

An Officer Corps for the Next Century

By RICHARD H. KOHN

The United States needs the highest quality people it can recruit to the colors. While that is a truism, accomplishing it will be increasingly difficult. As the military establishment shrinks, as technology grows in significance, as compensation comes under increasing pressure, as the conditions of

fighting capacity of the Armed Forces, and most importantly as military affairs sink in significance to the American people, a shrinking proportion of our brightest and most capable youth will be attracted to military careers. At the same time, our best officers may increasingly choose greater opportunities presented by the civilian economy.

Those officers who stay will need to be ever more diverse in this multiracial, multiethnic, and multicultural nation—embracing not only gender and ethnic divisions but all religions, classes, and perspectives. If the Armed Forces are to serve worldwide, we need people at ease with other societies and languages, a familiarity that comes more from life experience than school. And most of all, we must attract representative numbers from all segments of society, including members of the elite. If a third of Americans live on the crabgrass frontier, a third of our officer corps should originate there also. The strength of the U.S. military has always been its diversity and correlation with the heterogeneity of America; yet there is growing evidence that such diversity in the services, at least in terms of background, opinion, orientation, and perspective, has diminished.¹

To compete for the best and most varied cohort of youth, the services may have to change the character of recruiting and the conditions of service, experimenting with innovative approaches: shortening enlistments and moving Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) back into elite universities with comprehensive four-year scholarships for cadets and midshipmen, thus appealing to populations that have heretofore been underrepresented. For example, when the Air Force raised the obligation for pilots to nine years a decade ago, a significant segment of American youth probably ceased to be attracted to that service, unwilling to mortgage their twenties just to



55th Signal Company (Joseph A. Francis)

service continue to stress individuals and families, as divisions over gender and other policies divide the military and civilian leadership and lead some groups to disparage the quality and

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Report Documentation Page		
Report Date 1998	Report Type N/A	Dates Covered (from... to) -
Title and Subtitle An Officer Corps for the Next Century		Contract Number
		Grant Number
		Program Element Number
Author(s)		Project Number
		Task Number
		Work Unit Number
Performing Organization Name(s) and Address(es) National Defense University Institute for National Strategic Studies Washington D C 20319-5066		Performing Organization Report Number
Sponsoring/Monitoring Agency Name(s) and Address(es)		Sponsor/Monitor's Acronym(s)
		Sponsor/Monitor's Report Number(s)
Distribution/Availability Statement Approved for public release, distribution unlimited		
Supplementary Notes The original document contains color images.		
Abstract		
Subject Terms		
Report Classification unclassified	Classification of this page unclassified	
Classification of Abstract unclassified	Limitation of Abstract UU	
Number of Pages 5		

fly. A service that draws its leadership disproportionately from less than 20 percent of the officer corps must assure the finest human capital at the beginning of the career cycle.

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The reason for such polices is cost—to train pilots who might leave for airline jobs or keep cadets in college. Yet given the cost of organizing, equipping, and training the Armed Forces, and granting the indispensability of leadership to winning wars, we cannot allow accountants to control the quality of our future leaders. Succumbing to the pressures—length of initial term, obligations for specialist training, location of ROTC, or limits on scholarships—is simply penny wise and pound foolish. We spare no effort or expense to provide our soldiers with the finest weapons in history; we ought similarly to spare no expense in furnishing the best officers to lead them.

Officers will need to be broad and deep as well as tough and competent—men and women of judgment, wisdom, and balance—to conduct more disparate missions in the future. They must adjust to accelerating change not just in technology but in concept and strategy. Knowing when to fight as well as what to destroy and how to destroy it will become more significant. We will also require a larger proportion of thinkers over doers. If Peter Drucker is correct and the developed world is entering a post-capitalist age in which “knowledge is the only meaningful resource,” then decisions by officers, particularly senior leaders, will be the determining factor in war and military operations more than in the past.² The United States, once a most ardent and effective practitioner of capital-intensive war, must learn how to rely as much on strategy as on resources and as much on cleverness as on overwhelming force. We will be increasingly involved in situations short of total war, and connecting ends and means will be critical for victory and minimizing casualties.

Change to assure such officers will conflict with cherished practice. First, the services will need to broaden officer education starting with ROTC and service academies, although any radical reform is probably impractical at present.³ However, one modest proposal is worth considering. The academies could initiate a mandatory junior year abroad with cadets and midshipmen spending their third year at either another academy or a

civilian school in this country or overseas. The only possible impediment to such a proposal may be the integrity of academy football, a small price to pay for enhancing the breadth—and jointness—of the military establishment. Similar changes will be necessary elsewhere in professional military education, including foreign language proficiency, multicultural curricula, rigorous historical study, specialty training in understanding technological change, and increased emphasis on research and writing so that officers learn to think critically and to distinguish explicitly between intellectual rigor and hogwash.

A master's degree earned in residence at a civilian university should become as important for higher responsibility as attending a staff college. Officers need to return to the American people in mid-career and avail themselves of the best



U.S. Navy (McNeely)

education available in our society. Granting master's degrees at war colleges is a dubious practice since it may lessen the frequency with which officers are educated outside government institutions. Nothing is more dangerous to the officer corps than isolation and parochialism.

Fair Warning

We will need many more officers expert in history, international relations, strategic studies, and similar subjects. An education on the economy will also encourage such programs in civilian universities, thus broadening public awareness of national security issues which is on the

decline. Currently there is a controversy over the proportion of officers educated in technology rather than the social sciences. Although both are needed, if the importance in an uncertain future is knowing whether to act as well as how to act, the tilt should be toward softer subjects.



Combat Camera Group, Pacific

James Michener told the story of “four of us” in the Navy being “taken into a small room” at the beginning of World War II.

A grim-faced selection committee asked . . . ‘What can you do?’ and the [first] man replied, ‘I’m a buyer for Macy’s, and I can judge very quickly between markets and prices and trends.’ The selection board replied, ‘But you can’t do anything practical?’ The man said no, and he was shunted off to one side. The next man was a lawyer and . . . he had to confess, ‘I can weigh evidence and organize information,’ and he was rejected. . . . But when the fourth man said boldly, ‘I can overhaul diesel engines,’ the committee jumped up, practically embraced him, and made him an officer on the spot. At the end of the war . . . the buyer from Macy’s was assistant to the Secretary of the Navy, in charge of many complex responsibilities requiring instant good judgment. He gave himself courses in naval management and government procedures until he became one of the Nation’s real experts. The lawyer wound up as assistant to Admiral Halsey, and in a

crucial battle deduced where the Japanese fleet had to be. . . . I was given the job of naval secretary to several congressional committees who were determining the future of America in the South Pacific. And what was the engineer doing at the end of the war? He was still overhauling diesel engines.⁴

The lesson that expertise, while necessary, could be hired and that insight, judgment, and wisdom were indispensable even for a technological service, is fair warning. Some may argue that fifty years ago science and technology were less relevant than they are today or will be tomorrow, but that would be a misreading of the history of military technology.

The services will have to rethink their traditional bias toward operations in the assignment and promotion of officers. Operations will always be primary, but in times of change, especially when organizations and lower budgets are cut, the careers of people with more varied assignments or who have taken time for graduate education or faculty duty or career broadening experiences, get killed. Systems that require proscribed careers with zero defects, without opportunities to take risks and learn from mistakes, will not grow the best leadership, nor will promotion criteria that constantly privilege operations and command. The Navy has been and is the most guilty, but one suspects other services are hardly better.⁵ Only the Marine Corps, perhaps because of fewer cuts, seems to have improved. For a brief period in the 1990s, an assignment on the faculty at Quantico ranked second only to command as a criterion for promotion. Perhaps it comes as no surprise that earlier this year there were a total of five—an unprecedented number—Marine four-stars.

The Army in its officer personnel management system, the Air Force in revising the officer evaluation report among other changes, and the



Combat Camera Group, Pacific (Stephen Batz)

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Navy if it implements recent recommendations, are beginning to address this problem. However, the solution lies only partly with the Armed Forces. Congress must allow the services to “over-populate” the officer corps to assure billets for schooling and as a basis for expansion of the

services in a future mobilization. It is not fashionable to speak of mobilization and citizen-soldiers. People write that the age of mass warfare is over and that the United States

need not think of an “expansible army” even though that has been our national policy for our entire history. But the one thing history teaches is that the future is unknowable and that regardless of one’s analysis, someday, sometime, at some critical point, we will be surprised.

Finally, we need men and women who identify themselves as members of the profession of arms; that is as people who consider themselves professional warfighters, officers who are not only outstanding in managing violence, but who have a broader understanding of, and perspective on, their role and place in American society.⁶ For many in the services, particularly the Air Force and probably the Navy, this may involve a very deep cultural transformation.

Appreciating the Client

Two aspects of the profession of arms appear to be particularly weak among officers today. Both require remedy, not only for the benefit of the Armed Forces but for the long term health of American government.

First, officers must understand and appreciate their client, the United States and its people. Like the rest of the population, officers are often ignorant of national history and more than most are isolated from society, focused as they are on the technical requirements of their jobs and living apart on bases or abroad. The former deputy head of the History Department at West Point worried that less than a third of cadets take a semester of American history, mostly those identified as deficient in the subject. A recent book published by Pentagon correspondent Tom Ricks paints a grim picture of how marines view society, which ranges from pessimism to contempt.⁷

Second, officers should possess a deep and abiding appreciation of civil-military relations, particularly civilian control of the military. In discussions with students at service academies, staff and war colleges, and senior officer executive programs—in most cases the top portion of officers in their year groups—one finds not only views similar to those reported by Ricks, but widespread misunderstanding of the proper role of a professional military in a democratic republic. Likewise, continuing prejudice against the media is troubling, particularly the propensity to blame reporters for America’s failure in Vietnam and afterwards. Repugnance with this channel of communication with the public, especially during recent peace operations, should disturb everyone in government, the military, and the civilian sector.⁸ No profession can adapt to change, remain healthy, or fulfill its responsibilities by neglecting its relationship with the client. Nor can the Nation undertake to teach democracy, especially to military establishments elsewhere in the



1st Combat Camera Squadron (Efrain Gonzalez)

world—where democracy is little understood and frequently leads to autocratic regimes suspicious of Western values and the United States in particular—if its own officers don’t “get it.”⁹

Presently there is abroad in the land a concern that the gap between the military and society is growing and may endanger national security or civilian authority over the Armed Forces. On the one hand the officer corps appears to be both more alienated from society and more vocal about it; on the other, elites know ever less about the military profession, do not care, and exert pressure on the government for changes and policies that may harm our warfighting capabilities. Some survey data indicates that the officer corps

has become politicized and partisan. Other information reveals that Americans trust most those institutions that are the least democratic—the military, police, and Supreme Court—and distrust those that are the most democratic—the Presidency and Congress. The officer corps may be



65th Signal Company (Christina Ann Shumaker)

more divorced from national values and attitudes than at any other time in history, becoming less diverse in these respects as elites have become more heterogeneous in their thinking. If so we may be heading for considerable civil-military conflict, with consequences for the government and national defense.¹⁰

Whatever the reality the United States has been blessed with a loyal and successful military. The key has been the officer corps. Everything else comes and goes, but it remains. Officers lead the Armed Forces in war, recommend policies to deter or best our enemies, and operate our forces in peacetime. They provide the continuity; they have the expertise; theirs alone is the professional responsibility for national security. Their recruitment, training, education, and career development must be a national priority.

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NOTES

¹ Thomas E. Ricks, *Making the Corps* (New York: Scribner, 1997).

² Peter F. Drucker, "The Rise of the Knowledge Society," *The Wilson Quarterly*, vol. 17, no. 2 (Spring 1993), p. 65.

³ If a college degree and initial education in the profession of arms are, in the information age, too important, costly, and complex to be crammed into four years at a government institution, and remembering that higher education is among the most successful American industries, service academies should become postgraduate two-year courses for careerists. Each could graduate 2,000 officers a year and ROTC could be abandoned. Every officer would possess a common education, indoctrination, and preparation. To attract the best, each service should provide at least a thousand competitive four-year scholarships, allowing "walk ons" to fill the remaining officer spaces.

⁴ James A. Michener, *A Michener Miscellany, 1950–1970* (New York: Random House, 1973), pp. 52, 54.

⁵ On the Navy's attitude toward education, see Thomas B. Buell in "The Education of a Warrior," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, vol. 107, no. 1 (January 1981), pp. 41–45.

⁶ Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1960).

⁷ Ricks, *Making the Corps*, particularly pp. 276–95.

⁸ See Warren P. Strobel, *Late Breaking Foreign Policy: The News Media's Influence on Peace Operations* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 1997).

⁹ On the fragility of democracy outside the developed world, see Robert D. Kaplan, "Was Democracy Just a Moment?" *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 280, no. 6 (December 1997), pp. 55–80; Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 76, no. 6 (November/December 1997), pp. 22–43; Richard H. Kohn, "How Democracies Control the Military," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 8, no. 4 (October 1997), pp. 140–53.

¹⁰ See Ole R. Holsti, *A Widening Gap Between the Military and Civilian Society? Some Evidence, 1976–1996* (Cambridge: John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies, October 1997); Andrew J. Bacevich and Richard H. Kohn, "Grand Army of the Republicans," *The New Republic*, vol. 217, no. 22 (December 8, 1997), pp. 22–25.