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MILITARY CULTURE DOES MATTER

by Williamson Murray

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Does military culture matter? Students of either military history or current military institutions have devoted little attention to it, yet it may be the most important factor not only in military effectiveness on the battlefield, but in the processes of innovation during times of peace. Stated simply, military culture comprises the ethos and professional attributes, derived from both experience and intellectual study, that contribute to military organizations' core, common understanding of the nature of war. Less easily studied than defined, its influence on military institutions is almost always the result of long-term factors rarely measurable and often obscure both to historians and to those actually serving in the institutions -- obscure, that is, until a war begins.

Military culture is shaped by national cultures as well as factors such as geography and historical experience that build a national military “style.” The American military, for example, has always had to project its power over great distances. Even in the Civil War, which has exercised such great influence over the general military culture of the U.S. services, Union forces waged a war on a continental scale equivalent to the distance from Paris to Moscow. Germany, by comparison, was for centuries at the center of European wars, and consequently tended to neglect logistical problems.

As with all human affairs, however, military culture is not immutable. Changes in leadership, professional military education, doctrinal preference, and technology all result in the evolution, for better or worse, of the culture of military institutions. The effects on culture, however, may not be evident for years or even decades, and may in fact be unintended consequences of other shifts.

The history of the interwar period from 1920 to 1930 underscores the importance of military culture in preparing the services for war. The German victory over France in May 1940 resulted largely from changes in the cultural patterns of the German army that were made in the early 1920s by the chief of staff, General Hans von Seeckt. The hallmarks of the new German army were its emphasis on systematic, thorough analysis, willingness to grapple with what was really happening on the battlefield, and a rigorous selection process that emphasized the professionally relevant intellectual attainments of officers as well as their performance in leadership positions. The Reichswehr’s willingness to study the operational and tactical lessons of the last war stands in sharp contrast with the British army’s reluctance during the same period to draw lessons from the experiences of the Western Front.

Historians have often suggested that military organizations study the last war and that is why they do badly in the next. In fact, few military organizations study the past with

any degree of rigor, although the success of those that do so has demonstrated its vital importance. Some military cultures reject the past as having no relevance to the future of war. Air forces have been particularly attracted to the belief that the study of even recent military experience is of limited use in preparing for the glorious, technology-driven future. Such cultures have great difficulty in innovating in useful ways during peacetime and a particularly hard time in adapting to the real conditions of war. The Eighth Air Force's failure to push for the development of long-range escort fighters, despite heavy losses to its bombers on deep penetration raids during the summer and fall of 1943, indicates the potentially baneful influence of military culture.

For the most part, U.S. military cultures were in fact flexible and open to innovation during the interwar period, and emphasized intellectual preparation for future war. Professional military education, in particular, received not only high-level attention but respect. The faculties of the services' war colleges in the years immediately preceding American involvement in World War II included several officers who would later rise to top commands at the national level. In addition, the war colleges of the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps were instrumental in developing the doctrines of amphibious warfare and carrier aviation that proved essential to success in the war.

By comparison, the current American military cultures demonstrate trends with some disturbing implications. According to a devastating House Armed Services Committee report of the late 1980s, professional military education has suffered a significant decline, and the major institutions have become profoundly anti-intellectual and ahistorical.

Perhaps even more significantly, the American military appears to be going through a major change as the Vietnam War generation is succeeded by officers who did not share that experience. With the exception of the Marine Corps, the new generation has proven far

more attracted to the sort of technological and mechanistic “solutions” that contributed so much to failure in Vietnam.

As in the past, the air force continues to emphasize number-crunching systems analysis. According to one air force study (*New World Vistas: Air and Space Power for the 21st Century*, 1995): “The power of the new information systems will lie in their ability to correlate data automatically and rapidly from many sources to form a complete picture of the operational area, whether it be a battlefield or the site of a mobility operation.” Many senior leaders in the other services are now moving in the same direction. A recent naval war game suggests that some officers believe that fog, friction, uncertainties, and chance -- all the factors that have influenced history over the past 2,500 years -- will simply disappear under the searching eye of superior technologies. The army is clearly divided between those who look expectantly upon technology and those who continue to be influenced by historical evidence. And it is the battles within the army that will decide where American military culture will go -- at least until the next Vietnam.

Only the marines appear to be solidly resisting the allure of technology as the answer to all the problems of war in the next century. Their recently rewritten doctrinal publications contain a pervasive Clausewitzian flavor, emphasizing uncertainty and “fog.” Moreover, their culture remains firmly tied to a sense of history both as a learning tool and as a warning to those who would put too much reliance on technology. The army’s major doctrinal manual is presently being rewritten; its initial draft appears quite similar in philosophy to that of the Marine Corps. But the other services continue to push technologically oriented, top-down doctrines. This trend has been reinforced by what is coming out of the joint forces community. The joint doctrinal publications are unreadable, which is perhaps just as well,

because the mechanistic, technologically driven doctrine they advocate claims much, but in fact contains little of substance.

Particularly worrisome at present in the U.S. military culture has been the propensity to shut down debate. The current draft of Army Regulation 600-20 suggests that the senior leadership in the army wants to “proscribe an officer from even holding certain views which contravene official policy, much less from espousing them.” On the other hand, the navy and the marines do appear to be encouraging debate within their officer corps: the navy because of its three very different subcultures (aviation, submarine, and surface), the marines simply because their culture appears to thrive on argument.

Military organizations that remain totally enmeshed in the day-to-day tasks of running their administrative business, that ignore history and serious study, and that allow themselves to believe their enemies will possess no asymmetric approaches are, frankly, headed for defeat. Certainly in comparison to the thinking and atmosphere of the U.S. military in the period preceding World War II, the current picture reveals severe weaknesses. Consequently, any major attempts at military reform are bound to founder unless leaders address fundamental problems of military culture, to which there are no simple or quick solutions.

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