

The U.S. Army General Staff: Where Is It in the Twenty-first Century?

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A Myriad of problems plagued the U.S. army in the first few years of operations in Iraq. At the eleventh hour General Petraeus led a new counterinsurgency doctrine inspired “surge” campaign that may have saved the entire war effort. However, the question must be asked –why did the war effort of the most sophisticated army in the world come down to a final moment “Hail Mary” pass that was reliant on the genius of an individual commander for victory? The answer is that the U.S. army experienced a crisis of command. Pundits gradually came to the conclusion that the performance of U.S. generalship and senior leadership had been mediocre at best and at worst largely responsible for the problems associated with prosecuting the war in its initial years. Army Lieutenant Colonel Paul Yingling wrote: “These debacles are not attributable to individual failures, but rather to a crisis in an entire institution: America's general officer corps.”¹ Yingling’s analysis was echoed by military affairs analysts such as Ralph Peters and Douglas McGregor.² Even Chief of Staff of the Army, General George Casey allowed that “we don’t do as good a job as we need to training our senior leaders to operate at the national level.”³ However, mediocre generalship alone does not account for the initial uninspired reactive prosecution of the war. Also contributing to the inconsistent and ineffectual prosecution of the war was the absence of a professional corps of general staff officers operating in support of the senior leadership.

Inspired talented generalship greatly enhances combat effectiveness, however, no army in history has been able to consistently recognize military genius and ensure that those individuals of genius rise to the levels of senior command. Instead, military genius among senior commanders at the critical historical moment is more a matter of luck rather than design. The great military theorists, Sun Zu and Clausewitz both agreed that successful battle command depends on the intuition of the military genius. Such intuition can be improved by education and experience, but only if the commander already possesses the innate ability.⁴ No military system has ever been able to consistently

¹ Paul Yingling, “A Failure of Generalship,” *Armed Forces Journal* (May, 2007).

² Douglas Macgregor, “Outside View: Where U.S. Generals Failed,” *UPI Outside View Commentator*, 14 August 2006; Ralph Peters, “General Failure,” *USA Today*, 24 July 2007.

³ George Casey, interview by *Government Executive Magazine*, 6 September 2007. On-line. Available from Internet, at the *Small Wars Journal* website: <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2007/10/gen-casey-on-a-failure-in-gene>, accessed 17 March 2008.

⁴ Michael I. Handel, *Masters of War: Classic Strategic Thought* (London: Frank Cass, 1992), 31.

produce that type of talent, and it is not realistic to expect all army generals to be military geniuses.

Complaints about the quality of generalship are not unique to the American military of the twenty-first century. Military analysts and theorists have lamented the poor quality of general officers for centuries. In fact, the instances of mediocre or failed general officer leadership in military history far outnumber those of inspired success. President Abraham Lincoln's search for competent Union army generalship is legend. British General J.F.C. Fuller captured the phenomenon in his monograph *Generalship: Its Diseases and Their Cure, A Study of The Personal Factor in Command*. He saw three major failings among the British general officer corps of World War I and the inter-war years: courage, intellect, and physical fitness. Frederick the Great complained of his generals that he could "Take shoemakers and tailors and make generals of them and they will not commit worse follies!"⁵ Fuller, and other early evaluators of generalship, however, missed the fact that in modern war generalship, though important, should not by itself determine operational success. The U.S., and all modern militaries, should not need inspired generalship to win wars. A general staff is designed to mitigate the impact of generals who are less than geniuses.

The French led by Napoleon in 1806 soundly trounced the Prussians, perhaps the best of the eighteenth century professional militaries. In response, a group of Prussian reformers carefully studied the nature of French success and determined that though they could replicate or copy French tactical and operational methods, they had no ready answer to the command genius of Napoleon. Ultimately, however, they hit on a unique counter to the genius of the opposing commander. They determined that although it was impossible to train a commander to be a genius, or even to find and cultivate genius ability among junior officers, what was possible was to find and identify exceptionally bright junior officers. The Prussians determined that by carefully identifying, training, educating, mentoring, organizing and networking the brightest minds in the Prussian army they could artificially create a corporate genius that was an extremely powerful competent command capability that could outperform the individual genius of an opposing general. The corporate genius harnessed by the Prussians came to be the Prussian and later German General Staff. The German General Staff corps was a pool of the best minds in the German army, carefully selected and trained and then networked by common experience, training, personal relationships, and precise assignment to lead the German army in war, and also to study and solve the vexing military issues of the day in peace. The General Staff was the brain of the German armies of the 19th and 20th centuries, and the German General Staff system remains at the core of the German military system today.

Importantly, the German general staff system was an institutional element within the German command system designed to ensure that mediocre generalship did not cause

⁵ J.F.C. Fuller, *Generalship: Its Diseases and Their Cure, A Study of The Personal Factor in Command*. Online available at the *Combined Arms Research Library* website, <http://www-cgsc.army.mil/carl/resources/csi/Fuller/Fuller.asp>, accessed 25 March 2008. Originally published Harrisburg, PA: Military Service Publishing Co., 1936

operational or strategic failure. One of the proponents of the German reforms of the early nineteenth century, Gerhard von Scharnhorst, addressed this issue specifically: “General Staff officers are those who support incompetent generals, providing the talents that might otherwise be wanting among leaders and commanders.”⁶ The general staff system did not replace the need for generals. Rather, it replaced the need for individual genius with corporate institutional genius. It provided a system that augmented and added to the strengths of good generals; and, most importantly, it ensured that the army succeeded despite mediocre or poor generalship.

A U.S. army general staff corps is unacceptable to many because it smacks of elitism. However, an elite corps is necessary to identify, train, empower and reap the benefits of the best minds the army has to offer. As indicated by the Prussian reformers, a general staff corps provides a corporate genius to mitigate against mediocre or failed generalship, however, numerous other circumstances point to the requirement for an American expert general staff officer corps. American military history demonstrates that an elite general staff greatly enhances wartime capability. The army officer professional education and management systems does not produce elite staff officers. Current army staffs are not professional organizations with a sense of corporate identity. In addition, army doctrine does not require expert staffs. Addressing these circumstances requires the creation of an identifiable general staff officer corps.

A highly trained, carefully integrated, and respected general staff officer corps is required to mitigate the unavoidable inconsistency of generalship and to create the institutional staff genius necessary for consistent operational success in a dynamic and complex environment. A corps of talented staff officers made major contributions to the victory in World War II. The brain power of the Army Staff under Chief of Staff General George Marshall was absolutely critical to strategic victory and more important than any field army or theater commander. The key billets in that staff were filled by the small interwar period regular army officer corps, rigorously trained and schooled at the Army Command and Staff College (a two year course in the 1930s) and the Army War College. The graduates of the army professional education system of the interwar period were recognized by being placed on the General Staff Eligible List and were thereafter groomed for key command and staff billets at higher headquarters. The carefully schooled and socially networked small cadre of regular army officers manned the key staff billets in the major army headquarters throughout World War II, and enabled the large conscript American army, mostly led at the tactical level by amateur officers, to perform with a high degree of professional credibility. The success of the U.S. army was not the result of superior military resources or superior battlefield generalship, but rather of superior professional staff work that mitigated mediocre tactical leadership. Superior staff work ensured the most efficient and effective use of scarce resources, guided the strategic approach to the war, and compensated for often mediocre or less generalship.⁷

⁶ Quoted in T.N. Dupuy, *A Genius for War: The German Army and General Staff, 1807-1945* (Fairfax, VA: Hero Books, 1984), 25.

⁷ Historian Peter Schifferle describes in detail the role of the regular army officer corps in World War II in his work *Anticipating Armageddon: The Leavenworth Schools and U.S. Army Military Effectiveness 1919 to 1945*, unpublished, 2007. Williamson Murray makes a similar point regarding the intellectual tradition

Today neither Leavenworth or Carlisle produce the type of staff officers necessary to man a professional general staff officer corps. The Command and General Staff College produces generic staff officers, undifferentiated by any special training or achievement, who can fulfill non-key basic low level staff positions. The War College, because admittance is limited to senior lieutenant colonels qualified for promotion to full colonel, produces a more experienced staff officer. However, many of the War College graduates move directly to brigade level command. The remaining War College graduates may be individually very talented, but they have a limited service obligation remaining: the bulk rarely remain to serve as senior staff officers for more than a few years and all are too senior to serve at the division level or lower. The army identifies them too late in their career to develop a sense of corporate identity and experiences; they are not networked formally or informally, and receive little specialized training. Thus, the largest of U.S. Army staff officer training programs are not capable of producing the type of integrated experts needed to operate a professional general staff officer corps.

The staffs of U.S. army commands are not professional organizations. Army staffs in general consist of interchangeable staff officers who as a body are without any particular staff expertise or talent, get little respect, and have no corporate identity. The only exception to this is the small body of SAMS qualified officers in the staff planning cell. They learn their roles “on the job.” Staff assignments take little account of special training, ability, or expertise. The blurring of branch differences and the emphasis on multifunctionalism in the army has increased the erosion of much of the individual expertise of army staff officers while making the generic assignment of officers to staff positions more common. Key senior primary staff officers are typically selected based on command not staff experience. Thus senior staff officers often have no special staff training or expertise, and often lack any talent for detailed staff work and analysis. Their contributions to their commander as staff officers are limited, as is their ability to mentor, instruct, or even supervise the subordinate staff officers who work for them. Outstanding individual staff officers exist and have made incredible contributions to some of the army’s recent and past operational successes; however, their achievements were the contribution of individuals not of organizations. Without a sense of corporate identity and networked relationships that only comes from have a staff officer corps, army staffs will not be able to achieve more than mediocre performance.

Another reason that mediocrity exists within army staffs is that army staffs do not play an independent or even critical role within the army command process. The staff is important, but army doctrine clearly states that the commander is the central focus of army operations: “Commanders are in charge of the planning process. Their personnel role is central.” In contrast, the staff plays a decidedly supplementary role: “The staff’s effort ...focuses on ...integrating information with sound doctrine and technical competence.”⁸ The staff is merely an appendage of the commander designed to carry

and professional education, “Clausewitz Out, Computer In: Military Culture and Technological Hubris,” *The National Interest* 48 (Summer, 1997): 57.

⁸ *FM 5-0, Army Planning and Orders Production* (Washington D.C.: Department of the Army, 2005), 3-4, 3-9.

out the routine bureaucratic tasks of command. For these routine tasks army doctrine requires only “technically competent” staff officers rather than experts. Doctrinally, an independent thinking staff is not necessary to the army staff process. The doctrinally defined role of the staff and the army’s staff manning policies results in senior headquarters staffs that British Brigadier Nigel Aylwin-Foster recently described as “strikingly conscious of their duty, but rarely if ever questioned authority, and were reluctant to deviate from precise instructions. Staunch loyalty upward and conformity to one’s superior were noticeable traits.”⁹ As such, army staffs are unable to, and are not intended to be centers of institutional genius. They do not provide specialized expertise, compensate for commander’s shortfalls, or ensure consistent operational success. By design, the commander is the single central focus of operations, and therefore the single point of failure within army organizations and within the army decision-making process.

The systems, personnel, and resources exist to rapidly create a professional staff officer corps. These resources are available in the current School of Advanced Military Science (SAMS). The SAMS provides for the U.S. army a pool of specially trained and educated operational planners. However, as it is currently structured, SAMS is inadequate to meet the needs of a professional staff officer corps. However, if modified, and with other institutional changes, SAMS has the potential to be the core of a powerful U.S. army general staff officer corps.

To serve as the hub of a highly competent general staff officer corps the SAMS requires significant expansion. Currently the course produces approximately one-hundred SAMS trained army officers annually. In contrast, the CGSC regular course can produce up to 1,500 graduates annually. Thus, less than five percent of the cadre of operational officers receive SAMS training. These numbers should be increased to at least 150 total graduates –about ten percent of the operational staff officers. To meet the needs of the army and to account for attrition, a realistic size for a SAMS class might be as many as 225 –about 15% of the total of the CGSC regular course. Such a number permits assigning SAMS officers as general staff officers rather than merely planning specialists.

SAMS expertise is required in many different staff officers, not just planners. In accordance with the independence of the modular brigades, general staff corps officers be assigned to key positions beginning at that level. At higher levels, in addition to planners, all primary staff officers, key action officers, planners, as well as the chiefs of staff should also be members of the general staff officer corps. Logistics commands, currently seldom assigned SAMS graduates, also need to have a significant quota of SAMS trained officers. Human Resources Command will require a centralized general staff corps officer management office, to coordinate the field requirements for staff officers, assignments, and the production by the expanded SAMS course. The army staff will require a general staff corps section to make and supervise army policy regarding training, education, and utilization of the corps.

⁹ Nigel Aylwin-Foster, “Changing the Army for Counterinsurgency Operations,” *Military Review*, LXXXV, No. 6 (November- December 2005), 6.

To ensure expert professional staffs at the highest command levels the career path of SAMS officers must be altered. SAMS should be the start point of general staff officer education and training, but not the end. The army must create a second tier of staff officers, a senior general staff officer tier. SAMS trained officers, as the cadre of an expert general staff officer corps, require further education and training to become the long term senior specialists the army needs to serve on staffs at all levels. This senior general staff officer requires specialized education at the doctorate level, and further promotion (to O6) specifically to serve as expert special advisors and staff officers to senior commanders. The current Functional Area 59 (strategic plans and policy) should be incorporated within this group of senior staff officers; and SAMS attendance should be a prerequisite for Functional Area 59 qualification. These changes, by facilitating promotion and continued training and education, will reward SAMS expertise, experience, and talent; they will perpetuate networking that began in the SAMS and during early staff assignments; and associated service obligations will ensure that the bulk of SAMS graduates continue to contribute their unique staff expertise to the army throughout an extended career.

Creating and managing a second tier of education and utilization is critical to creating an expert general staff officer corps. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates recently stated "Army soldiers can expect to be tasked with reviving public services, rebuilding infrastructure and promoting good governance. All these so-called 'nontraditional' capabilities have moved into the mainstream of military thinking, planning and strategy, where they must stay."¹⁰ The most recent publication of Field Manual 3-0, *Operations*, represents a revolutionary change in army doctrine. Describing the new manual, General William C. Caldwell, Commander of the Combined Arms Center (CAC) stated "Stability operations are considered a core mission of the military; full spectrum operations means stability operations are just as important (and sometimes more important) than offensive and defensive operations."¹¹ Routinely planning and executing the diverse set of missions and tasks required in stability operations requires staff officer with unique specialized knowledge combined with a firm grounding in army operational and staff skills. Experienced full colonel staff officers with specialized doctorate level education will provide the required expert knowledge in such diverse fields as economics, political science, anthropology, history, and international relations. Currently, such specialized training of senior staff officers is the exception rather than the norm. Future full spectrum operational success requires that it be a prerequisite for primary and key staff officers in all major commands.

The apparent operational success of "the Surge" in Iraq was partly a function of the type of expertise that a general staff officer corps contributes to a command. General David Petraeus created an elite "council of colonels" in his headquarters in Iraq. Historian and defense analyst Fred Kagan of the American Enterprise Institute commented "Commanders haven't [traditionally] tried to reach out and just pick the best minds—not

¹⁰ Julian E. Barnes, "Gates Urges Funds For A Smarter Army," *Los Angeles Times*, 11 October 2007.

¹¹ William C. Caldwell, "Evolution vs. Revolution: FM 3-0," *The Small Wars Journal Blog*, February 15, 2008. Online available at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2008/02/evolution-vs-revolution-fm-30/>, accessed on 25 March 2008.

the guys on the fastest track for promotion, not the 'best' soldiers, but the best minds with relevant experience". It was wonderful to see that." In effect, Petraeus created his own professional staff corps. General Petraeus' action validates the concept that in a complex environment even a very talented commander must rely on respected and equally talented expert staff officers. However, the institutional army was unable to provide the General his staff. Rather, he had to personally find and obtain the assignment of individuals such as counter insurgency experts David Kilcullen and Colonels Peter Mansoor and H.R. MacMasters, and economic experts such as Colonel Mike Meese. General Petraeus' expert staff was an ad-hoc organization that the institutional army is currently unable to replicate. Even this expert staff, certainly very effective supporting General Petraeus, does not take the place of an integrated staff officer corps, networked by personal and professional relationships and operating in sync at all levels of warfare and throughout the army system to support the commander. It also raises the question of whether General Petraeus' successors were able to maintain the quality staff since his departure.¹²

The early operations in Iraq and Afghanistan exposed a problem in army command, but the problem is not inadequate generalship. Rather, the problem is that the support of an expert general staff officer corps is not available to compensate for the limitations of a single leader: the commanding general officer. This reality is not a fatal institutional flaw if the army supports its senior leaders with carefully selected, educated and trained, networked, and respected general staff officers capable of providing expert candid advice across a broad spectrum of complex issues. This can be done by modifying and enhancing the utilization of SAMS graduates. Utilizing SAMS graduates as the core of an institutionalized general staff officer corps is a step toward achieving the vision for SAMS articulated by General Don Starry, former TRADOC commander, when he asserted in 1983 that the army needed "institutional leadership as well as individual leadership."¹³ A smart, elite general staff officer corps, supporting the army's field commanders at every level above battalion, will ensure that the expertise necessary to successfully adapt to diverse situations, and execute full spectrum operations in a myriad of complex and unpredictable conditions is available to army leaders and soldiers.

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¹² Babak Dehghanpisheh and John Barry, "Brainiac Brigade," *Newsweek*, September 17, 2007.

¹³ Donn A. Starry, "To Change and Army," *Military Review*, LXIII, No. 3 (March, 1983), 27.

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