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A NEW APPROACH TO OFFICER DEVELOPMENT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

TITLE: A NEW APPROACH TO OFFICER DEVELOPMENT

THESIS: In order to operate successfully in today's highly differentiated and sophisticated world, the Marine Corps' officer development system must shift its emphasis from grooming "generalists" to training "specialists".

PROBLEM: The current officer assignment system, particularly for unrestricted, ground, combat arms officers, tries to give everyone a balanced and varied pattern. It strives to expose the majority of officers to a broad range of career enhancing tours. It also tries to give everyone his fair share of scarce FMF time. While the intent is admirable, the result is a large number of widely exposed but poorly trained senior officers. Our senior leadership is composed of men whose talent is excellent but their experience is "a mile wide and an inch deep." This problem is exacerbated by the lack of formal emphasis on military education and professional study.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: It is axiomatic and unquestioned that, "every Marine is a rifleman." This institutional imperative leads us unwittingly to a mind set that glorifies the lowest common denominator of military excellence. This would be fine except that it also has led to the unconscious exclusion of vital staff functions from their rightful place in our organizational priorities. We test forty year old LtCol's to see if they can do three pull-ups and run three miles, but it never occurs to us to test them to see if they have studied war, read history, or acquired technical expertise. The Marine Corps standard for its young warriors both officer and enlisted is superb. But toughness, fitness, and determination are not enough at the senior levels. To them we must add intelligence, experience, education, and organizational sophistication.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Marine Corps must create an officer assignment and development system that is specialized, progressive, and efficient. It must put the right kind of people in the right jobs and then leave them there. The education and promotion systems must be designed to encourage our officers to become the military and organizational experts we need. We must get away from the social and cosmetic criterion that so often drive our promotion system. Instead we must put unserving emphasis on professional excellence.

INTRODUCTION:

One of the crucial lessons to come out of the gulf war was the lack of an experienced, top quality operational staff. This was evident at all levels of MAGTF command elements, and most glaringly at the inter-MAGTF and compositing levels. Many of the key players in the war were new to their jobs and often were returning after five to ten years out of the FMF. These were good people who wanted desperately to do a professional job. They knew the importance of their positions, and did their best, but they were the victims of a personnel system predicated on bureaucratic priorities and a desire to treat all officers fairly and equally. This approach would be admirable in an Equal Opportunity Office, but it amounts to criminal mismanagement when national security and the lives of young Marines depend on the excellence of key officers in critical positions.

Despite the fact that we are sworn to support and defend the greatest democracy that the world has ever seen, the military establishment is not, and never can be, an equal opportunity employer. We all accept that the Marine Corps is not a democratic organization, and that we forfeit many of our normal rights and freedoms when we become Marines. In fact, it is our credo that NO men are equal, even if it requires two privates to compare dates of rank, alphabetically, to decide who is the "senior" man. Despite this, our concern for an artificial and impossible fairness in our officer assignment policies leads us to potentially tragic inefficiency and institutionalized incompetence.

All men are not created equal. They vary in every aspect of human measurement. Any attempt to ignore this physiological fact can only result in a less effective organization. Yet we continue to perpetuate and pursue this myth of egalitarianism. We can not expect all of our officers to be all things to all people. We must stop grooming every officer to be the Commandant.

We have long acknowledged this need for selectivity in our competitive promotion system. Despite the anguish that the "up or out" system causes those who are not selected, it is the key to the continued vitality of the officer corps. It does not claim to be perfect, and we have all seen instances that we considered to be unjust, but the greater good is consistently served. The cream is encouraged and required to rise, while the less talented, or less motivated fall by the wayside. The impact of the Peter Principle on the organizational flow is greatly reduced, because those who have reached their level of incompetence are soon passed over. We must broaden this kind of tough thinking to all aspects of our officer development system.

BACKGROUND:

In A GENIUS FOR WAR¹, Col. T. N. Dupuy makes a compelling case for what has become known as the German General Staff concept. It details the history of the military staff and more importantly the rationale behind its development. The basic premises of the book are well worth careful consideration by the Marine Corps, particularly in this time of shrinking assets,

increased emphasis on operational effectiveness, and reinvigorated academic system. Fundamentally, the idea is to chose top quality officers, at an early point in their careers, and groom them carefully, throughout their assignments, to become full-time operational art experts. These officers are given priority in schooling and command opportunity, and are protected from distracting non-operational tours. The competition for selection to this group is fierce and the continued demands placed upon them are daunting, but the result is a ready pool of highly qualified operators. We cannot afford to settle for less.

There have been several attempts made to improve the U. S. defense establishments' warfighting capability, starting in modern times with the NATIONAL SECURITY ACT OF 1947², which was one of the first efforts to create a national 'staff', the Department of Defense. More recently, in the GOLDWATER-NICHOLS DOD REORGANIZATION ACT OF 1986³, a serious effort was made to strengthen the role of the Chairman JCS, and his staff, in controlling the services. It also put some teeth into the push for a much needed spirit of jointness and interoperability within and between the services. In pursuing this goal, the HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE PANEL ON MILITARY EDUCATION⁴, under Rep. Ike Skelton has directed an aggressive reevaluation of all aspects of the military education system. A key element of this committees' advice is designed to stress jointness, academic excellence, and professional rigor among our most talented officers. Now is an

excellent time for the Marine Corps to seize the initiative, and building on the operational emphasis of Gen. Gray, revamp our officer development system.

PROBLEM:

It is important to start by looking at the many interrelated aspects of the problem before we suggest how they can be ameliorated by the proposals that follow. Above all, we have created far too many "generalists." These are usually combat arms officers who compete desperately to get to the FMF every third or fourth tour in order to gain the MOS credibility they will need for their next promotion board. Once in the Fleet they spend an initial year (of a maximum 30 to 36 month tour) on the "staff" knocking off 5 or ten years of rust, while they once again compete for a "must have" billet as a commander. Hence, the best people on all our operational staffs are new and inexperienced, and will move within a year, just as they become effective, because they are selected for command. Those not selected for command then stay on for another year or two, but they are often moved early to make room for the next crop of aspiring would-be commanders. These are not truly functional staffs, competent and revered in their own right. They are "on deck circles", or AAA teams for officers trying to break into the big leagues. It is a place to "pay your dues", not an end in itself.

The other side of this problem is just as serious. We do not have an adequate number of specialists to man a host of crucial

but unglamorous billets. Jobs such as joint service officers, foreign area officers, PPBS/POM specialists, military educators/ academicians, MAGTF experts, doctrine writers, research and development experts, acquisition gurus, and many others are staffed by inexperienced, untrained officers. Usually they are serving their first (and only) tour in this specialty as a "career broadening" tour while they wait for a chance to get back to the "real" Marine Corps. Although they are probably working hard, they are only marking time professionally, filling a quota. While this may be a good way to expose a lot of officers to many aspects of the Marine Corps, it does not create a solid core of functional experts or the requisite institutional memory to deal with the sophisticated issues that drive the higher level interaction of the service.

The result and the cause of these two conditions is an emphasis on careerism rather than professionalism. We learn that it is useful to get lots of "tickets punched", and that if we spend too much time in one area we'll get "cubbyholed", or "sidetracked", or "labeled", and that will be the end of our glorious careers. The worst part of this perception is that it is fairly accurate. These vital staff functions are not considered desirable, or respectable, or promotable. They become stepping stones for the up and coming and graveyards for the terminal. We must recognize that in today's complex world it is disastrous to leave these indispensable operations to the transient and the mediocre.

Some other problems that contribute to the general inefficiency of our officer system are instability, short tour length, lack of long range planning in the assignment of officers, and poor use of officers who have had specialized training, experience, or schooling. Another major shortcoming is our inability or unwillingness to recognize, accept, and capitalize on the individual strengths and weaknesses of our officers. There are very few truly versatile, multi-talented, "Renaissance Men" in our Corps. The rest of us have unique abilities and areas of superiority, as well as weak points and shortcomings. We must allow these people to stabilize in billets that capitalize on their talents, and prevent them from being assigned to billets for which they are unsuited, and in which they are bound to be mediocre.

There are many secondary problems that are really just symptoms of our failure to adequately manage our officers. These flaws are most apparent at the upper echelons of the Marine Corps, operationally, administratively, and academically.

...no case is more common than that of an officer whose energy declines as he rises in rank and fills positions that are beyond his abilities ... every level of command has its' own intellectual standards, its' own prerequisites for fame and honor the reader should not think that a brave but brainless fighter can do anything of significance in war ... Clauswitz, On War.⁵

The quality of our individual officers is very high and our junior officers perform splendidly, but at the more advanced levels of any organization there is a non-negotiable requirement for

experience. It is at this level that the defects in our system become painfully clear, particularly in areas requiring long range planning such as budgeting, acquisition, R&D, doctrine, or joint operational planning. Too often we send talented but inexperienced colonels and generals to manage programs they know little or nothing about. A notable exception to this is recruiting duty where, due to the complex nature of the duty, and its recognized criticality to the future of the Marine Corps, only Lieutenant Colonel's and Colonels with prior successful tours are assigned to District level billets. Why do we not show equal concern for the quality and training of our other top level staffs, particularly those that will control our destinies in war? We cannot continue to fill our joint and MAGTF billets on a revolving door basis. Our institutional administration and planning cannot be left to untrained men whose attention and interest is elsewhere.

PROPOSALS:

It would be a poor Marine indeed who cast such terrible aspersions on his Corps without offering solutions to these many serious problems. Unfortunately, tough situations often call for strong measures. The ideas that I will propose may run contrary to many strongly held organizational mores and traditions, such as equal treatment for all and loyalty to the individual. These are praise worthy attitudes that are fundamental to the American way of life. They are also very important to the lower echelons of military success. But they are not healthy for the long term

growth and continued superiority of the Marine Corps in today's more sophisticated and complex world.

Several positive reforms are already underway and with only minor reemphasis will fit comfortably into the proposed changes. For example, the recent requirement for unrestricted officers to have a secondary MOS is an enormous step in the right direction. If it is strongly emphasized and enforced over the next decade it will focus the majority of an officer's non-FMF time into a specialty. It will lead him to seek repeated tours in this non-combat arms field, thus greatly increasing institutional experience levels in many fields. It will also allow those who are not selected for command, or eventually for promotion, to continue to fill vital billets with a high degree of competence. Additionally, as the pyramid of the combat arms officer narrows, it will provide alternative opportunities for those talented people who find their skills or inclinations are elsewhere in the Corps. Bill Lind and others have suggested that there are too many senior officers in the grades of major and above⁶. I suggest that the real problem is that there are too many of these officers trying to compete for a very few top level combat arms billets. If the excess was shunted off into key specialties as they were promoted it would solve two problems; too many generalists, and not enough specialists.

In essence we would create much narrower, progressive career paths for the majority of our officers. Only a small, select group of fast-trackers would get the broad brush, generalist

development now so common to most unrestricted officers. At the heart of the reform program, and probably its most contentious issue, is the idea of early, aggressive screening and selection to designate an officers' future career path. I propose that during each promotion board, starting at the rank of major, those selected for promotion also be evaluated for future potential and abilities, and slated for a given track/sub-speciality that they would be on for the remainder of their careers. Officers would indicate their preferences for specialty on their fitness reports much like they currently request future duty assignment. Categories would mirror those mentioned earlier, i.e., joint staff, MAGTF staff, education, HQMC level skills, and many others. Those selected for these specialities would be assigned to functionally oriented schooling designed to prepare them for their field. For most, future schooling would also be in this area.

At each promotion, a small group of the very best officers would be selected for special handling. This elite group would be scheduled for appropriate level school and operational command as part of their developmental track. Other FMF time would be in key staff billets. They would be exempt from 9910 billets such as, recruiting, drill field, and sea duty, in order to maximize their time and best prepare them for future operational billets. Eventually these uniquely talented and trained officers would become the key, top level war fighters, operators, and commanders. They would become a Marine Corps General Staff. At

each new promotion this group would be reevaluated and revalidated. Those who are dropped out would then join one of the specialities at the managerial level. This would bring a balanced, operational perspective to those areas and encourage cross pollination. The guiding philosophy throughout this system would be, "groom the best, and train the rest." Those selected for their superiority would become the General staff. The rest would become functional experts, and allowed to focus their efforts in an area of personal interest and aptitude. In this way the vast majority of senior field grade billets would be filled by trained, experienced officers. Organizational continuity would be the norm, institutional memory would be ensured.

Needless to say, this admittedly radical proposal has a down side. It will raise the spectre of "elitism." It runs contrary to the sacred notion that "every Marine is a rifleman." It will not give everyone an equal chance to become a general. It will not spread the precious FMF time evenly among the available population. In return, it will bring an increased level of training, experience, and therefore competence to virtually every job in the Marine Corps. We will not have as many "Jacks' of all trades", but we will have many "masters of one (some)."

Another advantage of the program is that the specialists would serve significantly longer tours (4 or 5 years). This would save money, increase stability and experience, and enhance the long range planning/execution cycle. Under our present system, we seldom get to follow our long range plans through to

completion. Nor do we have to live with the future ramifications of our present actions. Longer tours would positively impact on both issues.

One of the most compelling arguments for this system is the enormous positive impact it will have on the Marine Corps' goal of developing a truly "maneuverist" operational capability. In the past ten years it has become fashionable to talk in urgent reverent tones about, "mission orders", OODA loops", and out maneuvering your opponent. On paper it is obvious, and easy to "hit him where he ain't", "to maneuver against his flanks and rear", and "to decentralize execution based on commanders intent." In reality these things are incredibly difficult and require a phenomenal amount of skill and coordination. The world is full of well read, well intentioned, totally inexperienced critics like Bill Lind and Gary Hart in America Can Win, who churn out long lists of such "motherhood and apple pie" platitudes. And they are right, as far as they go. Even FMFM-1 spends its' entire effort talking about the principles of maneuver warfare without even acknowledging the greatly improved organizational mechanism it would take to implement them. The problem is that in the "fog and friction of war", only an incredibly well trained, totally integrated, and highly competent group of commanders and staffs can hope to actually make it happen.

Clauswitz said, "In war everything is simple, but even the simplest thing is difficult." Well, maneuver warfare is NOT simple. Only top-notch experts can execute the required series of

complex decisions and staff functions in this fluid and fast paced environment. Sad as it may be, the prime reason that the U. S. traditionally resorts to attrition warfare is that the top levels of our military mechanism are not good enough operationally to use more sophisticated, and more demanding tactics. We simply haven't created the high quality organizational tools that maneuver warfare demands.

There is no doubt that we have the required talent and quality in our officer corps. But our current system fails to turn that superb raw material into specialized expertise. Until we do we will never become maneuverists. No matter how much lip-service we pay to it in schools and publications, we will not be able to transition from conversational dilettantes to accomplished practitioners.

We all understand that you cannot build a winning football team out of a group of forty, highly talented, but part-time, would be quarterbacks, no matter how good they are. We know that you need full-time, uniquely suited specialists; i.e., big, powerful lineman, shifty, agile ends, and aggressive, mobile, linebackers. Men of very different talents who dedicate their professional lives to perfecting one position and fitting it into the team, even if it means that they will never carry the ball. It is time that the Marine Corps accepted this fact of organizational excellence and stopped playing "pick-up" ball.

The last major leg of this proposal calls for an aggressive continuation and extension of the recent push to improve the

Marine Corps' schools system. We must do everything possible to institutionalize the study of war. Under Gen. Gray, professional reading and formal education have gotten a large and much needed boost. Unfortunately it has been largely rhetorical, with very little substance or supervision. If it is to be truly effective there are several modifications that can help.

Recently, Marines have been encouraged to expand their professional reading and to sign up for appropriate level school. In fact, we were ordered to do it, but there has been no organizational incentive or enforcement. If we required all officers to take a qualification exam prior to each promotion board and school selection, and targeted appropriate theoretical and technical areas in the testing, everyone would study. Those who didn't would soon eliminate themselves as part of the problem. Creating such testing system would certainly require a major effort by the Marine Corps University and the Marine Corps Institute, but it is definitely possible. The Navy and the Air Force have been doing it for years on a much larger scale for their enlisted people.

The Marine Corps should also make completion of appropriate level school a mandatory prerequisite for promotion at each rank. The Army has done this for years at the command and staff level. Those not selected for the resident course would know that they must complete the correspondence course before their promotion board meets or they will not be selected.

Making this promotion exam and school completion mandatory will offend some who will consider it a breach of special trust and confidence. But the benefits far outweigh the disadvantages. It would create a permanent, ubiquitous emphasis on military education and tactical/technical proficiency. In order to take care of their mens' careers all commanders would have to build PME into their schedule. They couldn't allow them to become so busy with the press of their daily duties that they forgot to study war. Mandatory school completion and promotion exams would also ensure at least a minimal combat arms proficiency among the specialists. They would be evaluated primarily on their performance in their speciality, but they would have to demonstrate at least adequate currency in general military knowledge.

Another easy change that would stress the value of professional reading and personal study would be to require a comment in section C of the officer fitness report. The comment itself may become pro forma, but it would send a clear signal to all hands.

In summary, The Marine Corps must get serious about officer development, assignment, training and education. It must put the viability and efficacy of the organization ahead of the convenience and sensibilities of its' members. It must establish policies that promote specialization, and excellence. Above all, it must create an atmosphere in which the study of war is the "prime directive."

CONCLUSION:

By now I hope it is clear that the Marine Corps must revamp its' officer development and assignment policies. Over 200 years ago Adam Smith in "The Wealth of Nations", showed that specialization and open competition led to increased creativity, efficiency, and quality in the marketplace. The result of that premise was the Industrial Revolution, and an increase in productivity that has changed the world. It is time that the Marine Corps recognizes the validity of these same principles in the military environment, and uses them to put us on the leading edge of a revolution in warfighting capability.

The Marine Corps has the potential to make modern military history. We have a long tradition of innovative thinking. We are small and can therefore make these changes easier than the other services. We have an aggressive, competitive personality that believes in rewarding excellence. Above all, we have built our reputation on pride and performance. We crave the honor of being "the finest fighting force the world has ever seen", and we have historically been willing to pay the price in war to earn it. Now we must be willing to pay the price in peace.

FOOTNOTES

¹Dupuy, text.

²National Security Act of 1947, text.

³Goldwater-Nichols Reorganization Act of 1986, text.

⁴Report of the Panel on Military Education, text.

⁵Clauswitz, pg. 110-111.

⁶Hart, pg. 163-164.

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