

The impact of a decade at war

BY COL. CHARLES D. ALLEN (RET.)

It would be easy to discount the conjecture that the Army is in trouble. After all, it is unmatched as a fighting force and successfully conducted military operations that achieved regime change in two countries in the space of 18 months. Total U.S. military spending averaged nearly \$720 billion over the past four years and exceeded 46 percent of global defense spending in 2009. Moreover, the \$6.73 trillion spent by the Defense Department in the 21st century dwarfed the annual gross national product of most other countries. Commensurate with the level of resourcing, the Army possesses the finest equipment incorporating the latest technology and the most extensive training program in the world.

Combined with the relatively high confidence placed in the Army (as part of the U.S. military) by the American people, it would be easy to feel invincible. Harvard University's Center for Public Leadership "National Leadership Index" for 2010 ranked the military as the U.S. institution with the most confidence in leadership (continuing the trend since 2005), and in a similar Gallup poll, the military has been ranked at the top since 1998. While Americans may have doubts about current wars, they are supportive of their warriors.

Even with such levels of fiscal support and confidence extended by American society, I am reminded of the retort to a comment made by Col. Harry Summers (later an Army War College professor). Summers is quoted in an interview saying, "You know, you never beat us on the battlefield," I told my North Vietnamese counterpart during negotiations in Hanoi a week before the fall of Saigon. He pondered that remark a moment and then replied, "That may be so, but it is also irrelevant." Public support and confidence may indeed be irrelevant if America's Army does not adequately prepare for the future.

I have been affiliated with the Army since the summer of

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1973 — first as an ROTC cadet, then a West Point cadet, and finally as a 30-year career officer. I have witnessed the Army transition from its focus on military operations in Vietnam, its triumph in the Cold War (which enabled successes in Southwest Asia in operations Desert Shield/Desert Storm) and then struggle through the 1990s with Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" — predicting the "universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" — and now in the 21st century arrive at its current station in history.

That journey was marked by successive chiefs of staff taking stock of the Army, establishing a vision and then charting a path to the future. Their methodology was to commission a series of white papers to identify the issues that would serve as the basis for key initiatives during their tenure. In 1978, at the end of the U.S. military's involvement in Vietnam and presented with the challenges of the all-volunteer Army, Gen. Bernard Rogers published "Assessing the Army." One year later, Gen. E.C. "Shy" Meyers declared the "hollow Army" and penned "A Framework for Molding the Army into a Disciplined, Well-Trained Force."

It is easy to make the generalization that the Army was ill-disciplined and untrained and demanding actions by strategic leaders were required to address an unacceptable condition. In 1986, Gen. John Wickham wrote "Values, the Bedrock of the Profession" in an attempt to establish a moral touchstone for members of the Army. From these white papers, the chiefs initiated a number of annual cam-

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U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan board a C-17 transport plane taking them back to the United States. The pace of deployments is taking a toll on the active-duty Army as well as the Army Reserve and National Guard.

AIR FORCE

paigns to redress shortfalls and “professionalize” a force that struggled with its identity and was attempting to redefine itself.

It was that professional force that Gen. Gordon Sullivan pressed to preserve during the drawdown of the 1990s. The Army 1994 white paper “Decisive Victory: American’s Power Projection Army” conveyed the imperative to maintain an effective fighting force that would be able to respond when called to secure national interests. Sullivan, an avid student of history, evoked the lessons of the Korean conflict with the slogan “No More Task Force Smiths.” Task Force Smith was the first Army unit to engage in combat in the Korean War. As part

of the constabulary force in Japan, it was woefully unprepared for combat with its minimal levels of equipment, manning and training. Sullivan feared external pressures to downsize the force would result in lack of focus and jeopardize the Army’s ability to accomplish its mission: to fight and win the nation’s wars.

SIGNALS ... WHERE THERE’S SMOKE

Army leaders took note of what was happening within the institution, actions and situations that were indicative of systemic weaknesses. Call them weak signals or signposts, there are several events that give cause for concern regarding the

Will the Army succumb, like metal, to fatigue and fracture?

health of today's Army. Ponder this short list: Abu Ghraib, Walter Reed, the Fort Hood shootings and service members' suicides. The Schlesinger Report of investigation into detainee abuse at Abu Ghraib identified several contributing factors beyond what was initially called a leadership failure. Conditions in the now-infamous Building 18 at Walter Reed Army Medical Center revealed unacceptable omissions in care for our wounded warriors. The traumatic events at Fort Hood, which resulted in the deaths of 13 and wounding of 29 others, were linked to a network of failures in various systems such as intelligence sharing and personnel management. The disturbing rise in suicides among service members prompted an assessment of the Army health program and rediscovery of the "Lost Art of Leadership in Garrisons." Over the past decade, as these signals appeared, the Army has addressed them as discrete events, and in many cases, prided itself on the actions taken to rectify them.

It is prudent to look at this collection of signals and question what senior leaders should garner from these incidents, especially as they relate to the health of the Army in an era of persistent conflict. As early as July 2003, Brookings Institution analyst Michael O'Hanlon warned about "Breaking the Army." Throughout current conflicts, we heard senior Army leaders acknowledge such a possibility — primarily the focus was on extended deployments — "boots on the ground" and the "dwell time" for soldiers between deployments. In 2006, then-Chief of Staff Gen. Peter Schoomaker testified to a congressional committee that the pace of repeated deployments with limited respite between operations would "break the active component" and pose significant challenges to the Army Reserve and National Guard. The charter to prevent the Army from breaking was passed to Gen. George Casey when he became chief of staff in 2007. The principal concern was the effect that such actions would have on the retention of company-grade officers and midgrade noncommissioned officers. But the impact of a decade of continuous war is more insidious; one needs only to look at the series of reports, internal and external, to be concerned about the health of our Army.

LOSING THE BEST

The health of America's Army can be gauged by analyzing a sample of its people — in this case, I chose leaders in the officer corps. The Atlantic journalist Tim Kane conducted a series of interviews with a number of active-duty and former

midgrade officers and asserted that the best of the Army are leaving. Some of these officers may have been of the type that concerned three brigade combat team (BCT) commanders enough to cause them to write a white paper to Casey detailing the field artillery specialty as a "dead branch walking." These BCT commanders made the argument that young officers were not receiving the basic core competencies, an assertion that can easily extend to any number of other branches.

It is now the norm in the Army to focus almost exclusively on the tactical counterinsurgency mission sets, while at the same time deferring attendance for professional military education. Not enforcing requirements to complete intermediate-level education and senior-level college results in officers being placed in key assignments without the requisite experience and education to facilitate professional and organizational success.

An informal polling of division commanders found that effective mentorship of lieutenant colonels is impossible given the numbers (more than 130 in a typical senior rating chain while deployed). From their viewpoint, according to Lt. Gen. Mark Hertling's January 2010 memorandum to Casey, "Division Commander Comments on Modularity Issues," the Army is "not spending as much time training and mentoring these officers [battalion commanders] for the inherent responsibilities associate[d] with the leap to this critical position [of brigade commander]." The issues of education and mentorship may also be a factor in the reliefs from command of more than a dozen battalion and brigade commanders in the past year. We should also take note of the continuing interest in the topic of "toxic leadership," on which retired Col. George Reed, associate professor of leadership studies at the University of San Diego, spoke to a packed auditorium in the Pentagon in December.

It is informative to consider how officers judge their senior leaders as in Lt. Col. Paul Yingling's "A failure of generalship" (AFJ, May 2007). This concern regarding the professional competence and performance of senior leaders cuts across the services at every level. Lest we forget, since 2006, the U.S. military has witnessed the firing or resignation of the chief of staff of the Air Force, the secretaries of the Army and the Air Force, plus several general officers, including the commander of U.S. Central Command and two successive

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senior American commanders in Afghanistan.

The heart of the matter lies in whether these actions are indicative of major fault lines within the Army, generated by an era of persistent conflict. Is the Army strong and resilient enough to endure the stresses placed on its most valuable resource — its people — or will it succumb, like metal, to fatigue and fracture? In either case, senior leaders need to assess the threats and risks, and then develop mitigation strategies.

NOT ONLY AN ARMY CONCERN

It is clear that a period of transition is ahead for the U.S. military resulting from the reduction of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as the impact of the American economic recovery. These acts portend that the changes ahead will affect all services whether as a result of frozen and reduced Defense Department or Army budgets, the downsizing and reduction of forces, or concern over the implementation of the repeal of “don’t

ask, don’t tell.” These transitions serve to reaffirm the characterization of today’s strategic environment as volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous, in need of senior leaders who are strategic assets capable of ensuring relevance of our Army to the nation. Not unlike the 1990s, where a peace dividend was expected after two triumphs against the USSR and Iraq, the fiscal environment of today requires a realistic look at defense expenditures. Accordingly, Defense Secretary Robert Gates has directed “efficiencies” in DoD operations from which the savings will be reinvested into specific defense capabilities and where the total defense budget will be significantly reduced over the next five years.

Following the methodology of past chiefs of staff when faced with times of change and turbulence, Casey and Army Secretary John McHugh directed the Profession of Arms campaign. The campaign and its accompanying study are the vehicles that will allow senior leaders to assess the health of the Army

after nearly a decade of conflict and in the face of change and transitions. One of the products of the Profession of Arms campaign will be a white paper, which will become the first chapter in Field Manual 1, “The Army.” That chapter will present the Army as a profession of arms and outline the attributes and values expected of its members. For those in the Army who choose to participate in this effort, the words of Gates to West Point cadets in April apply: “You have an extraordinary opportunity — not just to protect the lives of your fellow soldiers, but for missions and decisions that may change the course of history.”

By asking questions, the Army will be able to examine the environmental context with insight from our constituents, determine critical areas of concern that will help in reframing the problem and chart the way ahead. Through this critical and potentially uncomfortable self-reflection, the Army can gain what it seeks: “the strength to overcome and the strength to endure.” **AFJ**

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almost every private and public organization, is facing budget constraints. In turn, force reductions are inevitable, and the time it may take to be promoted will probably be lengthened. Thus, Gates urges that nonfinancial rewards, closely linked to his concern on development, can nonetheless retain top performers. He asks that commanders pay attention to the intrinsic value of assignments when deployed officers return home.

Junior officers, he noted, have had incredible responsibilities in theater. These included caring for the lives of hundreds of troops, accounting for millions of dollars in materiel, and negotiating between and among warring factions. Bluntly, Gates says he is “terrified” that these exceptional officers will now be in cubicles “reformatting PowerPoint slides” once back stateside. The secretary knows that the Army has to do better than this. How? Perhaps a start would be

to ask the returning officer how best his next assignment can be shaped.

Second, mechanisms should be established to make it easier to move from branch to branch, maximizing talent for the immediate issue at hand. Third, branch managers should help find unique positions for their best talent, as another way to develop new competencies and to retain talent. Fourth, consideration may need to be given to changing the length of a rotation in nontheater assignments, a variation of home-steading.

As an example, rotational military officers have a three-year assignment at the military academy. These officers typically spend their first year simultaneously learning what they will be teaching and the pedagogical science behind it. In their second year, there may again be new courses to teach. By their third year, when they are in a terrific position to provide meaningful curriculum enhancements and reform, they face the prospects of

reassignment and wind down. The return on the academy’s investment, for the betterment of the education of future officers, is not maximized. We daresay it also feeds into a short-term focus that can typify many Army assignments, which, regardless of location, is not an ingredient for long-term and positive change.

Gates is retiring. His reflection points are important ones, ones informed by his experiences both before his 2006 appointment as defense secretary and thereafter. Organizations in the midst of leadership changes are tempted to “wait it out” or “see what happens.” We hope that is not the case here. We hope that Army commanders begin to operationalize now the human resource reforms Gates put forth. After all, none would argue with Gates’ proposition that the Army needs versatile, agile and adaptive leaders. Now would be the perfect time for Army leadership to promote those competencies. **AFJ**