the military the most important of these has to be--as always--senior leadership. Perhaps the biggest contribution the current Chief of Staff has made to the ethical climate of the officer corps (and to OPMS) has been to stress the importance of units rather than the importance of individuals. The selling of OPMS involved a prodigious effort--all targetted at individuals for an illusive goal. General Mayer transferred the objective to a more tangible one; and one which fits more with the premise of the study on military professionalism.

The orientation that MILPERCEN took in the first half dozen years of OPMS was--from the benefit of hindsight--too severe, too inanimate, too systematized. It wasn't so much that the basic mission had changed but the importance of the Branch structure which provided knowledgeable, human contact was underestimated and not satisfactorily replaced. Compounding the field's disenchantment was the perception that MILPERCEN's attitude was one of exclusivity. In an Army that thrives on fixing responsibility the one area that defies conventional solution is the personnel management business. Whether policymakers or operators desire it or not everyone wants to be involved and will be. Experienced personnel people know this and learn to thrive on it instead of resent it. The leadership of MILPERCEN, it must be said, did not take effective action to disavow this perception until it had become widespread.

Initiatives in the past two to three years have been taken to increase communication. To cite two of them: One was the partial return to Career Branch managership. In no way is this close to the old form for several reasons but it provides that most important missing ingredient--continuity. Left in being, a tradition of its own will develop. A laudatory step. The other is involving the commander at the time a reassignment is being programmed.³⁵ I have my doubts whether the individual is better off under this program but it is a stroke of genius as far as command support of OPMS is concerned.

The swing of recent emphasis is encouraging. The tough work of the first years is done. Centralization is a fact. There is a body of young officers coming along whose collage of expectations are framed in OPMS parameters. The supporting systems are in place with the concept of promotion by specialty approved and a new O&E system in effect. Some

careful sorting out of the relative role of the proponent heads remain; likewise do the doctrinal ramifications of the personnel function in general and OPMS in particular. Matters of personnel doctrine have heretofore been put in the "too tough" box; but the Chief of Staff directive that policy belongs to DCSPER, operations to MILPERCEN and doctrine to TRADOC clears up a fog factor that became an excuse to do nothing. Finally, probably the best thing that can be done for OPMS now is nothing. Don't tinker any more with the fundamentals and let it work. It offers much to the Army of the future.

ENDNOTES

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