

A Crisis of Leadership

George S. Patton, Lewis Burwell "Chesty" Puller, William Frederick "Bull" Halsey, Charles Elwood, "Chuck" Yeager, Gregory "Pappy" Boyington, and Dwight D. Eisenhower. All of these men have something in common. They are all war heroes. Except for Boyington, who received the Congressional Medal of Honor, they were all promoted to senior officer rank. And without exception, none of them could have succeeded in today's military without turning off the skills and traits upon which their success depended.

What has Gone Wrong

The military command culture is built around the career officer. Senior officers are reasonably expected to have a well-rounded background, to the point where certain military assignments are considered "ticket-punch" stepping stones to that coveted senior rank. Further, officers are expected to make rank on a particular schedule or their commission may not be renewed. In a predominantly peacetime military, the metrics used to determine promotions are so highly competitive, so that a single bad mark on an officer efficiency report can literally sink a career ten years down the road. This is particularly true in peacetime when the congress is loath to spend money on the military.

This has fostered a paranoid culture among the junior officers where there is a zero tolerance for failure — or in other words an unhealthy focus on the promotion process. The result is that those who are risk-averse, who keep their heads down and take no chances, go along — even with a bad system — who shun innovation and the inherent risks it entails, are often the ones most likely to be promoted. This process promotes 'yes-men' and, as these people are promoted, they tend to favor and promote underlings of a similar disposition. These are awful traits to foster in a senior commander—but that is what this process does.

This is a relatively new problem for the US military. Before World War II, the role of the military was based on the professional cadre, to be filled out with reserve officers and drafts in time of national emergency. The post WWII paradigm of a professional standing army means that the commanders in combat have their careers to think about as much as they do the tactical or strategic problem at hand.

"You mainly learn from your mistakes, which is why I know so much." –Anonymous

It's said that people learn from their mistakes, and that a real master in his or her field is the person who discovered the hard way what didn't work. What the military's current promotion process rewards is a class of midlevel and senior officers who avoid risk and career-harming mistakes. Consequently, they learn little about problem solving and becoming inspiring leaders. In the aggregate, the risk takers who have faced the consequences of their actions become vastly better leaders — especially in difficult situations. These people have the confidence of experience to bring to their decisions, plus a healthy but proportional sense of caution. Anyone in a leadership position should always be thinking, "How am I screwing this up?" while still thinking about "How can I execute better?" This is a healthy exercise for handling risk management, and much different from

the artificially paranoid mentality in which the common thought is, “Oh God, oh God, if I somehow screw this up, my career will be over!”

Social Engineering and Promotion

Developing effective combat leaders in peacetime is complicated by political pressures to use the military as a social engineering laboratory. When the military mission (which in peacetime amounts to “be ready”) is subordinated to demands to accommodate a special class of soldier, or to operate in a particular politically correct fashion, the metrics associated with these social engineering missions become prominent in an officer efficiency report. The difference between “Supports gender integration efforts” and “Enthusiastically promotes gender integration efforts” can mean the difference to a promotion board if gender integration is an important political issue. Such a metric either has nothing to do with how much the candidate can contribute to combat effectiveness in wartime or it’s a negative indicator of combat effectiveness.

“People sleep peaceably in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf.” George Orwell

The rough men who allow people to sleep peaceably are often not fit for polite society. War and the art of making war is a horrific endeavor. Military men who allow their combat training to become subordinated to the politically correct mores of a society that enjoys the peace provided by the military have no business leading our soldiers. The task of a military leader is simple – close with the enemy and removes his will to fight. Any directive that complicates or obfuscates the basic simplicity of this task should be shunned. Today’s officer promotion structure promotes mediocrity and compliance to pervasive political correctness. As the promotion process rewards the risk-averse, the innovators and risk takers self-select out of the military, to the detriment of all.

“Tell me what brand of whiskey that Grant drinks. I would like to send a barrel of it to my other generals.” – Abraham Lincoln

As Lincoln so eloquently put it, we should be concerned with a commander’s combat potential more than anything else when promoting. Specific metrics in combat effectiveness in war simulations should be the standard of promotion, not whether an officer has a checkered social life or whether they made a mistake sometime in their career. Indeed, the absence of mistakes should be a red flag.

Why the Best and Brightest Left the Military

In 1991, we went to war in Iraq to liberate Kuwait with the best trained, most well equipped and best led army in history, thanks to President Reagan’s investment in defense. The senior commanders of Operation Desert Storm had been junior officers — lieutenants and captains — during Vietnam. They saw how fouled up the political climate was in Vietnam, and what it did for our combat effectiveness. They saw the disaster of leading conscripted soldiers with a professional officer corps. And as they rose through the ranks in the post-Vietnam era, they vowed “Never again. Not on my watch!”

This culture didn't survive the drive to political correctness forced upon the military in the 1990's. The country's economy roared with a trifecta of economic stimulants: the "peace dividend" resulted from our scaling back military spending since the Soviet Union had collapsed. Reaganomics took hold, as the investments in manufacturing infrastructure made in the 80's when Reagan slashed corporate taxes started to produce results. And the advent of the microprocessor created a huge technology vacuum that companies scrambled to fill.

Meanwhile, the Clinton administration slashed the size of the military. Bases were closed around the country. Instead of closing the supporting infrastructure of a combat air wing, the size of an Air Force squadron was reduced from 24 to 18 and eventually to 12 aircraft, with the idea that it would be easier to increase the size of a squadron than to reconstitute a whole organization from scratch. Military pay was effectively frozen for years. The smaller military was tasked to deploy more times than ever before in peacetime, causing service members to be away from home as much as fifty percent of the time. The junior grade officers – from whom the next generation's senior command would be promoted – looked at their bleak prospects in the military and the six-figure salaries they could draw in the booming economy, and it became a no brainer. The best and the brightest left first. And this process continued for the next 20 years as the better Junior Officers would often not find the promotion culture acceptable. Eventually, with a very few notable exceptions such as David Petraeus and Paul Vallely, there was little left of the senior officer corps except risk-averse commanders who weren't competent to lead in a dynamically changing modern battlespace. This was the pool from which the commanders in the War on Terror were promoted.

These military commanders in 2001 entered Afghanistan without a clear idea of what would constitute a definitive victory in the operation. Their mission objective seemed clear – find Osama Bin Laden, destroy Al Qaida in Afghanistan and end Taliban rule there. The actual details of how this was to be done were tactically sound for the most part, but didn't properly account for the realities of the terrain or the culture of the native population, and were therefore unrealistic.

Likewise, the same leaders agreed invading Iraq without a long-term plan for transition to local governance. US forces took control of the battle space and held it, making the invasion a masterpiece of execution and planning, but no effective consideration was given to the post-invasion pacification of the country, or, again, the culture and internal politics of the indigent population. This failure to strategically plan cost the lives of thousands of American soldier and untold thousands of Iraqis.

Conclusion

America can ill-afford to commit her youth to be entrusted to a military leadership selected by its ability to avoid risk and be politically correct. The military promotion process must be overhauled to reward officer traits that correlate to actual military combat effectiveness, so the great generals of the next generation are given an environment where they can thrive and grow their ability to protect American interests, first with real deterrence, then real force. Doing this will require action by the congressional committee on military affairs and direction from the commander in chief and his secretary of defense. That means they must hear from the American people that the present situation is intolerable.

MilitaryValues.org Principles and Mission

The content of these topical white papers from MilitaryValues.org is aligned with the organization's principles and mission statement. At the core is the protection of America and the founding principles—mainly summarized by freedom and liberty for citizens and a federal government with limited and enumerated powers. All of this is made abundantly clear in our Constitution and the founder's many writings. The US military's role to protect this is made very clear by the oath that is taken by military officers today:

"I, [name], do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office upon which I am about to enter. So help me God."

For details on the MilitaryValues.org principles and mission statement go to www.MilitaryValues.org.

About MilitaryValues.org

The effectiveness of the United States military has been significantly compromised over the last 20 years by social engineering and politically driven decisions. This is especially true and serious with military units that face front line combat duties. In stark terms, this problem has unnecessarily cost the lives of our front line men and women—while many more suffer various combat-related physical and mental traumas. And there are untold tangents of pain and loss suffered by families, fellow soldiers, and others.

Combat units, and those that support them, greatly benefit from a culture in which there is a focus of effectively prosecuting missions and wars—and rejects unnecessary risk to the military personnel. This culture creates trust and increases effectiveness and loyalty—which is truly critical for the best shot at success in the complex and dangerous endeavor called combat. However on the other hand, if a military is constantly beat down by forces that do not care about its well-being—then a culture of distrust, failure, and despair will increasingly result. This second culture is what we have today in America's military.

MilitaryValues.org exists to educate millions of citizens on what has gone wrong and how it can be reversed. We hope you will continue to our website and learn more!