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USAWC MILITARY STUDIES PROGRAM PAPER

THE MILITARY IN A CIVILIAN ENVIRONMENT

INDIVIDUAL ESSAY

by

Mr. Robert K. Young, DAC

Colonel Paul J. Saulnier, QMC  
Project Adviser

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ABSTRACT

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Three basic issues are explored: the significant group differences between the military and civilian in the Department of Defense (DOD); the impact of these differences in the typical civil-military relationship that exists in the non-political level of bureaucratic operations; and how to overcome or prevent the actual or potential problems inherent in this working relationship. A key consideration to note about the paper: the groups referred to are the career civil servants, and the military officer corps.

## THE MILITARY IN A CIVILIAN ENVIRONMENT

Colonel Smith, the division chief, was waiting for a response to his observation. Mr. Jones, one of the civilian supervisors in the Colonel's division was holding an internal debate about how direct and honest his response should be. The two of them were on a TDY trip together and between meetings Colonel Smith related a conversation he'd had with another civilian, Mr. Stevens, about a year ago:

"You know, Colonel," Mr. Stevens had said, "This place is very different from a military unit. Most of the people here are not military, and you military are different than we civilians."

Colonel Smith admitted that this comment had been a real surprise, especially since he had only recently taken charge of the division. He told Mr. Jones that his response to Mr. Stevens had been something to the effect that "of course there is no such difference." After reaffirming this observation the Colonel was waiting for a response.

This anecdote need not be pursued, now; its purpose is to introduce the idea and impact of group differences. The groups of specific interest are the military officer corps and the Department of Defense civilians, although much of the discussion has more general application.

Group differences and their impact on interpersonal or intergroup relations are not unique to civil-military relations: our political system is made up of two major opposing parties, the association of each member usually being lifelong; the industrial work environment is separated into management and labor, both organized with a view of the other as antagonist; the

religious world is divided in many different ways, some very much in direct contradiction to each other.<sup>1</sup>

However, while not totally dissimilar to other group pairings, there is a unique aspect to the civil-military relationship; and this aspect is unique due to the nature of the military environment. The man in uniform works, plays, and in short "lives" in a deliberately different environment than the DOD civilian, as well as the rest of American society.<sup>2</sup>

There are many groups that may have a different perspective than the rest of society. Doctors, lawyers, and writers may view life or many of its elements in a manner that can be interpreted as stereotypic. But for reasons of necessity or tradition, the military as an institution, deliberately separates its members from the society out of which they were initially drawn: the wearing of the uniform, the salute, the caste-like system of officer and enlisted personnel, the military living quarters completely separated from the civilian element, etc. This complete separation results in much more than sometimes having a stereotypic view of a given issue or situation. It results in a unique blend of "customary beliefs, social forms, and materiel traits . . . of a group."<sup>3</sup> A further examination will support this conclusion.

It may be argued that many live somewhere off the military reservation. This is true, but it is not by design. If the Federal budget could afford it and Congress was so inclined, housing would be built to accommodate those that now must live "off post." Also, the more senior military managers almost always live on the installation; and the overwhelming preference by the rest is for on post housing. The civilian attitude contributes to this preference. This attitude seems to be most significantly influenced by the transient nature of most military. The transiency affects the stability of the neighborhood relative to occupancy, friendships (parents and children), and perceived impact on real estate value.

The fact that a military family will probably move in and move out in less than three (3) years means that the house will be vacant more than usual. The friendships between neighbors are often affected, and sometimes deliberately avoided because of this move-in/move-out situation. Many people just don't want to take the time to develop a relationship when it is known that it will be short-lived. This attitude can affect the children as well as the parents. Also, there is the perception that a house or a neighborhood that is constantly changing owners and/or renters loses real estate value.

It also may be countered that the military distinction is not a deliberate, institutionalized process; but that the military community is made up of men that had similar natural inclinations initially. However, based on the different ways that men have determined that theirs is the life of a soldier, and the young age at which such a determination is made, it appears unlikely that the young military careerist comes from a single psychological profile. Rather, it appears much more likely that the singleness of profile is more manifest at the end of the military career. One might conclude that military men are "made not born." Singleness of profile is a relative term, and it should not be inferred that one officer is just like another in any particular way. Rather, they are more similar, as a group, than any other group in our society, e.g., generalities can be attributed to this group much as generalities are attributed to Americans, or Italians, or French, etc.

Another example showing the distinctness of the military from the rest of society is offered for consideration. In addition to the separation that deliberately takes place, there is also the different type of society in which the military exists: the hierarchical and authoritarian structure of the military versus the guarantee of almost total individuality for the remainder of American society.<sup>4</sup> It is somewhat ironic that the institution (military)

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established to preserve our free society from the dictatorial ways of our international antagonist (USSR) must lose some of those freedoms that they are dedicated to protect.

A result of this authoritarian structure was recently witnessed in hypothetical discussions on mobilization and martial law. None argued for a cavalier decision on these very serious actions; however, the military tend to argue for their implementation at a much earlier stage in any mock crises situation. This tendency is attributed to a greater acceptance, by one group, of a stronger, more centralized power source; and to the repugnance by the other group of anything that infringes upon personal freedoms.

This is not surprising when one considers, for example, the authority of an installation commander. The commander can and sometimes makes the following decisions that affect many others: the hours of operation of post facilities; what attire is worn on base, off base, at work, etc.; when individuals can or cannot leave the base; whether the club system will serve liquor before close of business, etc. These and many other decisions affecting the public and personal lives of the military personnel are made under the authority of the commander, and they can be changed, almost literally, overnight. It is not implied that such decisions are arbitrary, unreasonable, or unfair. On the contrary, great care is generally taken to make certain they are not. The point is that such decisions in the civilian environment are long in the making, and are not made by one man: not even a mayor or a governor. Thus, it should not be surprising that there is a significantly different reaction (between military and civilian) on an issue dealing with centralized authority versus personal freedoms.

What has been shown is that there are significant differences between military and civilian: lifestyles, experiences, associations, etc.; these differences are developed by the military establishment rather than inherent

to the individual; the development is a deliberate process as a result of necessity, tradition, or a combination of both; and that being cognizant of these general differences can better explain the often disparate perspectives on specific issues.

There is one point that still needs to be made; and it is made now, more as a reminder than an argument to be defended: when identifying and discussing the differences between any two groups of people it should always be noted that relative judgements about the groups is not the intent. That is, one group is not better than another, is not more important than another, etc. Forgetting this point often stifles the discussion or even prevents the acknowledgement of differences. There seems to be a natural tendency toward qualitative judgements when discussing differences.

This tendency is not so apparent when parties to the discussion belong to a single group. Indeed, some gut-level honesty and objectivity can be witnessed. However, when different groups are present, honesty and objectivity are too often replaced with parochialism and subjective sniping. Unfortunately, when civilians and military are the groups involved, they are no exception; especially if long held, traditional viewpoints are the issue. It may be that acknowledging the group trait of parochialism is the best means of overcoming it. It is this possibility that supports this discussion.

Having shown that significant differences exist, how do these groups coexist, cooperate and produce in the working environment? Differences have been identified, but should there not be just as diligent an effort in identifying similarities? There can be problems if such an effort is not put forth. The potential problems are more serious in this discussion because of the typical civil-military relationship that exists in the nonpolitical level of bureaucratic operations: where the military officer corps is supervising/

leading the career civil servant. A review of this leader-led relationship of different groups is in order, before a more complete answer to the question is pursued.

. . . theories advocating world government often show an ignorance or intolerance of various deep-felt human desires and attachments, like the common desire of peoples everywhere to be ruled by persons who, whatever their shortcomings, are at least not felt to be foreigners.<sup>5</sup>

Barnard Brodie expresses this idea about not being led by a foreigner in a discussion about wars, mankind's inability to avoid them, and theories about avoiding them in the future. Although his discussion addresses the very highest level of leadership/management (world government), the central idea (underlined) is applicable at levels much lower. Unfortunately, not only is the concept applicable, but also the same ignorance or intolerance to it.

For brevity, acceptance is assumed for the common desire to be ruled (led/supervised) by someone who is not felt to be a foreigner. As an aside, one might suspect that this common desire played a significant role in the decision to not allow a foreign born individual to be President of the United States. However, the ignorance or intolerance of this common desire represents a deficiency that is often never recognized and can be very detrimental. To overcome this deficiency a leader must recognize the following requirement: that he be viewed by subordinates as a member of some common group; that is, common to both the leader and the subordinate.

Some positions of leadership are easier than others in that a commonality of all is readily apparent, i.e., a commander of a military unit, a president of a college fraternity/sorority, the head of a family, etc.<sup>6</sup> Also, the bonding element(s) (common group) between a boss and each subordinate need not be the same. For example, the strength of the relationship between boss A and employee A may be enhanced by the fact that they both went to the same high school; the strength between boss A and employee B may be that both are

Certified Public Accountants (CPA). A third point is that there are many anti-bonding elements that can serve to make a leader/boss appear as a "foreigner," i.e., a military chief supervising all civilians; a woman boss over all men; or a young individual managing an office of older employees. Of course, the converse of each of these examples has the same potential identity problem. It should be noted that some anti-bonding elements are not so apparent and/or can border on prejudice.

There is a common management desire and a common theme in many management texts that strongly advocate the need for an employee's personal and career objectives to complement the organization's objectives in some way.<sup>7</sup> The supporting logic states that the objectives of both are much more likely to be satisfactorily accomplished if such is the case. In short, an individual must be able to identify with an organization and its objectives if his potential contribution to those objectives are to be fully realized.

Identification with an organization and its objectives is unlikely if there is no bonding element (common point of identification) between the individual and his boss. Stated in Mr. Brodie's terms, "If the boss is perceived as a foreigner."

Some contribution will be realized, of course; but the contribution will be minimized because of variations on the following conflict that exists to some degree in all leader-led relationships:

Leader: I will compensate as little as possible for as much work as possible.

Led: I will do as little as possible for as much compensation as possible.

If the only recognized point of commonality is the fact that boss and employee work for the same organization, then there is little, other than the logic above, that will spark either.

It may be argued that an employee may look beyond his boss (even though he may appear foreign) and identify a bonding element with a higher level of management, or with the organization's objectives themselves. This can happen, but to most people their boss is the organization and the relative affiliation with the former is imposed upon the latter.

A military anecdote makes this point very well. A Drill Sergeant tells a new recruit to watch the company street and immediately report back when a visiting Brigadier General arrives in the company area. The recruit watches the company street and when a car approaches, stops, and the occupant gets out, the following conversation ensues:

Recruit: Are you a Brigadier General?

Brigadier General: Yes, I am.

Recruit: I don't know what you've done, but the Drill Sergeant is mad as anything; and wants to see you right now!

Dr. George Labovitz makes a similar point with his argument that managers should not dwell on motivating, but rather on integrating.<sup>8</sup> In elaborating on the point Dr. Labovitz explains that, too often, leaders look several management levels below themselves and attempt to develop means of motivating the individual(s) at that level. A manager, he argues, should be looking at his immediate subordinates and concentrating on integrating them into his and the organization's professional and personal frame of mind; i.e., developing a common bond. There are two significant points here that support the importance placed on the concept of commonality. The first is that a manager's greatest potential influence is on those directly subordinate to him, organizationally. The second is that the greatest organizational

motivator for an individual is for him to feel the existence of a "partnership" with the boss/organization ("integration" in Dr. Labovitz' terms).

If all desire their boss to not be a foreigner, does it necessarily follow that a leader must seek out elements of commonality to assure he is not perceived this way? If the "brotherhood of man" were emphasized, would not all relate to that? And would not that overcome any feelings of alienation? Theoretically this is correct, but it is not realistic.

Despite the fact that all are members of the community of people, this is probably the last group with which people consciously associate themselves; it is too large. Membership in smaller groups serves as the unconscious reminder that indeed the ultimate common bond is that "all are people". Without such membership in smaller groups the ultimate common bond is forgotten, resulting in the replacement of I for we, and an attitude of me versus the world. The best way to be convinced of this point is to recall the circumstance under which the following kind of observation was made: "That's human nature" or "people are people, everywhere you go." It is usually a fairly small group, all members of some more intimate community than the "society of people." Intimate in the sense that all feel a common bond toward each other, rather than a feeling of exclusivity from others.

The United States military puts very high stock in cohesion; that is, a unit, each member of which feeling a strong mutual trust (ideally the greatest degree being between the leader and the led). It is understandable that the military emphasizes this, in that the ultimate degree of mutual trust may be required during battle. This strong cohesion in a military combat unit is representative of the common bonding being discussed. In trying to develop cohesion in a unit, a commander seeks out and emphasizes those things that help him better relate to each of his subordinates: the unique head gear worn

by the unit (green or red beret); same hometown or college; playing on the softball team together, etc.

The emphasis in this area is evidenced by the recent efforts within the Army to improve cohesion by keeping units together longer; without letting the individual replacement system create a new unit (personnel wise) every year. The significance attached to this specific bonding situation (unit cohesion) is due to the fact that life and death to the individual, the unit, and even other units weigh in the balance. However, the great bonding that is necessary for the military is not as necessary for many others. Nor is it as necessary for the military in a noncombat environment.

Two issues raised in this military example should be explored further. The first is the implication that commanders have been deficient in establishing unit cohesion if it has become necessary for an organizational policy to enhance it. The second is the necessity of cohesion outside of a combat environment.

The implied command deficiency is really a matter of an organizational (Army-wide) rotation policy that diffused much of the potential for cohesiveness, and over which a commander had no control. To overcome the problem, special action was required by the organization. The absolute necessity for cohesion is only found in life and death situations such as military combat. In other situations, while not absolutely necessary, it is desirable and advisable because of potentially greater productivity, profits, morale, etc. However, few organizations will dedicate the resources to establish the level of esprit that the military finds necessary in a combat unit; nor will the same level be found when comparing combat oriented units with civilian type Department of Defense (DOD) activities. The necessity for that very

high-level of cohesiveness does not exist in the latter, and hence the organizational interest in and commitment to it are less.

As a result one must guard against unfair comparisons of activities even when they are in the same organization. More specific to the civil-military groups, when one moves from the combat to the bureaucratic DOD environment, the necessity for a very strong bonding (leader-led) is diminished; but the desirability and advisability of bonding (boss-employee) is still very much present. This, of course, is especially true if the new environment is one in which one of the potential anti-bonding elements exist, i.e., a military supervising civilians.

It was shown earlier how the two groups in the civil-military relationship are significantly different in general; and that realizing this general difference helps to explain very different perspectives on certain issues. Addressed next was the need for the two groups not to let differences interfere with their inherent need to work, cooperate and produce in a supervisor-subordinate working relationship. Next, the discussion in the preceding paragraphs reviewed this relationship vis-a-vis the requirement for common bonding. An examination of this requirement reviewed situations where bonding was relatively easy and where anti-bonding can exist; management practice and theory was discussed to validate the concept's practicality; the perceived sameness of a supervisor and the organization he represents was emphasized to underscore the importance of the former; and finally the same concept using others' terminology (integration, cohesion) was explored to show its universality.

The next point is addressed last because of its ever increasing relevance and practicality as it is applied to successively higher levels of management:

At one time or another, most commanders find themselves in the position of having to make decisions which emphasize one aspect of their responsibilities at the expense of

others. . . . Circumstances demand that such decisions be made with full awareness of their potential consequences upon the other aspects. It is one thing to make a decision favoring a mission while taking into account that morale will likely suffer as a result. Such awareness permits a commander to also undertake appropriate measures to counter the anticipated drop in morale. However, it is another matter to make such a decision with total disregard for its effects upon morale.<sup>9</sup>

It is especially at times such as those described in this quotation that a leader will realize the value of a common bond with his subordinates. A relationship that has been deliberately or naturally nurtured through emphasis on common bonds (enhanced by the recognition of differences) can provide a leader with the support necessary to implement a difficult decision/action. The lack of such bonding and associated support can result in an implementation attitude that may consciously or unconsciously sabotage a proposed action. Few will give more than lip service support to the controversial decisions of a manager who appears as a foreigner to his subordinates.

Mr. Jones had not answered Colonel Smith yet. Time was not available to be honest, responsive, and comprehensive. Many things were being quickly reviewed in his mind: group differences, understandably different perspectives, bonding and anti-bonding elements, common objectives, "foreign" bosses, etc.

After a less than honest answer, he thought to himself, "Some day time might permit a thoughtful consideration of the question. I may even write a paper."

#### ENDNOTES

1. It should be remembered that the civilians being addressed in the paper are civil service career people; not the political civilian leadership of government.

2. I refer specifically to men because woman's presence in the military has not yet had any significant influence on policies, attitudes, etc.; that the reason for this has been the official prohibition (or extreme limitation) of their participation is unquestioned.

3. Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, Springfield, Mass., Merriam-Webster Inc., Publishers, 1983, p. 314. This is an official definition of a culture.

4. This terminology is taken from the comments of Major General Buckingham to the Army War College, Class of 85, on 8 January 1985. His comments addressed the necessity of this type of structure, and I concur that it is a necessity.

5. Brodie, Barnard, War and Politics, New York, Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1973, p. 4. This quote is slightly paraphrased for the sake of brevity and logic; underlines are added.

6. Easier only in the sense that this commonality is apparent.

7. Hicks, Herbert G., The Management Organization: A System and Human Resources Approach, Second Edition, New York, McGraw-Hill Inc., New York, 1972, p. 39.

8. A paraphrase of Dr. George H. Labovitz's comments to the Army War College Class of 1985 on 10 January 1985.

9. Watson, Dwayne C., Editor, Army Command and Management: Theory and Practice, Carlisle, PA US Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA 1984, p. 5-13.