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The Personnel System at War:
A View from the Generation at the Tip of the Spear

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Introduction

Five junior officers, all veterans of combat, recently came together for a day-long dialogue with current and former senior manpower and personnel officials from the Department of Defense. Their major assessment was that an "industrial age" personnel system is being used to fight an "information age" war.

This frank assessment was sponsored by Anita K. Blair, the acting Assistant Secretary of the Navy (Manpower and Reserve Affairs). Ms. Blair's purpose in bringing the two groups together was twofold. First, it provided an opportunity for senior manpower and personnel officials, both active duty and retired, from the military services and the Office of the Secretary of Defense, to hear, first-hand, the experiences of a group of five young officers who had served in Iraq, and their views of how personnel issues affected operations. Second, it also afforded the young officers, all of whom have published and commented on their wartime experiences in various electronic and print media, a chance to gain knowledge about current policies and practices from the perspectives of current senior defense leadership.

The five officers came from a variety of backgrounds. Four were Army, one Marine Corps; one was a woman; ages varied, approximately, from 27 to 39. One was an active Army major in the Aviation Branch, currently transitioning to a Strategist MOS; he commanded an aviation unit in Iraq as a captain. Another was an Army Reserve captain commissioned in Military Intelligence, who served as an operations planner and intelligence officer in an infantry brigade in Iraq. A third remains in the Army Reserve as a captain, also in Military Intelligence; she spent two tours in Iraq, one as a supply officer for an MI brigade and her second as commander of a tactical human intelligence team, and has also returned twice to Iraq for shorter tours as a contractor working on intelligence matters. A fourth has recently left the Army Reserve as a captain; a Military Police officer and a lawyer (although not a JAG officer), he spent a year in Iraq as an adviser to the Iraqi Police. The final officer, a Marine Corps Reserve infantry major, served in a Force Reconnaissance unit in the initial Iraq invasion in 2003 and as an adviser to the Iraqi Army in 2006-2007.

In addition to Acting Assistant Secretary Blair, the senior officials and analysts included her immediate predecessor; several current and former chiefs of the reserve components

of their services; several senior service and OSD civilians involved in manpower and reserve policy; and some military manpower and personnel analysts working in the private sector and for the Congress.

> ***There was one dominant theme that emerged, it was that existing personnel management, compensation, and assignment policies were far too rigid and inflexible, and that modern information technology (IT), in their view, enables flexibility to be managed in a way which may not have been possible in the past.***

Perceptions and Experiences

Continuum of service is not there yet. The four out of five young officers who were reservists were unanimous in describing a myriad of administrative obstacles in transitioning between reserve status—particularly the IRR—and active duty. Several expressed repeated frustration at the obstacles they encountered in trying to be called to active duty and to deploy to Iraq, and how they would not have been able to do so without lengthy and intense pressure and high-level contacts. Given the strains on the force, they felt that those who run to the sound of the guns should not have to pass through a minefield to get to the theater of war.   The rigidity of the reserve system itself, in providing no alternatives between the existing parameters for Selected Reserve or IRR status, accounts for much of this. Existing data base and communications technology should enable the reserve components to activate, deactivate, and assign reservists with much more fluidity than current drill, pay, and administrative categories allow. One of the senior conferees noted that the Naval Reserve can now activate someone and send him or her to an assignment location without ever going to a mobilization station; this was hailed as exactly the kind of flexibility that is required. One of the young officers suggested that modern IT should enable the services to aggregate reservists who desire to volunteer for active duty into deployable units, based on grade, occupational specialty, and the like, and form and tailor those units for a particular tour in a particular place. While this would require more effort, it would also obtain the services of many reservists who, although they would serve and do serve when called, would volunteer more often if they could have some input into the conditions of their service.

Army enlisted accession quality is declining. The discussion among the four members of the group who were, or had been, Army officers indicated considerable concern about recent decline in the quality of Army recruits.[1] Anecdotal and impressionistic indicators from colleagues and friends currently in troop units indicate a sharp rise, two to three-fold, over the past two or three years in the number of disciplinary problems, incidences of drug abuse, and substandard educational attainment (one officer noted a case in which enlisted soldiers graduating from a highly technical Advanced Individual Training course required remedial English instruction after joining a unit). It was asserted that whatever quantitative indicators may say, a bigger question is the number of individuals who, even

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[1] The one Marine Corps Reserve officer said he had not personally experienced, nor had he received any impressions from friends and colleagues currently on active duty, any indications of a similar drop in Marine Corps recruit quality.

if they meet the metrics for enlistment, should never have been graduated from initial entry training. The issue of recruit quality was also connected to the use, or lack thereof, of modern IT to provide high-level decision makers with comprehensive trends on recruit quality; the young officers were surprised that such indices were not available within DoD on a cross-service basis.   Although it was not specifically stated as such, there seems to have been a tacit consensus that below a certain standard, it was better to be under strength than to accept too many enlistees of lower quality.

Personnel evaluation criteria and procedures need to be more rigorous and inclusive. There was very strong support among the young officers for 360 degree evaluations— that is, providing an avenue for peers and subordinates to provide input to the performance evaluations of officers and NCOs.   Those involved in private industry stated that such evaluations were uniformly successful and had a beneficial effect on both those who were being rated and those who were empowered to be involved in the rating process. They disagreed with the assumption that subordinate evaluations would always favor the more passive and permissive leader that was less rigorous in his or her enforcement of standards, stating that in their experience soldiers and Marines responded most positively to commanders who set the bar high and expected people to be able to reach it.

Iraq and Afghanistan tour lengths for the Army. There was unanimous agreement that the Marine Corps seven-month tour length for TOE units was infinitely preferable to the Army's 12-month (and, at the time of the conference 15-month) tours, that the latter were simply too fatiguing for both individuals and their families, especially for combat units and the personnel in them.   At the same time, they felt that those personnel serving in advisory capacities with Iraqi (or Afghan) forces needed the longer tours to develop and maintain rapport with their indigenous counterparts. However, concerns about tour lengths also segued into the omnipresent theme of personnel management flexibility. For instance, it was suggested that for units in advisory roles or those otherwise involved with the local population, units could be deployed for several years, but individual members would serve 90 days in theater, then rotate back to CONUS for 30 days, and then return to the theater, and so on. A senior conferee noted another alternative, in which, key command and staff positions at the brigade/Marine RCT level and above would be assigned for two or three years, but the individual officers would rotate between CONUS and Iraq/Afghanistan on a 90/30 day basis, or something similar.   Yet another model, related to that noted above for the reserve components, was that stated by one of the young officers, who said that as an experiment he was able to find, through his online contacts, 500 volunteers ready to do a six-month tour in Afghanistan if guaranteed short (two-week) pre- and post-deployment cycles. [2]

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[2] Interestingly, views on required postmobilization training time were quite varied. Some of the young officers felt that a good deal of this was wasted, others that it was absolutely essential, leading them to agree that it probably depends entirely on the specific nature of the unit and the circumstances under which it is created. A group of individual reservists, or an active duty unit, or a unit composed of both types of personnel, which is brought together from across the country without knowing each other may need some time to jell before deployment. A cohesive active duty or Selected Reserve unit which has done a good deal of collective training may need very little.

Changes are needed in career development and progression and 20-year retirement. 20-year cliff-vesting retirement was seen as an anachronism, because its inflexibility virtually mandates major limits on the ability of individuals to (1) transition between active duty and reserve status and (2) pursue career goals that deviate from the rigid model defined by personnel managers as the norm for people who wish to succeed. There was no call for abolition of cliff-vesting itself and its replacement by a retirement system closer to a civilian model. Rather, it was strongly felt that the 20-year career norm should be lengthened so as to provide a broader range of assignments that officers could hope to serve in as part of a career. Right now any deviation from the norm, which is hard enough to cram into only 20 years of service, threatens promotability. An example cited was having the ability to take a break in a military career, for either professional or personal reasons (such as starting a family) and then rejoining one's year group for personnel management purposes. Furthermore, it was noted that individuals in general, but military personnel in particular, are both living longer and staying much more healthy and fit later in life than was the case when 20-year retirement was enacted into law at the end of World War II.

The minutiae of garrison life and training in the United States is a detriment. There was a sense that the "hassles" of barracks life in garrison drive personnel out of the service. However, under this general category, the severest criticism was reserved for topics which the young officers felt were ancillary at best to an armed force in time of war: EEO and sexual harassment training were cited, as well as exhaustive documentation in detail for administrative procedures of minimal importance which bear no relationship to getting soldiers and Marines ready to deploy and go to war. There was also a sense that military personnel redeploying to the United States were disillusioned by the quality of training and garrison activity contrasted with what they were actually doing while at war.

Contractors in war zones need to be monitored more. There was no blanket condemnation of same; at the same time, there was a strong feeling that they needed to be regulated much more closely than they were. It was posited by one that "Contractors have much greater ability to specify what they'll do, when, and for how long. Why can't something along these lines be used by the military," under some circumstances. At the same time, it was believed that the stereotype of service members serving, and contractors performing a job, is still very much valid. One unusual observation was that standards for contractors have dropped considerably simultaneously with Army enlisted recruit quality: "All you need to get [some] contractor jobs is a pulse."

We have an industrial age-personnel management system which does not capitalize on the potential of modern IT. This was expressed with particular vigor in regard to reserve mobilization, training, and utilization. Related to this was a broad theme of how the military services have a grossly inadequate data base of their personnel, something which modern IT should enable them to maintain: "our personnel systems are not searchable, not mineable." Such a data base would facilitate a matching of people's skills and experience with what the deployed force, or, in the case of reservists, the active duty force in general, needs. The "send the Arabic speaker to Korea and the Korean speaker

to Iraq" syndrome seems, according to the young officers, to be alive and well. They also suggested that the Internet provides a widespread and constantly-monitored informal network of military personnel who could be made aware of requirements for personnel with particular occupational specialties, educational or linguistic qualifications, or specialized professional experience, on short notice.

Concluding Observations

All of the attendees were profoundly impressed with the dedication and commitment of these junior officers to the military as an institution. Their concern for their services shone through their tones and attitudes as well as their specific remarks. Negative opinions were on occasion expressed vehemently, but only out of a desire to improve the armed forces, not tear them down. The American people and the nation are truly well-served by young men and women in uniform with such high intellectual and moral qualities.

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