

The Army and Society: Some Perspectives for the 21st Century

by Colonel (Ret.) Michael D. Mahler

As our Army enters the 21st century, there appears to be a distinct sense of unease within its ranks. Recent surveys depict a corps of officers and noncommissioned officers who have low morale, who do not believe that their units are well prepared, and who do not intend to stay in the Army until retirement — in fact, the survey found a third of the officers and noncommissioned officers intend to leave at the end of their current obligation. Added to that alarming report is a perception that the “warriors” are getting out first and that career success comes from avoiding risks in training, doctrine, and leadership.

As unsettling as this picture is, it might be well to put a little perspective on what we are reading and hearing in the hope that we can better find our way through this seeming morass and recover some of our good feeling for a profession that our nation still needs — though sometimes it does seem that the nation doesn’t know it. If it is true that the Army is, in many ways, a reflection of the society from which it springs, it may be well to start by looking at some unsettling trends in that society.

A few years ago, a well-known management consulting firm did a very large national employee survey. The general trends were disquieting and may sound familiar. They found that company credibility was at a 10-year low, that manager/professional skepticism was up five percentage points, that “company” approval was down 20 percentage points, that less than 50 percent of management believed they were “in touch” with employees, and that advancement opportunities were perceived to not be there.

Much of this feeling probably resulted from the downsizing and reengineering that had been taking place. As good people were let go, remaining employees worried about their future. As organizations reduced size, the work burden grew greater for the remaining employees. As resources became more constrained, managers were pushed to

achieve the same or greater outputs with less. As outputs became more critical to survival of the organization, it became more demanding of its managers. And as managers became more pressured, they became insensitive to the needs of their subordinates.

In the midst of all this, the reduction in the middle-management ranks meant that promotions were hard to come by because there were not as many positions available. Eventually, the private sector came to understand that there is a limit to being lean and mean that is not reflected in the balance sheet alone. Many companies have been working at redressing the damage done in the years of self-inflicted reorganization and many of the gurus of that era are out of work, but the sense of betrayal lingers and employees remain skeptical.

Our Army has been through much the same thing over the last eight or nine years, though the downsizing resulted from directives and budget reductions. It should not, therefore, be surprising at this stage to find that the same reactions have set in among our officers and noncommissioned officers.

The recent Army survey found that the major issues motivating members to leave the service were family separation, pay, quality of life, and job satisfaction, though the order differed slightly between officers and noncommissioned officers. Compare this to that national survey of a few years ago where the top four reasons for leaving a company were advancement potential, boredom/more challenge, inept management, and pay. It takes very little imagination to see the parallels, nor to understand the terrible price an organization pays when it reduces size beyond the point where responsibilities can reasonably be fulfilled. If you take into consideration that our Army members have always had more family separation than any private-sector employee, have always had less control over their earning power, and have always had much less ability to do something about their quality of life, it is no

wonder that there is a sense of unease in our ranks.

But maintaining an Army that is too small for its missions and not as well paid as the private sector of our society is not new. The 31 December 1899 *New York Times* carried a small article noting that the Democratic Senator from Missouri opposed a Republican plan to raise the regular army strength from 26,000 to 65,000 because, with some slight adjustments for seacoast fortifications, the 26,000 would be “all this country will need after the present conditions in the Philippines have been overcome.” And pay has always been an issue. In the late 1800s, the Congress simply did not appropriate *any* pay for the Army for a period of time. So, the Army has had similar issues with American society for at least a century, but the sense of unease that is with us today seems not to have been present in the past. What makes the difference?

One difference now is that the mission of the Army is more ambiguous than ever before. That is partially due to the end of the Cold War, which was the last easily articulated threat to national security, and partially due to the number of administration-directed deployments whose relationship to core Army missions is not easily articulated. Fortunately and unfortunately, these deployments have not resulted in high costs in casualties or equipment — or at least not since Somalia. It is fortunate for the deployed Army members, but it is unfortunate because it enables the deployments to continue without much public notice or discussion. In the absence of full public discussion on the national security rationale for these deployments, it becomes very difficult to relate them to the Army’s traditional core missions.

In order to feel pride in performance, most Army members need to feel that they are doing something important that is related to what they have been trained to do and what they joined up for. While you can train them to do

“Take, for instance, the omnipresent e-mail... The recipient gets the message instantly, though the responsibility for getting the word out has subtly changed from the sender to the recipient who must open his e-mail — but the message no longer conveys the angry voice of a boss, the frustrated gesture of a subordinate, the compassionate look of a colleague, or the friendly pat of reassurance, all of which often deliver the message more effectively than the most eloquent e-mail.”

many different tasks, you can't legislate how they perceive the difference between the assigned task and what they signed up to do. For them to believe that an activity is worthwhile, they must see some significant mission-related reason for the family separation, high operational tempo, and general discomfort incurred. You cannot use the Army for what many perceive to be repetitive whimsical deployments, not clearly related to core missions, and expect the ranks to feel good about it.

The traditional senior leadership role of trying to rationalize the burden simply emphasizes the different perspectives under these circumstances and leads to the allegation that they are out of touch with the organization. No amount of thanks for a job well done, or preaching about the importance of a mission, will convince soldiers that they are involved in something significant if the issue is not generally accepted as one that they signed on to perform. Desert Storm felt significant; nothing since then has quite made the grade with soldiers despite all the talk. Desert Storm was about what armies do.

That doesn't mean that our Army has not turned in a fine performance in these nontraditional missions; it does mean, however, that it has been a fine performance that a majority may not believe they should be doing. Overcoming that is going to require some inspired leadership, not just talk about missions other than war. Unfortunately, the most difficult part of that inspired leadership may require doing the politically unpopular: educating society on the trade-offs involved in multiple doubtful deployments versus current resources so that all the costs of the choices are clear to both our civilian leadership and their constituents. The effort, alone, would dispel some current perceptions.

The problem of “warriors” leaving the Army is also not new. If you look at the “warriors” in the Civil War, you find that many of them had left the Army only to come back in when the conflict started. It is hard to be a “warrior”

when there is no need because “warriors” don't like to waste training time on activities they perceive to be marginal to their mission, and they don't take kindly to the kind of careerist who is willing to sacrifice risk-taking in training and thought in order to make it appear that all is well with the world during their “watch,” which is endemic among senior managers in the private sector of society as well.

If you look at one of the managerial-style constructs popular in society today — the one that uses quadrants labeled “analytical,” “driver,” “amiable,” and “expressive” — it appears that the Army has always wanted its small unit leaders to be “drivers” (high risk taker, results-oriented, task-oriented), but its senior leaders to be “analytical” (always wants more information, hates to be wrong). Extended periods of peace aggravate that divide because the “drivers” who want to realistically prepare for war and the “analytical” types want to be sure they don't make a mistake — and most peacetime goals will always appear to be artificial when compared to taking a hill. It is simply harder to quantify success in the military in peacetime, so careerists focus on “zero defects” instead of maximum effectiveness.

Warriors have always left the service during long periods of peace, and if they stayed, their advancement was slow. Many of our World War II leaders would have retired as colonels had it not been for that conflict. My generation of soldiers (after Korea and during the Cold War and Vietnam) were more fortunate than many because most of our senior leaders had made their reputations in World War II or Korea, when “warrior spirit” counted, and had that momentum to carry them up through the ranks in the ensuing periods of “peace” — though what with the Cold War and Vietnam, there was never quite the intolerance for these “drivers” that may be prevalent now.

The challenge then is to make room for the “warriors” when a careerist's instincts are to eliminate the risks of having such stormy petrels around to

explain. That takes a lot of security in who you are and where you're going — and a stronger interest in what is right for the organization than what is right for advancement in that organization, which are hard qualities to legislate given the human instinct for survival and the natural competitiveness of many Army members. We will also have to do better in this respect than our private sector counterparts, with whom being a “team player” has become the major qualification for success in big organizations.

There is an added dimension to this scenario that comes from our society's fascination with high technology and its current tendency to believe optimum effectiveness comes from functional specialization. Technology has provided the ability to retrieve and sort endless amounts of data, and the natural extension of that is that we sometimes have trouble differentiating between data and useful information. Simply because the capability exists, society seems to be impelled to use it. We must resist that societal trend because it may be fatal to Army operations. My memories of trying to move a tank company forward while buttoned up make me wonder how much digitization I could have digested — and reading about trying to do the same thing these days with “auto-masking” in effect makes me think that not much has changed.

Technology and functionality also tend to distort what is important and what is not. A recent article in *ARMY Magazine* lauded the advent of the new Strategic Plans and Policy specialty. While the new specialty appears to be simply a refinement of the old Operations, Plans, and Training specialty, the authors tried unsuccessfully to make the case that this new specialty would provide a unique advantage for the Army of the future. After a historical review of past great military strategists (which actually showed rather convincingly that the great strategists were really the result of personality and place rather than any training model or specialty track) the authors asserted

that the new specialty would release the selected officers “from the needless burden of becoming tactical and operational masters en route to becoming strategists.”

Apparently they saw nothing wrong in asserting that an officer could become a strategist without mastering the foundations — and neither did the readers. More than six months after the appearance of the assertion, I have read only one criticism — in another professional journal and from another retired officer. What’s wrong with this picture? Have we become so inured to unrealistic concepts that nobody objects to two academics demeaning the core skills of a successful Army leader? Does that mean that Courtney Massengale has become the hero of Myrer’s *Once an Eagle* to this new generation of readers? Or are our readers just too busy and too tired to care? Intellectual apathy is not normally the hallmark of a healthy organization in our society.

Finally, with regard to technology in all its wonder, it would be well to remember that it is a tool, albeit a very powerful tool, for humans. It is not a substitute for initiative or intelligence, and it requires a deal more sophistication to use it properly than most folks seem to realize. Take, for instance, the omnipresent e-mail. It is a quick and efficient means of communication, but is it effective or is it “efficiently deceptive”?

The recipient gets the message instantly, though the responsibility for getting the word out has subtly changed from the sender to the recipient who must open his e-mail — but the message no longer conveys the angry voice of a boss, the frustrated gesture of a subordinate, the compassionate look of a colleague, or the friendly pat of reassurance, all of which often deliver the message more effectively than the most eloquent e-mail. Senior leaders need to consider that aspect lest they inadvertently distance themselves even more from those they lead in ways they have never even thought about. And make no mistake: this issue is not, as I recently read, about learning to use new technology; it is about being sensitive to the effect of new technology. The private sector of society is just now starting to understand these complications, but we’re the ones whose business is supposed to be leadership.

Current high technology is the latest tool, but probably not the last new development. And even if it is, we are in a profession that may require us to at-

tempt what technology tells us will not work. A wise professor at the U.S. Military Academy once responded to a question about the utility of teaching literature to future Army officers by pointing out that the purpose was to develop their imagination and creativity so that they might be able to find a solution on some future battlefield when the computer — and everything rational — told them that they could not hold. After all, technology or not, smart munitions or not, isn’t that what our profession is about?

There is not much that we can do about decreasing budgets, frittering away scarce resources on doubtful missions, or reduced strengths, other than to make an honest case for what is right and what is needed in the appropriate public forum. There is much that we can do to avoid the pitfalls that the private sector of society has encountered in its dash to downsize and reengineer and employ technology. Technology was initially touted as being a way to reduce personnel needs, but it has never produced any real personnel savings. It has merely changed the skills needed without reducing the numbers. A case may be made for the private sector that the end result is improved output despite the absence of savings in personnel costs, but that would be a dangerous pattern for an army to try to replicate since its output is overwhelming force at the needed place at the needed time.

Society in general today is mesmerized by high technology and prosperity and early retirement with a minimum of effort. The temptation to clone an Army with those qualities is great, and the possibility of totally avoiding them really remote. It may be that it is a time to be reinforcing the tried and true Army leadership principles, while remaining cognizant of what is going on in society at large — and adopting only that which really fits those principles. Increasingly, that society is one that has no familiarity with the realities of Army service; that needs to be continuously educated in terms that they can understand about what we do and what our limits are. That does not mean, however, that we need to become like them in ways that may counter our effectiveness when it will be most needed. Reliance on technology and politically easy solutions may earn you stock options, but it may not make you successful on some future battlefield.

Finally, it is apparently not fun to be in the Army these days. That is what you read and what you hear. All of the

issues discussed to this point would make it reasonable to accept that perception as fact. I’m not sure that many of us would characterize our own periods of Army service as “fun,” but I am very sure that there were a lot of very satisfying high points along the way that seem to be missing today. And, I do think that there was more of a sense of making a real contribution to something really big in other years — a sense that your unit might be the only available force for your country at a critical moment in a critical place and that you had better be ready for the eventuality, no matter how remote it might appear.

One of my bosses in a pretty routine staff assignment once remarked that what kept his combat arms staff officers going was that they all had white horses tethered out in the hall in case the need arose for them to gallop off. As absurd as that may sound for a digitized army, maybe we need to make sure that there is still a place for those horses as we start the 21st century.

COL Michael D. Mahler was commissioned in armor from the U.S. Military Academy in 1958. He commanded armored cavalry and tank units in the U.S. and Europe before returning to the U.S. Military Academy as an instructor and assistant professor of English. Subsequently, he served in Vietnam as the brigade adjutant, 1st Brigade, 1st ID, and as the executive officer, 3d Sqdn, 5th Cav, 9th ID. He commanded the 3d Sqdn, 12th Cav, 3d AD for two years and served as the deputy chief of staff for personnel and administration for the First U.S. Army at Fort George G. Meade. He is a graduate of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College and the Industrial College of the Armed Forces. After leaving the service, Colonel Mahler joined an architectural engineering firm in Chicago, Illinois, where he was the vice president for human resources and services for 10 years. He currently writes and is a lecturer in management at Montana State University’s College of Business. He is the author of *Ringed in Steel — Armored Cavalry, Vietnam 1967-1968*.