



Executive Summary

Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press



A HISTORY OF THE U.S. ARMY OFFICER CORPS, 1900-1990

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The present volume was written as a supplement to series of monographs authored by Casey Wardynski, David Lyle, and Mike Colarusso of the Army's Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis (OEMA), U.S. Military Academy, West Point, NY, and published by the Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle, PA, in 2009-10. In those monographs, Wardynski, Lyle, and Colarusso adumbrated an Officer Corps strategy based on the theory of talent management. Other observers have contributed to the discussion, most notably perhaps, Time Kane, a former Air Force officer and presently chief economist at the Hudson Institute, Washington, DC. Kane, in *Bleeding Talent* (2012) and other publications, articulates a market-based, talent management strategy for the molding of military officers similar in many respects to the model presented by the OEMA group.

This volume provides a historical context for their discussion of an officer strategy (and for what has passed for such a strategy in the past). Like the earlier monographs, this volume is organized around the functionally interdependent concepts of accessing, developing, retaining, and employing talent. Each chapter will take the reader up to the point where the earlier monographs began their story, which generally falls in the time frame of the late-1980s and early-1990s.

Chapter 1 offers an overview of some key developments and assumptions that have guided and shaped the Officer Corps and the way it has been managed over the last century. This chapter begins with the reforms instituted by Secretary of War Elihu Root and concludes with the changes effected at the end of the Cold War. It traces the frequent revisions the officer management system has undergone since 1900, call-

ing attention to the evolutionary nature of those revisions. Because changes have been evolutionary rather than revolutionary, the current system of officer management has an administrative superstructure consisting of disparate policies and procedures that have accumulated over decades to address specific problems. Moreover, this patchwork rests upon a foundation built by Root and firmly rooted it in the industrial age. Such an incrementally arrived at officer management system is the antithesis of a coherent officer strategy. It relies upon a collection of legacy practices when it should instead flow from a conscious and thoughtful planning process designed to meet strategic requirements.

The next chapter deals with the concept of officer talent as understood by the Army in the 20th century. The Army never defined officer "talent" in a formal sense during that entire time. In its official publications and pronouncements, it instead adduced a laundry list of skills, knowledge, and aptitudes considered critical to mission success. These changed with shifts in the Army's operating environment and were not particularly useful as practical guides for officer management. Nevertheless, beginning in the 20th century, there arose within the Army a general concept of talent that, at its core, has remained relatively stable over time and mirrors that found in much of the private sector—that broadly "talented" officers are a small percentage of the force who must be groomed for leadership at the Army's highest levels.

In Chapter 3, the topic of officer retention is addressed. Officer attrition is a problem that first posed a serious threat to the Army Officer Corps after World War II. From 1945 until the end of the century, in fact, the Army frequently struggled to retain not only the

requisite number of officers but the most “talented” officers as well. Since the end of World War II, in fact, the problem was studied by a host of boards, commissions, agencies, and think tanks who made recommendations about how to solve it. The actions adopted by the Army to allay its retention troubles, however, were largely ineffectual, especially when it came to the qualitative aspect of the problem. The steps that the Army prescribed were incremental and generally lacked decisiveness, specificity, or long-term vision. Wide latitude for interpretation and implementation was accorded to commanders in the implementation of these actions, and many of the most complicated or difficult problems were for all practical purposes ignored. Moreover, the egalitarian ideology of the Army and its commitment to the cult of the generalist prevented it from targeting the highly or technically educated for retention.

Assessing officer talent is the subject of Chapter 4. This section focuses on the varying educational requirements and intellectual screening mechanisms that the Army used after World War I to regulate entry into the Officer Corps. The general trend was for the Army to dilute or discard its culling and screening tools for its officer aspirants as the 20th century progressed. The Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) received the most thorough treatment because in the post-World War II era, it has been (except for relatively brief periods during conflicts) the largest source of Army officers. Equal attention is devoted to the Officer Candidate School (OCS) system during those periods when it provided a significant volume of new officer accessions. Discussion of the Military Academy is limited due to its relatively low susceptibility to the fiscal pressures and forces that have caused frequent, whipsaw changes in ROTC and OCS accessions policies.

Chapter 5 analyzes the methods by which the Army has developed talent since the Spanish-American War. This chapter concentrates on two aspects of the officer development process—the Army’s school system and fully funded civilian graduate education. In the Army school system, the focus, from pre-commissioning through the War College, was on preparation for command and the next assignment. While it is true that, in recognition of technological advances and the complexities of the new strategic situation brought on by the Cold War, graduate education experienced a steady if gradual expansion, it was held within strict bounds and limited to specific purposes. Fiscal austerity explains some of this but so, too, does the prevailing view that graduate school was peripheral to the military profession, good perhaps for a small body

of experts but not an avenue taken by officers on the road to high rank and professional distinction. The 1960s and the early-1970s witnessed a noticeable shift in the Army’s priorities and orientation. In the Army school system, this was manifested by a renewed stress on professional education and a concomitant de-emphasis of training. Schools were instructed to make their courses more intellectually challenging, add depth and substance to their curricula, focus on long-term professional development instead of the next assignment, encourage a spirit of inquiry and experimentation, and reach out to civilian educational institutions and associations to enrich the content of their programs. After Vietnam, the Army returned to an earlier conception of the officer development process. The primacy of training and preparation for the next assignment gradually reasserted itself, while professional education and long-term development took a back seat. Intellectual and strategic astuteness were subordinated to tactical and operational expertise.

Chapter 6 provides a survey of how the Army has employed officer talent. The policies and the underlying philosophical and operational assumptions that have guided the employment of officers from the end of the First World War to the fall of the Berlin Wall are broadly discussed. In the process, the story of how personnel managers have struggled, with only limited success, to place the right officer in the right position and still satisfy the demands of the traditional career progression model will be discussed. Despite the revolutionary changes that have transformed warfare and the military profession since the First World War, the fundamental principles that have guided the employment of officers have survived largely intact. Based on Root’s interpretation of the Prussian military paradigm and the “company man” model used to develop business executives during the industrial age, these principles took on the aspect of hallowed tradition. To be sure, concessions, and in some cases significant concessions, were made to specialization and “functionalization,” developments that run directly counter to the company man paradigm. Nevertheless, the broad outlines of the officer employment patterns laid out at the beginning of the 20th century, albeit modified and refined, were still clearly evident in the late-20th century.

The final chapter will deal with how the Army has evaluated officer talent since 1900. The principal purpose of the Officer Evaluation Report (OER), or officer efficiency report as it was known until 1973, has been to serve as a basis for personnel decisions. Matters of promotion, elimination, retention in grade, command selection, and school selection have all rested heavily

on the strength of a given officer's evaluation. Furnishing personnel managers with information necessary for the proper assignment and utilization of officers has been another aim of these reports. Only relatively recently has the OER been employed as a tool for professional development. Unfortunately, the OER has not lived up to the exalted hopes that the Army and its leaders have had for it. It has been bedeviled by a host of internal and seemingly intractable flaws that make it of marginal value both to the Department of the Army and to the individual officer. Its tendency toward inflation, its inability to distinguish performance from potential, its inadequacy as a professional development tool, its lack of precision and specificity, its myopic focus, its scaling problems, and its failure to inspire confidence in those whose fate it regulates has prevented the OER in the various forms it has assumed over the years from fulfilling the purposes for which it was allegedly designed.

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