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Author(s): Richard H. Kohn

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COMMENTARY

TARNISHED BRASS

Is the U.S. Military Profession in Decline?

By RICHARD H. KOHN

Nearly twenty years after the end of the Cold War, the American military, financed by more money than the entire rest of the world spends on its armed forces, failed to defeat insurgencies or fully suppress sectarian civil wars in two crucial countries, each with less than a tenth of the U.S. population, after overthrowing those nations' governments in a matter of weeks. Evidence of overuse and understrength in the military abounds: the longest individual overseas deployments since World War II and repeated rotations into those deployments and the common and near-desperate use of bonuses to keep officers and enlisted soldiers from leaving. Nor is it only the ground forces that are experiencing the pinch. The U.S. Air Force has had to cut tens of thousands of people to buy the airplanes it believes it needs. The U.S. Navy faces such declining numbers of ships that it needs allies to accomplish the varied demands of power projection, sea control, and the protection of world commerce.

Why such a disjunction between enormous expenditures and declining capability? One factor is that the threats currently facing the United States, many of them building for a generation or more, do not yield to the kind of conventional war that our military is designed to fight. The challenges to global stability are less from massed armies than from terrorism; economic and particularly financial instability; failed states; resource scarcity (particularly oil and potable water); pandemic disease; climate

change; and international crime in the form of piracy, smuggling, narcotics trafficking, and other forms of organized lawlessness. Very few of these threats can be countered by the high-tempo, high-technology conventional military power that has become the specialty—almost the monopoly—of the United States, shaped and sized to fight conventional wars against other nation-states.

Another factor is the role the United States has assumed for itself as the world's lone superpower—the guarantor of regional and global stability and champion of human rights, individual liberty, market capitalism, and political democracy, even though promoting those values may simultaneously undermine the nation's security.

A third factor in the disjuncture between the needs of American security and the abilities of the military establishment is not much discussed: deficiencies in American military professionalism. This problem, hidden because our military regularly demonstrates its operational effectiveness in battle, is the focus of this essay.

The challenge to military professionalism in the twenty-first century lies in three interconnected areas. The first is *intellectual*: the ability to wage war successfully in a variety of circumstances without wasting the lives of soldiers or their equipment and supplies (which are always limited, even for a superpower at the zenith of its relative strength). The second is *political*: the absence from the officer corps of partisan political divisions, its subordination to the legally constituted civilian authorities in charge of the state, and its

ability to establish an effective working partnership or collaboration with the civilian political leadership regardless of party or faction. The third challenge to professionalism is what I would call *moral* or *ethical*: the honor, integrity, honesty, and self-sacrifice of the officer corps, the commitment of individual officers to the norms and values of personal and organizational behavior that permit them to lead, and their subordinates to follow, in the heat and stress of battle.

A failure in the first area—strategy—is obviously the most dangerous. After remarkable success prior to and during World War II in creating and executing strategy in the largest and most complex war in human history, the American military began a slow decline. Ironically, this decline came at a time when the military was gaining enormous influence in the making of foreign and national security policies in the government reorganization of the 1940s: the unification of the armed forces and the creation of the National Security Council, Joint Chiefs of Staff, the unified and specified commands, the Central Intelligence Agency and other intelligence organizations, and the various mobilization, munitions, and logistics boards and agencies.

While prior to the war military planners were reduced to poring over the newspapers and parsing public statements by the White House to discern foreign policy, afterwards uniformed officers were integrated into (and increasingly influential on) a complex interagency coordination and policy-making process. But the military never gained full control of



General Shalikashvili speaks to the Democratic National Convention in Boston, 28 July 2004.

nuclear weapons, and increasingly in the 1950s lost primacy in nuclear strategy to the new think tanks and to the private sector. At the same time, the services adopted business models of management and to some extent leadership that reflected a growing partnership with American industry. (Significantly, William Westmoreland was the first active-duty Army officer to graduate from the Harvard Business School.) The services also embraced operations research, systems analysis, and economic theory partly to defend themselves against Robert McNamara and his whiz kids. Nonetheless, the services began to use those disciplines, along with the traditional supports of science and engineering, to manage their institutions, formulate policy, and eventually to wage war.

The result was the withering of strategy as a central focus for the armed forces, and this has been manifest in a continual string of military problems: a Vietnam War in which Americans won every single battle and campaign and lost the war almost from the very beginning; failed interventions like Lebanon in 1983 and Somalia in 1993; the Gulf War, which ended, contrary to American wishes, with Saddam Hussein still in power and his most lethal armed forces intact; and initially successful campaigns in Afghanistan (designed by the CIA) and the Iraq War, which metastasized into interminable and indecisive guerrilla wars of attrition that have tried American patience and will.

Iraq has become the metaphor for an absence of strategy. The theater commander brilliantly overthrew the

Saddam government in three weeks but failed to provide for occupying or securing the country, or even to advise the Defense Department adequately about his needs in that regard. His successor on the ground in Iraq failed to partner with civilian authorities, devise operations and tactics to prevent the onset of an insurgency, and then to combat it effectively. The American forces failed to train Iraqi security forces or to oversee contracts competently or to rebuild Iraq—and even the tactics and operations of the American forces have come under withering criticism. In effect, in the most important area of professional expertise—the connecting of war to policy, of operations to achieving the objectives of the nation—the American military has been found wanting. The excellence of the American military in operations, logistics, tactics, weaponry, and battle has been manifest for a generation or more. Not so with strategy.

Now there are many other factors in the Iraq War about which the American civilian leadership was even more derelict than the military. But for all of the pronouncements about preparing for “full spectrum conflict,” and the discussions about Operations Other Than War, the American military since the end of the Vietnam War has been focused like a laser on organization, weapons, doctrine, training, and the assignment and advancement of officers—on high-tempo, technology-rich conventional warfare. Discovering the so-called operational level of war in the 1970s, the Army seemed to lose interest in strategy. Even the Army War College, dedicated to the mission of educating

“strategic leaders,” teaches “about strategy,” in the words of a faculty member there, but not “how to develop strategy.”

From the introduction of nuclear weapons in the 1940s, the Navy seems actually to have subordinated strategy to the capabilities of its fleets rather than designing its fleets to fit the larger needs of American foreign policy and national security strategy. The Air Force continued its torrid love affair with strategic bombing to the point of blinding itself to the application of any kind of warfare other than total war against another nation-state. Even after Vietnam, when it finally got the message that obliterating whole societies from the face of the earth was not going to be American national policy, the Air Force has had difficulty adapting aviation to the full suite of possible military conflicts the nation might experience. The most adaptable American service has been the Marine Corps, but only at the operational and tactical levels; it remains relentlessly a light infantry shock force whose officer corps seems to understand strategy almost wholly in terms of figuring out when and where they can insert their men into the fight.

The Iraq War is not the only example of strategic deficiency. In October 2002, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld asked his chief military and civilian subordinates for an assessment of the “Global War on Terrorism,” noting that “we lack metrics to know if we are winning or losing” and asking numerous broad yet focused questions, all of which came down to the question of strategy. It took several years, and still the Joint Chiefs of Staff required help from contractors—*contractors*—to come up with a system to measure what is clearly the most pressing security threat facing the United States in a generation.

Contracting has been a growing trend for nearly two decades throughout the defense establishment: in the Army, for example, not simply for kitchen police or security for stateside bases, which makes eminent sense, but increasingly for core military functions like doctrine, after-action analysis, and the training of foreign armies. Some of this has resulted from the pressure of too many missions and too few people. But whether because of resources or convenience, too much

has been willingly given up by the armed forces. A profession that surrenders jurisdiction over its most basic areas of expertise, no matter what the reason, risks its own destruction.

The second area of diminished professionalism in the armed forces is in politics, and by that I mean the officer corps' understanding of its proper role in government and society. For a century, at least, officers understood that they must be completely apolitical: neither for nor against any party or creed, to the point where most officers in the first half of the twentieth century even abstained from voting. Not that the military eschewed politics altogether; throughout their history, the American armed forces have maneuvered for budgets, roles, and missions—policies that benefited their war-fighting capacity—and officers, obviously, have lobbied for personal advancement. A few top leaders ran for office after retirement, an old American practice. But officers on active duty understood their role to be not only non-partisan but un-partisan—completely outside party politics—and their function purely to be advisers to civilian leaders on matters of policy and strategy from a military perspective, and to execute the decisions of those leaders in peace and in war.

In the last generation, however, this understanding has become so compromised that Secretary of Defense Robert Gates felt constrained to instruct officers graduating from the Naval and Air Force Academies in 2007 about the necessity for being “non-political.” Officers now vote, in substantially higher percentages than the general population; they identify themselves as Republican or Democrat, and less as independent or non-partisan, much more than the American people as a whole.

The most glaring manifestation of partisanship has been the sudden emergence of endorsements for presidential candidates by retired four-star generals and admirals, begun most notably in 1992 when retired chairman of the joint chiefs, Admiral William Crowe, and several other retired flag officers endorsed Bill Clinton, an act that bolstered Clinton's fitness to be commander in chief. It was a direct intervention in politics that, while legal, violated a



General Franks gestures as he addresses the Republican National Convention in New York, 2 September 2004.

very old, and significant, tradition. In its aftermath, Generals Colin Powell and Norman Schwarzkopf declared as Republicans and played prominent roles in the election of 1996. In 2000, even more retired four-stars backed George W. Bush, and in 2004, retired chairman General John Shalikashvili appeared with other flags to speak at the Democratic National Convention, as did retired General Tommy Franks at the Republican gathering.

In April 2006, several retired generals attacked Donald Rumsfeld's handling of the Iraq War, calling for his ouster, again violating a tradition that retired officers do not criticize an administration they served until it leaves office, and most certainly not when American forces are still engaged in combat. They appeared over two dozen times in the press; two of them participated in video advertisements attacking the president and Iraq policy, in effect joining the Democrats' war opposition in Congress. In the fall of 2007, retired Army Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, who commanded the Multi-National Force in Iraq in 2003–2004, attacked the Bush administration's handling of the war in explicit, incendiary language in a luncheon speech to military reporters and editors. Weeks later, he delivered the same message in the Democrats' reply to the president's weekly radio address, introducing himself “not as a representative of the Democratic Party, but as a retired military officer.”

More disturbing than partisanship have been the calls, in the wake of Rumsfeld's abusive and intimidating

leadership, for the military to stand up to civilians who are ignoring or deciding against military judgment—to the point of speaking out or otherwise preventing a decision from going forward, or resigning to alert the public to a disaster in the making. The roots of these impulses extend back to Vietnam when officers accused their leadership of going along with policies and decisions they knew would fail. Out of that conflict came a generation that, in Colin Powell's words, “vowed that when our turn came to call the shots, we would not quietly acquiesce in halfhearted warfare for half-baked reasons that the American people could not understand or support.” Powell's predecessor as chairman of the joint chiefs admitted in his memoirs that he schemed to achieve policies of his own choosing even when his own secretary of defense opposed them. The head of U.S. Central Command, Admiral William Fallon, spoke so often and so freely to the press that he was forced to retire abruptly in March 2008 after airing his disagreements over Iraq strategy, boasting privately that he would try to stymie any unprovoked attack on Iran, and criticizing the Congress for considering a resolution that labeled the Turkish massacre of Armenians in 1915 genocide.

Just how politicized some of the military's leading members have become is illustrated by General David Petraeus. Aide or assistant to three different generals during his career and with a doctorate in political science from Princeton, the general published an op-

ed in the *Washington Post* lauding the progress of the Iraqi Army just before the 2004 presidential election. Pushed front and center by the president as the person who would decide force levels and strategy and define success or failure in Iraq, Petraeus became for a time the virtual public face of the Iraq War. No matter how carefully he phrased his assessments or hedged his predictions of future conditions in that stricken country in his congressional testimony and public statements, some in the press and in Congress labeled him a “front man” for the administration.

Partisan politicization is a cancer in the military, particularly inside the officer corps. It has the potential to divert soldiers from their tasks and to affect their morale, and thus their fighting ability. Surely partisanship undermines public confidence in the objectivity and loyalty of the military, and, by association, in the policies of their civilian masters. A number of senior officers recognized these dangers. On taking office in 2008, the new Air Force chief of staff warned his generals explicitly: “You will deal with politics . . . but you must remain apolitical . . . now and in retirement.” Whether politicization can be contained in an age of instant worldwide communication remains to be seen. As the prominent military lawyer Eugene Fidell, head of the National Institute of Military Justice, says of Iraq, “This is the first post internet, post digital American war.”

Related to these strategic and political failures are possible moral deficiencies among the officer corps, which have arisen in the last few years. At its heart is a growing careerism that has led to micromanagement from above and a sense that any defect will derail a career, which in turn leads to risk aversion and sometimes to cover-ups, avoidance of responsibility, and other behaviors that harm the ability of the armed forces to succeed in battle. These failures of professional conduct have appeared in such cases as the misrepresentations of Pfc. Jessica Lynch’s battlefield experiences; the handling of the death of Cpl. Pat Tillman (the altered reports, changing stories, and botched investigations); the scandalous treatment of wounded soldiers at Walter Reed; the

aborted career of Maj. Gen. Antonio Taguba, who investigated the Abu Ghraib prison horror; and of course Abu Ghraib itself. Twice the Army has suppressed its own studies of the Iraq War in fear that the conclusions would anger Donald Rumsfeld, an egregious breach of honesty that threatens the indispensable after-action feedback loop upon which success in future battle depends.

Such incidents occurred in the past and will undoubtedly occur again; malfeasance and breaches of ethics occur in every profession. What is troubling is the lack of accountability and the fact that these ethical lapses go unpunished. The military has well-developed systems of criminal investigation and justice and other investigative channels that are designed to expose and punish crime, misbehavior, and violations of rules and regulations. But in recent years, few if any senior officers have been identified, punished, or held to account. As Lt. Col. Paul Yingling wrote, in a stinging attack on the Army brass, “A private who loses a rifle suffers greater consequences than a general who loses a war.”

That two Air Force and two Army generals had to be reprimanded in 2007 for appearing in uniform in a video promoting evangelical religion indicates a decline in the understanding of proper professional behavior. This was not a big thing, one might say; but these individuals were at the top of their services, role models as well as leaders. The fact that they did not “get it” suggests a lack of understanding that may extend more widely in the officer corps than heretofore thought. That the secretary of defense in his first eighteen months in office had to replace several top generals and an admiral (along with a service secretary) suggests that those most knowledgeable about the military also recognize these problems.

There is a longstanding argument among scholars about the ability of military institutions to reform themselves. To some degree, I think that the services do recognize their weakness. The Air Force in the 1990s began a school of advanced air power (and now space power) studies to produce officers who could think through the

uses and limitations of such power in war. A few years ago, the Army War College created an advanced strategic arts program for a select group of officers in each class. The Army chief of staff has noted publicly the complexities that will challenge the cultural comprehension of Army leaders in future war and recently opened up a Center for Professional Military Ethics at the U.S. Military Academy.

The American military has certainly demonstrated in the past an ability to transform, particularly in response to changes in technology. One only has to go back to the introduction of steel and steam in the Navy, the adoption of aviation by both services, and the development of strategic bombing, amphibious doctrine and practice, combined arms and armored land warfare, and carrier and submarine forces in the 1920s and 1930s to see all of the armed services innovating in organization, weapons, doctrine, operations, and tactics. Indeed, in what I have argued is the most important area of special expertise—strategy—American officers performed magnificently during the interwar period and in World War II in dealing with what was perhaps the most dangerous foreign threat the country has ever faced.

But if the military is to repair its professionalism without a massive (and inevitably messy) intervention by civilian authorities, piecemeal approaches will not suffice. Almost any academic would immediately target professional military education (PME) as the point of leverage, focusing on curriculum in an attempt to renew among officers critical expertise and the norms and values of their professional world. But the services are far too action-oriented, too busy and strained, too focused on recapitalizing and modernizing their weapons systems, and in truth too anti-intellectual for PME to suffice. Most treat “schooling” as something distinct from serving, therefore making it for most officers an experience only to be endured. (Only very recently has the Navy made war college a prerequisite for flag rank.) Rather, a more systematic, comprehensive solution is needed, imposed from the top by either the civilian or military leadership in ways

that cannot easily be undone by bureaucratic sloth or subsequent leadership.

First, the uniformed chiefs and civilian secretaries of each of the services should together instruct promotion boards for flag officers to choose a greater proportion of candidates with demonstrated intellectual as well as operational and command ability: people who have advanced civilian schooling in disciplines particularly suited to the formulation of strategy; who have demonstrated moral as well as physical courage and a willingness to take risk; who are original, innovative, and indeed conceptual in their thinking; and who may not have pursued typical careers or served in assignments that in the past would be necessary for promotion to flag rank.

Second, each of the services should be ordered to review its promotion and assignment policies to ensure that officers of this type will be attracted to the services, educated properly, retained, and assigned in such a way as to develop the desired characteristics while at the same time rising competitively into the leadership. Specifically, the top civilian and military leadership of each of the services must undertake a systematic effort to eradicate the careerism, anti-intellectualism, and politicization of their officer corps—in other words, to change the organizational culture, particularly in their flag ranks.

Still another indispensable reform concerns the officer evaluation system, specifically diluting the “top-down” system of officers being judged by their superiors only. Fitness for promotion—and particularly the characteristics recommended here—requires assessment by peers and subordinates as well as supervisors and commanders. However, such an innovation must be carefully crafted, for it can and will be “gamed” by officers, itself a commentary on professionalism and its challenges.

Third, the services need to institute programs of continuing education to be pursued by officers on their own, separate from and in addition to intermediate and advanced professional military education in residence or by correspondence. Other professions possess self-administered systems of continuing education. Officers should

be required to apply to staff and war colleges, passing entrance examinations to qualify, or writing a statement of interest and submitting an essay on a professional subject to demonstrate their seriousness of intent. Professional readings should be part of the preparation, with officers allowed to take the examination again if they fail, as a certain percentage will if the tests are demanding enough.

Fourth, the service academies and ROTC (Reserve Officers’ Training Corps) should revise their curricula to make certain that officers at commissioning are fluent in a foreign language and conversant with a foreign culture, and senior service schools should revise theirs so that strategy, leadership, and command are the focus of a war college education. This may require further de-emphasis of mathematics, science, and engineering at the academies, on the grounds that war is first and foremost a human phenomenon, not a technical or engineering problem. While it is critically important, the operation of complex equipment is not more important than an understanding of war in all of its uncertainty and complexity or of the basic norms and values of the military profession. At all levels these ideals and ethics need to be emphasized.

Professions that cannot change themselves from within, cannot respond to the needs of their clients, and cannot enforce standards of behavior so as to maintain the confidence of their constituencies while also inspiring the admiration and loyalty of their own members are in trouble. Just how deeply these problems extend into the officer corps of the American armed forces is hard to tell. Certainly the Army and Marines have fought bravely and served faithfully in Iraq without complaint, perhaps the most important test of military professionalism. Few people suggest that the Army’s (or the other services’) organizational climate is pervaded by the kind of moral decay discovered in the famous “Study on Military Professionalism” completed at the Army War College in 1970, although some echoes are disturbing.

Yet even before the stresses introduced by the current campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, knowledgeable ob-

servers of the military raised questions of strategic competence, politicization, and integrity in the officer corps. Part of the current strain on the American military has roots that reach back a generation at least, and in some ways into the very culture of each of the armed services. (Some may be endemic to military organization.) The civilian and military leadership must address these problems in a holistic way, treating them as connected, part of a pattern that threatens professionalism. To the extent that the leaders of each of the services avert their eyes from these problems, it jeopardizes not only the national defense but the long-term health of our military. Sooner or later the adulation of the American people, and the fear and respect shown our services by Washington, will revert back to something closer to the historical norm. Our military leaders should conduct a rigorous professional self-inventory now before the politicians decide that they must step in and perform this task for them. Professions that rely on outsiders to correct their own deficiencies are in decline—and unlikely to survive in their present form.



Richard H. Kohn is a professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He was chief of Air Force history for the U.S. Air Force, 1981–1991. He is the editor of *The United States Military under the Constitution of the United States, 1789–1989* (New York: New York University Press, 1991), and coeditor of *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001). This essay is adapted from the Alvin H. Bernstein Lecture at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, John Hopkins University.

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