Five Myths about Our Future

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Abstract: The Army, and many of its professionals, still behave far too much like they are leading, and serving, in little more than a government bureaucracy. To advance the implementation of the new doctrines, old myths must be destroyed. That is the purpose of this article and the next by Dr. Pfaff, to expose the myths as the falsehoods they are and replace them with correct, motivational understandings.

In a recent and quite prescient US Army War College publication, "Changing Minds in the Army: Why It Is So Difficult and What to Do about It," two faculty members explain a core issue of Army leaders—the ability to re-evaluate personal frames of reference when confronting new information: "Unfortunately, shattering or unlearning frames of reference is an action that is easy to espouse, yet incredibly difficult to execute." The authors note one convention senior leaders can use to assess their frames successfully is a red team charged with a direct, yet tactful, challenge. When presented within a culture of trust created by the leader, the team's ability to speak truth effectively to those in power is greatly enhanced.[1]

Similarly, Dr. Tony Pfaff, the War College's new professor of the Army Profession and Ethic, and I have collaborated to confront commonly held myths that can rightly be understood as specific frames of reference senior Army leaders, indeed all Army professionals, need to change. This article focuses on incorrect frames of reference still held three years after *The Army Profession* doctrine was implemented.[2] In each case these frames, these myths, are almost incompatible with the institution's doctrine, thus hindering not only the timely implementation but also the desirable influence on the effectiveness of the Army and its professionals.

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The Army is and will always be a military profession—not true.

The Continental Congress created the US Army in 1775 from the colonial militias and then placed it within a new Department of War before the end of our Revolution against the British crown.[3] It is thus fair to say that since its establishment the US Army has always been a government bureaucracy. Accordingly, since the end of the War of Independence

1 Stephen J. Gerras and Leonard Wong, *Changing Minds in the Army: Why It Is So Difficult and What to Do about It* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Press, 2013), 6, 25–26.

2 Headquarters, US Department of the Army (HQDA), *The Army Profession*, Army Doctrinal Reference Publication 1 (ADRP 1) (Washington, DC: HQDA, 2015).

3 William B. Skelton, *An American Profession of Arms: The Army Officer Corps, 1784–1861* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 5.

and the ratification of the Constitution in 1789, both the Congress and the executive have continued to exercise their Constitutional powers to treat the Army just like every other federal bureaucracy. The institutional character and behavior of government bureaucracy, therefore, has been and will be the US Army's default setting.

Turning now to the Army's professional status, which was attained by cohort during various periods of the institution's history, the creation of branch schools, consistent terms of service, and promotions by merit rather than patronage slowly professionalized the officer corps during the mid to late-nineteenth century; the noncommissioned officer corps by World War II.[4] But professionalizing the Army did not cause its character of origin—government bureaucracy—to go away. Bureaucracy remains in the background and constantly creates tension within the profession. So the Army is uniquely an institution of dual cultures in which only one culture can be dominant at a given time and Army leaders determine through their daily leadership at each location whether the dominant culture is that of the profession or of the default bureaucracy.[5]

Since becoming a profession, the US Army's degree of professionalization has ebbed and flowed. The most recent decline of culture and ethos of profession occurred during the late-Vietnam War period and the morph into bureaucratic behavior caused immense loss of trust by the American people. But trust, with both internal Army ranks and external citizens, is the currency that legitimizes professions and it is ever perishable. In Western democracies, the client—in this case the American people—gets to determine if an institution is treated as a venerated profession meriting the autonomy necessary to do its expert work. Thus, by the end of the Vietnam War, the Army had lost not only public confidence but also its status as a military profession and the associated autonomy. Likewise, it is wrong to infer "once a profession, always a profession" from Professor Huntington's influential work when modern competitive professions, such as post-Cold War European land armies, do in fact die as they morph into military bureaucracies.[6]

Unfortunately, because it believes it will always be a military profession, the Army has only studied itself as a military profession episodically. More often than not the institution simply declared itself a profession and continued to operate much like a bureaucracy. Although civilian historians have conducted most research on the military as a profession, the Army chief of staff did direct the US Army War College to conduct internally a "Study on Military Professionalism" after the failures in Vietnam.[7]

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4 Allan R. Millett and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America*, rev. ed. (New York: Free Press, 1994), 133–37.

5 In earlier publications the sharp differences between these two cultures have been more specifically contrasted. See Don M. Snider, "Will Army 2025 be a Military Profession?," *Parameters* 45, no. 4 (Winter 2015–16): 40.

6 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1957); and Andrew D. Abbott, *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 28–34.

7 See, for example, Allan R. Millett, *The American Political System and Civilian Control of the Military: A Historical Perspective* (Columbus: Mershon Center of Ohio State University, 1979); and US Army War College, *Study on Military Professionalism* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: US Army War College, 1970).

Notwithstanding the quality of the War College study that highlighted the unprofessional nature of the Army officer corps in the early 1970s; the Army did not perform another self-study on the profession for the next 30 years. In 2000 a group of faculty at West Point, aided by civilian colleagues from several academic institutions and disciplines, renewed the study of the US Army as a military profession, publishing four books from 2000 to 2010 that laid the intellectual groundwork for more recent doctrinal publications.[8]

In summary, the Army is an institution of dual character—bureaucracy and profession. With constant tension between their cultures, how the Army conducts itself each day in each location is determined by the effectiveness of Army leaders acting as the stewards of the Army Profession. The stewards' role is to resolve deep cultural tensions and behaviors by leading the institution to manifest the five characteristics essential to the Army's status as profession: military expertise ready for any contingency, a culture that fosters honorable service by all professionals, an esprit de corps that overcomes the adversity of combat, stewardship of the Army Profession, and military effectiveness that generates respect and trust from the American people.[9] Only under those conditions can the US Army continue to be a military profession.

The Army Profession is just about the historic profession of arms—not true.

It is true the Army community of practice that approached the initial tasker to research and study the meaning of the Army as a profession did start producing doctrine based upon the historic profession of arms.[10] Soon, however, the doctrine writing process fostered deeper reflection within the community as to whether in the current era the Army Profession should, or even could, be composed only of those who bear arms. After another year of deliberating and drafting the document that would eventually become official doctrine, a new consensus clearly formed. Consequently, Army leadership made a conscious decision during 2011 and 2012 that led to the profession of arms and the Army civilian corps jointly comprising the Army Profession. Specifically, the first decade of conflict in the Middle East caused the community to rationalize the inclusion of the Army civilian corps, which enables professionals to fight effectively as an expeditionary force. Thus the belief that the whole Army—uniformed and civilian—must be a coherent and cohesive military profession informed the doctrinal definition of the expertise and role of Army professionals:

> Military expertise is the ethical design, generation, support, and application of landpower, primarily in unified land operations, and all supporting capabilities essential to accomplish the mission in defense of the American

8 The four text books are: Lloyd J. Mathews, ed., *The Future of the Army Profession*, with Don M. Snider and Gayle L. Watkins (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2002); Don M. Snider and Lloyd J. Mathews, *The Future of the Army Profession*, 2nd ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2005); Don M. Snider, Lloyd J. Matthews, Eric K. Shinseki, *Forging the Warrior's Character: Moral Precepts from the Cadet Prayer* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2008); and Suzanne C. Nielsen and Don M. Snider, eds., *American Civil-Military Relations: The Soldier and the State in a New Era* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

9 ADRP 1, 1-4.

10 US Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), "The Profession of Arms," white paper (Fort Eustis, VA: TRADOC, 2010), 1.

> people. Soldiers and Army Civilians will find within this definition the role their units and organizations play in ultimately applying landpower and how their own contribution fits into the larger mission.[11]

Army civilians have for some time provided expertise, stability, and continuity in most major army organizations. The recent decision to include the Army civilian corps within the profession created recognition that the Army needed to more deeply professionalize the civilian corps with individual and institutional developmental programs as it did in earlier periods for the other cohorts. In fact, the rate and effectiveness with which the civilian corps professionalizes will likely be a major determinant of how well the US Army can meet the challenge to "win in a complex world."[12]

The practice of Army professionals is about applying large amounts of technology—not true.

Apache pilots and Abrams tank drivers might think this statement to be true; however, the professional art, the practice, of any Army professional is best understood as "repetitive exercise of discretionary judgments" executed by actions that apply the expert knowledge and skills of individual professionals and the units they compose.[13] In fact, this definition is now Army doctrine and true regardless of which cohort—uniformed or civilian—a professional serves within. The effectiveness of these actions are then analyzed for their effectiveness by after-action reviews and potential adaptations to knowledge and practices in the form of doctrine as well as tactics, techniques, and procedures.

Discretionary judgments are informed by many years of studying and training within the fields of expert knowledge—military-technical (how the Army actually fights); moral-ethical (how we enter, fight, and end wars rightly by the values of the American people); political-cultural (how we operate outside the boundaries of the Army to create joint, interagency, and allied effectiveness in both peace and war); and knowledge of human and leader development (how Army professionals of all cohorts are assessed, developed, and employed over a lifetime of service).[14] Whether made during peacetime or during war, these judgments are inevitably moral judgments because they directly influence the well-being of other humans—Army professionals, their families, the enemy, and innocents on the battlefield.

Army doctrine uses the term "discretionary judgments" as discussed above rather than simply "decisions" to establish Army professionals must be developed and then trusted to act with significant autonomy of action, the true mark of a professional. Granting such discretion through limited autonomy and underwriting prudent risk-taking by junior leaders is the behavior of a profession, not a government bureaucracy. These

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11 ADRP 1, 5-1.

12 See TRADOC, *The U.S. Army Operating Concept: Win in a Complex World, 2020–2040*, TRADOC Pamphlet 525-3-1 (Fort Eustis, VA: TRADOC, 2014).

13 ADRP 1, 1-2.

14 ADRP 1, 5-1.

positive behaviors are now being better facilitated through the Army's *Mission Command* doctrine.[15]

Quintessentially, Army professionals practice their art with their minds, voices, and hands, even though they may also use massive amounts of technology to implement their discretionary judgments. But such technology is not a precondition to professional practice as professions are human institutions, something the US Army has long recognized and cherished when manifested in unit cohesion, esprit de corps, and the personal camaraderie of a band of brothers and sisters bound together in common moral purpose to defend our republic.

Competency is the most important aspect of being an Army professional—absolutely not true.

Perhaps the most pernicious myth reflects the belief that the Army is an amoral institution, that all we need to do is be proficient at our specific tasks with little to no regard to whether those tasks are applied to moral ends. No other myth could be further from the truth nor more dangerous to the Army's future. The development of Army professionals has long focused, rightly, on the development of the individual's competence and moral character. Current doctrine intentionally modifies phrasing to make the commitment aspect of one's professional character explicit. Thus, the US Army now develops individual professionals, regardless of cohort or rank, across the 3Cs—character, competence, and commitment.

Such professional development draws deeply from the Army's Ethic, a slowly evolving set of foundational assumptions and beliefs embedded within the Army's culture. This ethic is the means of social control within professions, reflecting "how we do things around here to be effective at our profession's work."[16] The Army's history most often shows competent professionals of well-developed moral character and personal commitment are the leaders best able to make correct moral judgments in the stress of combat.[17] Vitally, the character, competence, and commitment of an Army professional must be integrated into their normative-ethical advice and actions involving the lethality of our military practices. This integration is particularly important at the strategic level, the upper level of the profession's civil-military relationships, where the moral imperative that lives must not be wasted is so heavy when advising on military options and outcomes to effect political objectives.[18]

General Dempsey, the Army's former chief of staff and then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, summed up this issue quite succinctly: "You can have someone of incredible character who can't

15 HQDA, *Mission Command*, Army Doctrinal Publication 6-0 with Change 2 (Washington, DC: HQDA, May 2014).

16 Don M. Snider, "American Military Professions and Their Ethics," in *Routledge Handbook of Military Ethics*, ed. George Lucas (London: Routledge / Taylor & Francis Group, 2015).

17 Patrick J. Sweeney and Sean T. Hannah, "High Impact Military Leadership: The Positive Effects of Authentic Moral Leadership on Followers," in *Forging the Warrior's Character*, 91–116. The critical finding of this research is that "trusted leaders will not only have the ability to lead followers effectively in combat, they will also have the ability to change who they are as people" (95).

18 See, for example, James M. Dubik, "Taking a 'Pro' Position on Principled Resignation," *Armed Forces and Society* 1-12 (2016), doi:10.1177/0095327X16659736; and Dubik, "Civil and Military, both Morally Obligated to Make War Work," *Army Magazine* 65, no. 11 (November 2015).

lead their way out of a forward operating base because they don't have the competence to understand the application of military power, and that doesn't do me any good. . . . Conversely, you can have someone who is intensely competent, who is steeped in the skills of the profession, but doesn't live a life of character. And that doesn't do me any good."[19]

So, yes, the competence of an Army professional counts, but not a bit more than the professional's moral character and personal commitment. This fact is true in both conflict and peace. The US Army has recently had too many instances like Abu Ghraib and Mahmudiyah as well as the many public moral failures by senior Army leaders and major matériel acquisition failures of all types to believe otherwise!

Whether the Army is a profession does not matter; we will always get the job done—not necessarily true.

The Army's effectiveness has depended on and will continue to depend on professional behavior from the institution, individual professionals, and their units. Remember, as discussed under the first myth, the Army is an institution of dual character that will always be part large, lumbering government bureaucracy. But can that bureaucracy win battles and ultimately wars in manners acceptable to the American people? Why is the alternative character, military profession, different with ebbs and flows over recent decades such as the Vietnam War's low point and the Persian Gulf War's (1990–91) high point?

The difference can be explained by the things professions routinely do and government bureaucracies seldom, if ever, do. The most important are the creation of expert knowledge and the human art and practices to apply that knowledge, which are natural functions of all professions, including military ones. For just one example, the doctrines of fighting and sustaining combined arms battles in joint and allied coalitions have taken years to develop and adapt and so have the battalion and brigade commanders who have the professional knowledge to apply those doctrines. That persistent development is the unique work of a military profession—expert knowledge applied by leaders who are experts in its application. But government bureaucracies generally do not deal in such expert knowledge nor professional practices. Their role in Western societies is to complete the routine, nonexpert, tasks (e.g., testing for and issuing drivers' licenses) necessary for an ordered and structured society.

Moreover, history shows that when stewards of the Army Profession fail to conform the institution's behavior to that of a profession, specifically keeping expert knowledge attuned to future needs, very bad things can happen. In March 2003, after a successful conventional campaign to take down the forces of Saddam Hussain, Baghdad fell. The US Army then found itself with no expert knowledge or practice to deal with the follow-on insurgency against our occupation. Note how General Ray

19 Thom Shanker, "Conduct at Issue as Military Officers Face a New Review," *New York Times*, April 13, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/14/us/militarys-top-officers-face-review-of-their-character.html?_r=0e.

Odierno, a division commander who later became the chief of staff of the Army, described the situation:

> When we first went there, we thought we would have a conventional fight. . . . We had a conventional fight, which turned quickly into an insurgency that was compounded by terrorism. . . . We were surprised by the changing tactics we saw. We had no idea about the irregular aspect we were about to face. We didn't recognize this was a possibility. And when we did recognize this, it took us too long to adjust.[20]

Notice the words he used, "we were surprised," "we had no idea," "we didn't recognize this." An egregious failure had occurred by senior stewards of the 1980s and 1990s who failed to keep the profession's knowledge and practices current to future needs. After Vietnam, the Army simply dropped the essential knowledge of counterinsurgency and instead focused narrowly on fighting Soviet forces in central Europe.[21] That horrible failure was paid for with the lives of far too many American soldiers and civilians, not to mention the prolonged nature of the conflict thereafter. So the point here is straightforward—as recent history demonstrates, whether the US Army is a bureaucracy or a profession makes all of the difference in combat effectiveness.

Conclusion

Army doctrine can often be turgid and too matter-of-fact. Doctrine regarding the Army Profession and Ethic is no exception even though significant efforts were expended to avoid that outcome. While doctrine may be quite declaratory, explanations are sometimes not sufficient. Thus, myths persist because the new information that Gerras and Wong note must directly confront old frames of reference if they are to change—the reasons why—are insufficient to be persuasive. So the five explanations above as to "why" are offered specifically to assist the stewards of the profession, and indeed all Army professionals, to change their minds on these issues. Gerras and Wong conclude their study with: "These questions are difficult to answer, but what we suggest in the preceding paragraphs is that for an Army operating in an environment of intense uncertainty and profound ambiguity, changing one's mind may not only be a distinct possibility, but also a pressing necessity."[22] I could not agree with them more, and especially if the US Army is to be a military profession.

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20 Lance Bacon, "A Tested Top Warrior," *Army Times*, September 19, 2011.

21 See Conrad C. Crane, *Cassandra in Oz: Counterinsurgency and Future War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2016), ch. 1.

22 Gerras and Wong, *Changing Minds,* 29.