

PROTECTING PROFESSIONAL QUALITY: COMPETENCY AND CERTIFICATION-BASED OFFICER PROMOTIONS

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**PROTECTING PROFESSIONAL QUALITY:
COMPETENCY AND CERTIFICATION-BASED OFFICER PROMOTIONS**

by

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ABSTRACT

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A 20-year history of low officer accessions, low officer retention, and growth in the Army's force structure has resulted in non-competitive officer promotions, placing the quality and professionalism of the Army's future senior leaders at risk. This problem can no longer be addressed through increased lieutenant accessions and bonuses to retain captains. To meet this strategic challenge, the Army must change its approach to how it selects and certifies its officers for promotion. This paper will show that the Army's current officer strength shortfall, combined with time-in-grade based promotion eligibility policies, have resulted in undesirably high officer promotion rates, rendering promotions virtually non-competitive; and that sustained non-competitive promotions threaten the quality of the officer corps and the professional reputation of the Army. This paper will conclude by proposing the Army implement a competency and certification-based promotion eligibility system, with extended career timelines, in order to sustain the quality and professional reputation of the officer corps.

PROTECTING PROFESSIONAL QUALITY: COMPETENCY AND CERTIFICATION-BASED OFFICER PROMOTIONS

Introduction: The Challenge From Within

The Army's senior leadership faces a multitude of strategic challenges in the near and immediate future. The nature of conflict has changed since 2001 and is likely to remain in a state of flux; threats will become more varied and require lengthier theater commitments, making the course of conflicts more uncertain than before. In addition, the Army faces the prospect of reduced budgets in the years to come. The Army must prepare for an uncertain threat environment while simultaneously attempting to determine where to take risk in developing the force, and it has to get it right the first time.

Preparing for uncertainty in an era of diminishing resources is demanding enough, but the external strategic challenges the Army faces are exacerbated by a strategic challenge from within: the possibility that the quality of the Army's officer leadership will decline over the next ten years. A 20-year history of under-assessed officer classes, low officer retention, and growth in the Army's force structure has resulted officer promotion rates so high as to render officer promotions non-competitive, placing the quality and professionalism of the Army's future senior leaders at risk. This problem, a generation in the making, can no longer be addressed through increased lieutenant accessions and bonuses to retain captains. To meet this strategic challenge, the Army must change its approach to how it selects and certifies its officers for promotion.

This paper will show that the Army's current officer strength shortfall, combined with time-in-grade based promotion eligibility policies, have resulted in undesirably high officer promotion rates, rendering promotions virtually non-competitive; and that sustained non-competitive promotions threaten the quality of the officer corps and the professional reputation of the Army. This paper will conclude by proposing the Army implement a competency and certification-based promotion eligibility system, with extended career timelines, in order to sustain the quality and professional reputation of the officer corps.

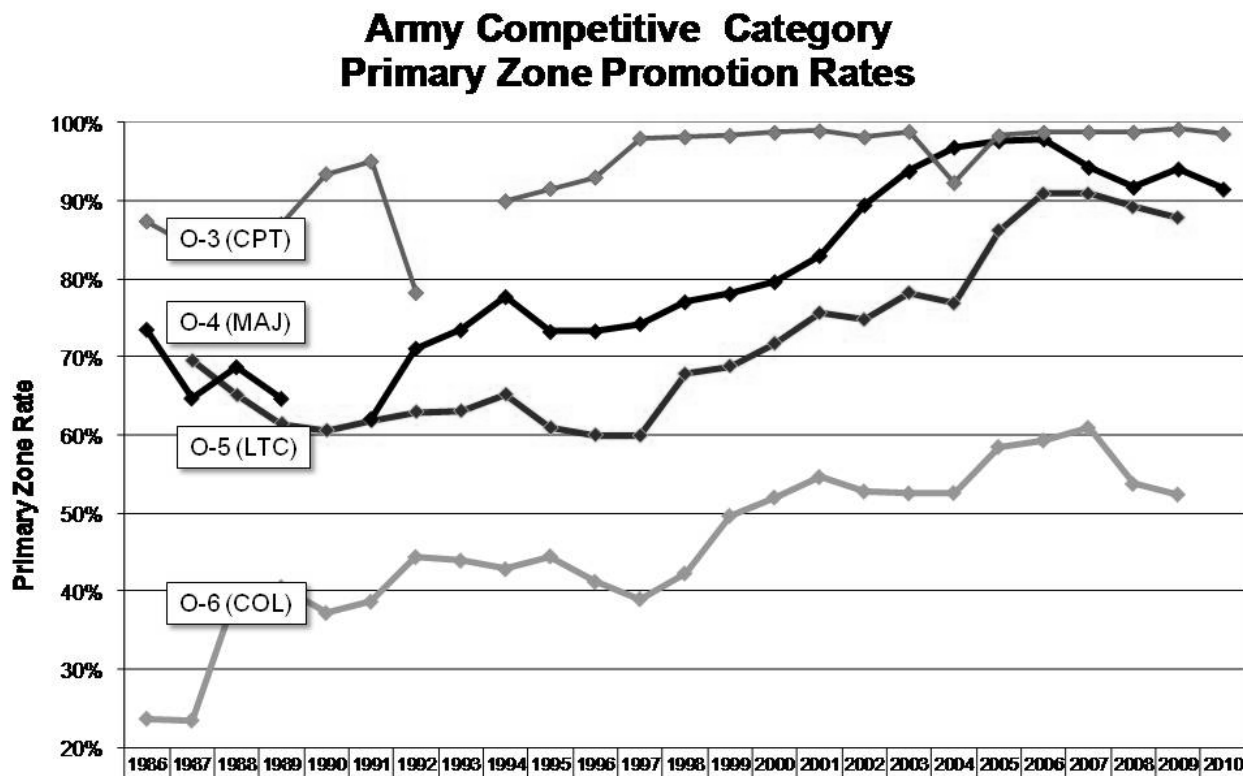
The Background of the Problem

Service guidelines for officer promotion rates, or the desired percentage of a particular officer cohort selected for promotion are described in the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act of 1980 (DOPMA), enacted 12 December 1980. The DOPMA provides standard officer promotion objectives and timings for all services, which are intended to keep officer authorizations within certain service-specific targets, as a percentage of overall end strength.¹ The optimum officer promotion progression by the DOPMA is as follows:²

<u>Grade</u>	<u>Promotion Timing (years)</u>	<u>Selection Rate</u>
O-2	2	100% (if fully qualified)
O-3	3 ^{1/2} , 4	95%
O-4	10	80%
O-5	16	70%
O-6	22	50%

By the DOPMA progression, an officer entering as an O-1, or second lieutenant, has an 18 percent chance of being promoted to O-6 over the course of a 22-year career. Most officers (76 percent) could expect to reach O-4, and a lucky 38 percent would reach O-5.

Army officer promotion rates, which were at or below DOPMA goals in 1996, have risen steadily since 1997 and remained high to 2009.



Army Competitive Category Primary Promotion Zone Rates, 1986-2010³

The figure above shows the steady rise in promotion rates for all Army officers since 1997. Whereas a new officer entering the Army after Desert Storm in 1991 had a 35 percent chance of making lieutenant colonel, and only a 13 percent chance of making colonel, today's junior officers are almost assured of making O-5, with an 80 percent chance of promotion, and a 42 percent chance of promotion to O-6, almost even odds.

The current high officer promotion rates in the Army are the product of three factors: the under-accession of new officers during the Army drawdown of the 1990s;

increased requirements for mid-grade officers due to force structure increases post-2001; and the increased number of captains that voluntarily separate from the Army.

Between the years 1991 and 1999, the Army reduced officer accessions in accordance with the overall drawdown of its end strength. In order to maintain sufficient officers for a force of 486,000 Soldiers, the Army should have accessed 4,300 new lieutenants per year. However, in order to meet drawdown strength targets, the Army accessed fewer new officers than modeled requirements.⁴ Between 1991 and 1999, new officer accession averaged 3,814 officers per year, approximately 9 percent below requirements to fill the force structure.⁵ Overall, between the years 1991 and 2000, the Army brought in 4,391 less new officers than required.⁶ After 2000, new officer accessions steadily increased until 2005, but shortfalls remained, on average, 2 percent annually.⁷

Force structure changes resulting from the Modular Force Initiative and the post-2001 increases in end strength caused the Army's officer requirements to grow by approximately 8,000 officers. Over half of the increased requirements, 58 percent or 4,600 officers, came at the mid-grade levels of captain and major.⁸ Officer shortfalls in the grades of captain and above are difficult to overcome quickly, because these officers must be developed from the ranks of the lieutenants, which takes time: by DOPMA guidelines, it takes between 3.5 and 4 years to produce a captain, and between 10 and 11 years to develop a major. As of 2008, the Army was short 798 captains and 2,554 majors.⁹

Low retention rates for Army captains have compounded the effect of low accessions and increased force structure on the inventory of captains and majors. A

certain amount of attrition is required to maintain the proper rank structure in the force: by necessity, there are fewer majors than captains, fewer colonels than majors, and so on. Prior to 1996, with the officer corps relatively in balance, the rate of captains leaving the service voluntarily was approximately 6.5 percent.¹⁰ After 1996, the voluntary separation rate for captains steadily increased to a high of 11.6 percent in 2000, with an average rate of approximately 10 percent.¹¹ It should be noted that voluntary separations are only part of the total annual loss: total loss rates for captains average approximately 2 percent higher.¹² The net effect was that captains were leaving the service at a rate faster than the Army could access and promote lieutenants.

The combination of under-accessed year groups, increased force structure requirements, and lowered captain retention produced persistent officer strength shortfalls at captain and major for the Army. To compensate, the Army increased the supply of officers through increased officer accessions, and began promoting officers faster to the ranks of captain and major.¹³ Starting in 2000, the Army steadily increased its annual targets for officer accessions from 4,000 new officers per year, to 4,600 in 2006.¹⁴ In 2002, the Army lowered promotion times to captain and major, promoting officers to captain six months earlier, at three and a half years time in service, and promoting officers to major a full year earlier, at 10 years time in service.¹⁵

Because of the time required for a newly accessed officer to progress to the ranks of captain and major, increased accessions and shortened promotion timelines for officers entering the service after 2000 were still unable to overcome the officer shortfalls for the cohort entering service between 1991 and 2002, the same officers that composed the Army's population of captains and majors. For example, an officer

joining the service in the year 2002 would not make captain until the year 2005 at the earliest, and would not be promoted to major earlier than 2012. Thus, the Army's shortage of captains and field-grade officers is persistent: in 2008, the Army projected strength shortfalls of 364 lieutenant colonels, 2554 majors, and 798 captains for the cohorts entering service between 1991 and 2002, with projected annual shortages of approximately 3,000 until the year 2013.¹⁶

To address the immediate shortages of captains and field-grade officers, the Army began to increase promotion rates in 1998. In 2000, the promotion rates for all officers met or exceeded DOPMA objectives, and have remained high since (Figure on page 3). It would seem that the promotion rates would begin to drop as the year groups entering service since 2000, over-accessed to compensate for retention shortfalls and structural requirements¹⁷, reach the promotion points to captain and major. However, a closer look at the sources of officer accessions will show that the selection rates for field grade officers are likely to remain high for the foreseeable future.

The fact that the cohorts entering service between 2001 and 2009 are composed of a greater proportion of officers entering commissioned service from Officer Candidate School (OCS) indicates that the Army will still be challenged to retain captains and majors in service beyond 10 years. The traditional sources of commissioning, the United States Military Academy (USMA) and the Reserve Officer Training Program (ROTC), have failed to keep up with the increased accession demand: in the years 2006 and 2007, the ROTC program and the USMA fell short of officer production goals by a combined 12 percent.¹⁸ This required the Army to rely on OCS to make up the shortfall: the 2007 OCS production goal was 1,650 officers, more than double its target

in 2001.¹⁹ Whereas the rate for OCS as a percentage of annual officer accessions prior to 1999 was approximately 9 percent, by 2009 the percentage had risen to 40 percent.²⁰ The high percentage of OCS officers, while meeting the immediate accession requirements for lieutenants, merely exacerbates the problem of retaining captains and majors. Of the officer population, OCS officers have the highest separation rates at the 6 and 10 year points, precisely the career point where the Army's significant officer shortfalls lie.²¹ Because of the OCS officers represent such a large proportion of the officer population, their departure will tend to keep promotion rates inflated.

Over-accession, intended to compensate for low officer retention, may actually contribute to sustained captain and major shortfalls, and sustained high promotion rates, in the future. Because the Army has accessed officers in excess of force structure requirements, there are more lieutenants than there are lieutenant jobs. Consequently, officers have to wait longer for key developmental positions such as platoon leader, and remain in those positions for shorter periods of time before being moved on to fill captain-level vacancies on staff elsewhere.²² Officers spend less time leading troops and receive less developmental time before being given increased responsibility, which leads to job dissatisfaction and further retention issues.²³

The Effect of Officer Strength Shortfalls on Promotion Rates

Officer strength shortfalls produce high annual promotion selection rates due to the time-in-service based system used to determine promotion eligibility under the DOPMA. The DOPMA, enacted in 1980, reflects the attempts of Congress to standardize officer promotion procedures across the services,²⁴ and as an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary document, it built upon policies and legislation dating back to

the late 1940s and 1950s, reflecting the accepted practices of the era of relatively static requirements that characterized the Cold War.²⁵

The DOPMA, as codified in Titles 10 and 37 of the U.S. Code, created standardized officer management policies for all services, covering appointment, training, promotion, separation, and retirement. The DOPMA promotion system centers on the “up or out” principle, in practice since 1947, in which officers are expected to maintain progress “up” through the ranks by being selected for promotion at certain points, measured by years in service. Officers twice not selected for promotion are processed “out” of the service through involuntary separation or retirement. The “up or out” system depends on managing officers in year-group cohorts. The officer population considered for promotion by each board is limited to two year-group-based zones: the Primary Zone, consisting of officers just entering promotion eligibility based on time in service, and the Above the Zone population of officers not selected for promotion the previous year. A small number of officers may be selected from “Below the Zone”, but only at a rate not to exceed 10 percent of the total selection, and only at the expense of Primary Zone selectees.²⁶

The time-based rules for promotion eligibility at the center of the DOPMA make officer promotion rates sensitive to the population of particular year groups. Since only one year group cohort is eligible for promotion at any given time, promotion rates are highly dependent on the population of that year group: over-strength year groups will tend to have a lower selection rate, and an under-strength year group will have a higher selection rate as the as the board needs to “dig deeper” into a year group to meet

structural requirements. As officer shortages above the grades of captain are likely to continue, promotion rates will likely remain elevated.

The Effect of High Promotion Rates on the Quality of the Officer Corps

Officer promotion rates that remain well above historical norms and DOPMA objectives are of concern because they call into question the ability of the Army to guarantee the quality of its officer corps in the long term. The career points at which officers are considered for promotion serve as a control on the quality of the officer corps: at each promotion point, the best-performing officers are selected for advancement, and the underperforming officers are passed over or separated from the service. Selectivity in promotions, and the culling of individuals not suited for promotion or continued service, is the mark of any healthy organization.²⁷ In an organization such as the Army, which must recruit its future leaders in from the lower ranks of the organization, such periodic culls are the only way to ensure the right individuals are selected to lead the organization.

The DOPMA promotion eligibility system, based on seniority rather than on competency, limits the Army's ability to control the quality of a year groups' class of promotees. Under DOPMA, all officers of a particular year group cohort are equally eligible for promotion when they reach the career point at which their cohort may be considered, regardless of differences in assignment experience, professional education, or military competence. Promotion boards rank-order officers based on performance and merit, and then select officers for promotion based on need: those high on the order of merit list are "above the line" and are selected for promotion, those who fall below the line become non-selects.

If a year group is highly populated and requirements are relatively low, promotion boards can serve as effective quality control points: the more officers to choose from, the more selective the board will be, as reflected in the selection rates of the late 1980s. In an era of persistent officer shortfalls, the reverse is true.

Because the Army will need to sustain high officer promotion rates in the future, it will be hard-pressed to cull its mid-career ranks. Instead of screening officers and selecting the very best for promotion, the Army is in the position of having to promote virtually all officers of a particular year group, without regard for ability.²⁸ At current promotion rates, it is possible for an officer to get promoted all the way to lieutenant colonel (and become eligible for battalion command) by performing no worse than the bottom 20 percent of his peers. The current trend of non-competitive promotions has prevented the Army from policing the quality of its mid-career officer ranks, and has led observers to call into question the overall quality of the officer pool in the ranks of major and lieutenant colonel.²⁹

High promotion rates would not be of concern if the current rules governing eligibility for promotion included ways to screen candidates for quality: if 100 percent each year's pool of potential promotees were certified to a certain threshold of competence in order to become eligible, then no matter what the selection rate would be, the promoted officers would be guaranteed as competent. This is not the case, because promotion eligibility for officers, by the DOPMA, is based on time in service instead of certification.

The only prerequisites for promotion under the DOPMA, as codified in: Title 10 United States Code; Department of the Army Pamphlet 600-3, *Commissioned Officer*

Professional Development and Career Management; and Army Regulation 600-8-29, *Officer Promotions*, is time in service. Assignment experience, attendance at professional schools, graduate study, competence may place an officer higher on the order of merit list for promotion, but have no bearing on whether an officer is eligible for promotion. With low populations of eligible officers pushing promotion rates to lieutenant colonel well above 80 percent, the Army has been forced to “play the hand it has been dealt” with regard to the quality of its officer corps. Despite claims to be consistently selecting officers on a “best qualified” basis,³⁰ at current promotion rates, undoubtedly some underperforming officers are getting promoted. The Army has lost its ability to control the quality of its officer corps, the population from which it chooses its future strategic leaders. Because current promotion policies do not certify the competence of the officers selected for promotion, the continued quality of the Army’s senior leadership is at risk.³¹

Ominously, the potential decline in the quality of the officer leadership pool due to attrition and non-selective promotions may have not gone unnoticed in a key audience: the Army’s current crop of top-performing junior officers. While the Army does not keep statistics on the quality of officers that choose to voluntarily separate, behavioral theory supports the notion that in organizations where the product is a direct result of the quality of the individuals comprising the membership, the high performers are the most likely to leave when the perceived quality of the organization declines.³² High-performing individuals do not want to be associated with low-performing organizations:

“If those who have the greatest influence on the quality of output are also, as is likely, more quality-conscious than the rest of the members, any slight deterioration in quality may set off their exit, which in turn will lead to further exits, and so on.”³³

The Challenge to Professionalism

The lowered selectivity and lack of certification standards for officer promotions, and the attendant lower quality of the officer corps presents a strategic challenge to the Army that strikes at the very the professionalism of the organization. By definition, professions are composed of a body of individuals who possess expert knowledge beyond the reach of general public, and who exercise that knowledge autonomously due a relationship of trust between the professional and the client the profession serves. The client trusts the professional to maintain and advance the expert knowledge of the profession, and to practice a self-policing professional ethic: the profession must control who is allowed to enter the profession, and ensure the individuals in the profession maintain certain standards of competence as they move up the ranks of the profession.³⁴

The professional-client trust is based on the ability of the profession to maintain expert knowledge, to develop subordinates in the profession, and to certify the knowledge of its members. The more the profession maintains its standards and exercises a self-policing ethic, the greater the trust, and the greater the reputation of the profession. When the trust is great enough, the client allows the profession increasing measures of autonomy, the ability to act without direction or oversight.³⁵

The Army, as a profession, seeks the trust of the American public. A professional military requires autonomy to carry out its duty to defend the nation, or put another way, the nation requires the military to be able to act autonomously in executing its functions. The nation requires the military to act as a professional body.

Current officer promotion practices place the Army's ability to act with autonomy, as a professional body, at risk. Because the Army promotes most of its eligible officers

without certifying their professional knowledge or competence beforehand, it is no longer performing the critical functions of a professional body: the maintenance of professional standards, the use of standards to the advance of individuals in the profession, and the policing of individuals that fail to meet professional standards. By not enforcing professional standards in promoting its officer corps and selecting *most* officers for promotion, as opposed to selecting only the *best*, the Army's reputation for competence, and with it the professional-client trust relationship it enjoys with the American public, is also at risk. Doubts about the quality of the officer corps,³⁶ especially of the senior ranks, will affect the ability of the Army's senior leadership to provide credible advice to the nation's civilian leadership, and ultimately cost the Army its professional autonomy. The Army is in danger of losing the ability to exercise control of its profession.

New Challenges Require New Approaches

Meeting the challenge of ensuring the sustained quality of the Army's officer corps while drawing from a shrinking pool of promotion candidates requires a new approach to promotion eligibility. Past practices of increasing the size of the promotion pool through increasing new officer accessions, speeding up promotions, and promoting in greater numbers will lead the Army down the path of mediocrity.³⁷ Employing lateral accessions by bringing more people into service at the middle ranks in the manner of OCS, is not suitable to solve the shortage of mid-grade officers due to the culture of the Army. The senior leaders of the Army, the colonels and general officers, are responsible not only for making the Army's strategic decisions; they are also the stewards of the Army's professional culture. Essential to an officer's qualification to serve as a senior leader and steward of the professional culture is the requirement to

progress through a career of being *developed by that same professional culture*; the future leaders of the Army must be of the Army and its unique culture. Unlike civilian corporations, the Army cannot “hire” its senior leaders from outside the organization.

An alternative solution to the problem of maintaining the professional quality of the officer corps is, instead of increasing the number of officers eligible for promotion, increasing the quality of the officers eligible for promotion by moving away from the time-based promotion eligibility, and towards a system that grants promotion eligibility based on competence and certification.

Competency-Based Promotion Eligibility

Time-based promotion practices, such as that defined by the DOPMA and captured in Title 10, U.S. Code, award promotion eligibility to officers based on time, regardless of the experience or demonstrated competence of the officer. Competency based promotions award eligibility based on the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) of the officer, gained through successive assignments.³⁸ In such a system, an officer becomes promotion eligible only after gaining a certain defined level of professional experience, based not on time but rather on the number of assignments. Competency based promotion systems, while differing in detail, have been proposed by various authors.³⁹ The clearest model, offering detailed analysis, is the one proposed by RAND, in the report *Challenging Time in DOPMA: Flexible and Contemporary Officer Management*.⁴⁰

Challenging Time offers a model of how a competency-based promotion system might work, using assignment histories from real O-4 (major) and O-5 (lieutenant colonel) populations for all services as a data source. In the competency-based system that RAND models, officers were “promoted” according to the following rules: officers

became eligible for promotion after completing three assignments in grade; the duration of an assignment had no bearing on eligibility; assignments were mixes of professional military education (PME), “command path” jobs, and non-traditional or “broadening” assignments.

In analyzing how the competency-based promotion rules affected the career path of the modeled population, RAND found the following:⁴¹

The due-course promotion zones for a particular cohort of officers tended to broaden. Some officers tended to progress towards promotion eligibility faster than others, by virtue of taking shorter-duration “command path” jobs. Others, taking more assignments in the “broadening” path, progressed more slowly. Overall, promotion to a particular rank, for a cohort entering the service at the same time, was spread out over an average of five years, even though all officers were progressing on “due course”.

Also, RAND found that the competency-based system was more tolerant of a varied career path. Because the RAND model replaced the time-based “gate” for promotion with a gate based on completing three assignments, the officers could pursue broadening assignments, typically longer than command path jobs, without placing subsequent promotions at risk.

Finally, RAND noted that while the competency-based system accommodated longer assignment times, the tendency in the model was for careers to lengthen overall as well. As RAND pointed out, career timelines longer than the current 20 to 30 year model may be required to fully reap the benefits of the competency based system.⁴²

The competency-based promotion system modeled by RAND is an attractive option to raise the quality of the officer promotion pool because it raises the competency

standard for entry into the promotion pool, without penalizing officers for taking the time to gain the experience. Further, by tolerating the lengthier assignments and career timelines, officers would have more opportunity to pursue the broadening Joint, Interagency, Industrial, and Multinational (JIIM) jobs that have been identified as providing the kinds of knowledge, skills, and abilities the Army desires in its future leaders.⁴³

Certification Based Promotion Eligibility

Another method to improve the quality of the officer promotion pool is to require officers to certify their professional knowledge prior to becoming eligible for successive promotion boards, by passing a centrally-administered promotion examination.

Promotion eligibility examinations, already used by the armies of India and Nigeria⁴⁴, serve as an additional “quality check” on the officer promotion pool, by ensuring that all officers under promotion consideration demonstrate a defined standard of professional knowledge and competence, appropriate to grade. Certification of the officer promotion pool discharges a key responsibility of the Army as a professional body: certification of the competence of its membership.

Implementing a Competency and Certification Based Promotion System

A promotion system based on competency and certification offers advantages over the current time-based system in that it ensures the quality of the officer promotion pool, regardless of the size of the promotion pool or the percentage of officers selected for promotion. A modified competency and certification based system, using the RAND model as its basis, could be implemented as follows.

Following promotion to captain after four years under the current DOPMA rules, officers would then become eligible for promotion per the competency-based model in

Challenging Time. To become eligible for promotion to major, new captains would begin a series of three assignments of varying length. Some officers could follow command track assignments immediately, while others could branch off into graduate education or broadening assignments, and complete company command later. Prior to becoming board-eligible, officers would take a TRADOC-administered promotion eligibility examination, certifying their professional readiness for the next rank.

Under this system, year group designations after captain will no longer have any bearing on promotion, therefore below-the-zone promotions will not occur. While this might be considered a disincentive, it could be turned into an incentive for high-performers. The competency-based system, with its flexible timelines, affords individual officers a measure of control over the timing of their promotions: officers that take on the sought-after command-track jobs that usually carry shorter timelines, and pass their promotion exams quickly, can make themselves eligible for promotion faster than their peers. Further, in place of the below the zone promotion, promotion boards could elect to reward the top 10 percent of each promotion class with incentives such as assignment preference. The ability to control one's career, and set the conditions for future success, is a powerful incentive for high-performers, and could be the key to retaining talented young officers.⁴⁵

The "up-or-out" system, implemented in 1947 to eliminate the stagnation produced by the seniority-based "up-and-stay" pre-war system⁴⁶ and a critical component of the DOPMA of 1980, should remain as a feature of a competency-based system, with a modification: an officer passed over once for promotion should become

eligible for promotion only after completing another assignment, and after being passed over a second time should separate from the service, as under the DOPMA system.

Challenges to Implementation

Implementing a competency and certification-based promotion system requires changes to the legislation and policies concerning officer management; considerable effort from the generating force; and perhaps requires a revision of how a successful officer career is defined.

Changing promotion rules from time to competency-based rule requires revisions to the DOPMA and Title 10, U.S. Code to: replace year-group based promotion eligibility, replacing it with eligibility after three assignments (the meaning of “assignment” itself needs to be defined); eliminate reference to below the zone and above the zone promotions; modify the definition and rules covering “twice failed of selection” to make passed-over officers eligible for a second time after completing an additional assignment; and establish the requirement to pass a promotion eligibility examination. To allow for and encourage the lengthier careers that the new system may require, retirement eligibility rules will need to be rewritten to extend careers beyond 30 years.⁴⁷ The fact that the legislation applies to all services and not just the Army is also an obstacle: any change to the promotion rules requires buy-in from all services, and not all services are under the same promotion pressures as the Army.

The addition of standardized promotion eligibility examinations requires significant effort on the part of the Army as an institution. The administration of the test, while a large-scale undertaking, can be significantly enabled through the use of distance learning technology. The true challenge in implementing certification examinations is conceptual: in order to write a test of professional knowledge, the Army has to define

the required body of knowledge. In short, the Army has to figure out what it is that it wants its officers at each grade to be able to do.

Finally, changing from a time-based to a competency-based promotion system requires a cultural change on the part of the Army, in that the definition of what successful careers are will need to change. In the year-group based system, measuring success is relatively straightforward: officers are promoted early, on time, or not at all. The time-based system also ensures, to a great degree, that most officers proceed through their careers on similar timelines, getting promoted and retired at about the same points. A competency-based system, with its flexible career timelines, removes the time-based gauges of success: figuring out who is “ahead” and who is “behind” will be harder to do. Further, the competency-based system will let some individuals to get promoted relatively quickly through their efforts in high-payoff jobs, while other officers may progress more slowly, either by choice or an inability to get selected for the high-payoff jobs.⁴⁸ This change, a direct result of competition and ultimately a benefit for the service, will represent a complete turn away from the current system that encourages equality of outcome, and may be the hardest change to implement.

Conclusion: No Time To Waste

The most significant obstacle to implementing a competency and certification-based promotion system is answering the question: why? If the problem of high selection rates is caused by the Army having too few officers for too many slots, won't the problem resolve itself as the Army downsizes after the end of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan? Won't the problem fix itself?

Answering those questions involves looking to the past, and to the future. Looking at past experience, the Army has faced draw-downs before, most recently in

the 1990s. This paper has shown that as the Army drew down its officer strength, it overcorrected and laid the basis for the situation we face today. Looking to the future, can it be said with confidence the Army will be able to predict conditions with enough precision to get its accessions to match its future requirements? What if the national economy enters a period of growth, and accessions are unable to keep up with requirements? Then the Army will be right back where it started in 2000: forced to promote as many officers as it can, and unable to ensure the quality of the officers it promotes.

The time is approaching for the Army to take positive steps to meet its professional obligation to certify the competence of its officers, to control the advancement of its officers in the profession, and to protect the relationship of trust with the American people. To date, the Army has overcome the current shortage of field grade officers and the reduced quality of its mid-career officer pool through the quality of its senior officer and non-commissioned officer ranks. Through closer supervision, mentorship, and the leveraging of experience, the Army has been able to “lead its way out” of the problem. However, as the current generation of senior leaders begins to leave the service, the responsibility for making the Army’s critical, strategic decisions will fall to the very generation of leaders to whom the least level of selectivity has been applied. The nation cannot afford to have average officers in the senior leader ranks. The Army must act now to ensure that only the best officers are selected to shoulder the burden of leading the service into the future.

Endnotes

¹ Bernard Rostker et al., *The Defense Officer Personnel Management Act of 1980: A Retrospective Assessment* (Washington DC: RAND 1993), 8.

² Ibid, 14.

³ Albert S. Eggerton, e-mail message to author, March 15, 2011. Data provided by U.S. Department of the Army, Deputy Chief of Staff, G-1.

⁴ Charles A. Henning, *Army Officer Shortages: Background and Issues for Congress*, (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, July 5, 2006), 3.

⁵ Ibid, 4.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ U.S. Department of the Army, Deputy Chief of Staff, G-1, "U.S. Army Officer Retention Fact Sheet as of May 25, 2007", May 25, 2007; Charles A. Henning, *Army Officer Shortages: Background and Issues for Congress*, 5.; and United States Government Accountability Office, *Military Personnel: Strategic Plan Needed to Address Army's Emerging Officer Accession and Retention Challenges*, GAO-07-224 (Washington DC: U.S. Government Accountability Office, January 2007), 12.

⁹ United States Government Accountability Office, *Military Personnel: Strategic Plan Needed to Address Army's Emerging Officer Accession and Retention Challenges*, GAO-07-224, 27.

¹⁰ U.S. Army Personnel Command, "OPMD Brief," April 2001 version, slide 17, quoted in Mark R. Lewis, "Army Transformation and the Junior Officer Exodus" *Armed Forces & Society* 31, no. 1, (Fall 2004), 65.

¹¹ Ibid. Figures for the loss rate of captains vary: the Army G-1 fact sheet at reference 8 quotes loss rates lower than the PERSCOM rates reported by Lewis. However, those loss rates are taken from the population that includes all company grade officers (2LT, 1LT, CPT), which tends to lower the reported percentage: because initial service terms for officers exceed four years, 2LTs and 1LTs cannot voluntarily separate from the service.

¹² Mark R. Lewis, "Army Transformation and the Junior Officer Exodus" *Armed Forces & Society* 31, no. 1, (Fall 2004), 87.

¹³ Henning, *Army Officer Shortages: Background and Issues for Congress*, 8-11; and U.S. Department of the Army, Deputy Chief of Staff, G-1, "U.S. Army Officer Retention Fact Sheet as of May 25, 2007"

¹⁴ Henning, *Army Officer Shortages: Background and Issues for Congress*, 4.

¹⁵ Ibid, 10.

¹⁶ United States Government Accountability Office, *Military Personnel: Strategic Plan Needed to Address Army's Emerging Officer Accession and Retention Challenges*, GAO-07-224, 7, 27.

¹⁷ Casey Wardynski, David S. Lyle, and Michael J. Colarusso, *Accessing Talent: The Foundation of a U.S. Army Officer Corps Strategy* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, February 2010), 14.

¹⁸ Casey Wardynski, David S. Lyle, and Michael J. Colarusso, *Accessing Talent: The Foundation of a U.S. Army Officer Corps Strategy* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, February 2010), 21-23; and United States Government Accountability Office, *Military Personnel: Strategic Plan Needed to Address Army's Emerging Officer Accession and Retention Challenges*, GAO-07-224, 21-23.

¹⁹ Ibid, 22.

²⁰ Casey Wardynski, David S. Lyle, and Michael J. Colarusso, *Towards a U.S. Army Officer Corps Strategy for Success: A Proposed Human Capital Model Focused upon Talent* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, April 2009), 7.

²¹ Casey Wardynski, David S. Lyle, and Michael J. Colarusso, *Accessing Talent: The Foundation of a U.S. Army Officer Corps Strategy*, 13.

²² Ibid, 14.

²³ Mark R. Lewis, "Army Transformation and the Junior Officer Exodus", 78.

²⁴ Bernard Rostker et al., *The Defense Officer Personnel Management Act of 1980: A Retrospective Assessment*, 7.

²⁵ Peter Schirmer et al, *Challenging Time In DOPMA: Flexible and Contemporary Officer Management*, (Washington DC: RAND 2006), 10.

²⁶ Ibid, 12-13.

²⁷ Casey Wardynski, David S. Lyle, and Michael J. Colarusso, *Towards a U.S. Army Officer Corps Strategy for Success: A Proposed Human Capital Model Focused upon Talent*, 10.

²⁸ Ibid, 4.

²⁹ Mark R. Lewis, "Army Transformation and the Junior Officer Exodus", 75.; and Kevin D. Stringer, *The War on Terror and the War for Officer Talent: Linked Challenges for the U.S. Army* (Institute of Land Warfare, Association of the United States Army, 2008), 4-5.

³⁰ U.S. Department of the Army, Deputy Chief of Staff, G-1, "U.S. Army Officer Retention Fact Sheet as of May 25, 2007"

³¹ Mark R. Lewis, "Army Transformation and the Junior Officer Exodus", 76.

³² Ibid, 80.

³³ Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 100, quoted in Mark R. Lewis, "Army Transformation and the Junior Officer Exodus", 81.

³⁴ Don M. Snider, Lloyd J. Matthews, eds., *The Future of the Army Profession*, (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 14; Don M. Snider, "Developing a Corps of Professionals", in John A. Nagl and Brian M. Burton, eds., *Keeping the Edge: Revitalizing America's Military Officer Corps*, 23; and U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, *Army: Profession of Arms*, (Center for the Army Profession and Ethic, Combined Arms Center, 2010), 13.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Tilghman, Andrew, December 2007. "The Army's Other Crisis," *The Washington Monthly*.

³⁷ Mark R. Lewis, "Army Transformation and the Junior Officer Exodus", 82-83.

³⁸ Maren Leed and David Sokolow, *The Ingenuity Gap: Officer Management for the 21st Century* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2010), 31.

³⁹ John A. Nagl and Brian M. Burton, eds., *Keeping the Edge: Revitalizing America's Military Officer Corps* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2010), <http://www.cnas.org/node/4077> (accessed October 30, 2010); Tim Kane, "Why Our Best officers Are Leaving", *The Atlantic*, January 2011; and Maren Leed and David Sokolow, *The Ingenuity Gap: Officer Management for the 21st Century*, 27.

⁴⁰ Peter Schirmer et al, *Challenging Time In DOPMA: Flexible and Contemporary Officer Management*, (Washington DC: RAND 2006), 17.

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⁴² Ibid.

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⁴⁴ "Army Begins Promotion Examinations For Officers", Nigerian Tribune, April 14, 2010, accessed online: <http://saturday.tribune.com.ng/index.php/component/content/article/4020-army-begins-promotion-examination-for-officers>, 18 March 2011.

⁴⁵ Michael J. Lorino, *Marine Officer Promotions: Incentivizing Top Performers*, (Quantico, VA: U.S. Marine Corp Command and Staff College, February 20, 2009), 11-12.; and Leonard Wong, *Generations Apart: Xers and Boomers in the Officer Corps*, (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, October 2000), 23.

⁴⁶ Bernard Rostker et al., *The Defense Officer Personnel Management Act of 1980: A Retrospective Assessment*, 3. In the words of General Eisenhower, as the Army Chief of Staff: "...short of almost crime being committed by an officer, there were ineffectual ways of eliminating a man."

⁴⁷ Peter Schirmer et al, *Challenging Time In DOPMA: Flexible and Contemporary Officer Management*, 45; and Don M Snider, "Developing a Corps of Professionals", in John A. Nagl and Brian M. Burton, eds., *Keeping the Edge: Revitalizing America's Military Officer Corps*, 23.

⁴⁸ Peter Schirmer et al, *Challenging Time In DOPMA: Flexible and Contemporary Officer Management*, 42.