Reforming the Ranks
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The Pentagon welcomes Information-Age technology into its weapons. But it is saddled with an outmoded Industrial-Age scheme for managing the careers and promotions of its officers and troops.

In a three-ring circus, sometimes the most interesting act is the sideshow. As Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld tries to tame the lions in the center ring that is his strategic review, Congress and the press have devoted most of their attention to high-priced, high-profile, high-technology weapons and to the sheer size of the military force. Although the soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines who will actually wield those weapons and fill out those ranks do take first place on most priority lists in the defense community, discussion of personnel issues often amounts to little more than the slogan, "Give them more money," and then moves on.

But combat troops are not a commodity. The military's problems in recruiting people, retaining them, and making the best use of their talents will not be solved by better pay and benefits alone, as welcome as the extra money may be. The future "transformed" military force that Rumsfeld envisions will not be manned by the same kind of people as those in uniform today, nor can that future force be managed the same way it is today. "The people element is probably the most critical," said Rep. Mac Thornberry, a reform-minded Texas Republican on the House Armed Services Committee. "That means we have to have better pay and benefits-but it means a lot more than that." That's why Thornberry and other thoughtful observers took note when Rumsfeld himself recently called into question two half-century-old mainstays of the military personnel system: the policy of moving individuals rapidly between jobs in often unrelated fields; and the "up-or-out" rule, enshrined in federal law, that essentially fires anyone not promoted at a certain pace. Both practices, said Rumsfeld, may cost the military its most talented people.

Fixing these problems may seem to be a simple question of efficient human resource management. But it is not. The policies that move people up or out and from job to job within the military affect every aspect of the force, including the morale of spouses and children who have to pick up and move cross-country every couple of years; the teamwork and cohesion of military units; and the ability of commanders to field sophisticated new weapons quickly and well. In many ways, the most crucial question for the Pentagon is not how many troops to field, or how to equip them, but what kinds of people these troops should be. For historical experience shows that neither greater numbers nor better weapons necessarily win wars. It is the most skilled, most motivated troops who prevail.

Consider an obscure patch of Iraqi desert best known by the military map notation 73 Easting. On February 26, 1991, three units of the U.S. Army's Second Armored Cavalry Regiment–numbering just several hundred men–suddenly encountered amid the dust and smoke a dug-in brigade of Saddam Hussein's Republican Guard–some several thousand men. Within hours, the vastly outnumbered Americans had shattered the Iraqi brigade. U.S. casualties came to only one dead and four wounded.

The Second Armored Cavalry won by throwing out the rulebook. Rather than stand back and hammer the Iraqis with its superior long-range weapons, one of the cavalry's units, Eagle Troop (which lost no men at all), charged into the teeth of the enemy's short-range guns. In a relentless but well-coordinated frontal assault, Eagle Troop audaciously attacked with its tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles, ultimately driving right through the Iraqis and giving them no time to regroup. "The way we fought negated most of our technological advantages" but resulted in victory, recalled John Hillen, an Army lieutenant in the battle and later a consultant to George W. Bush's presidential campaign. "If we had switched sets of equipment, we would [still] have beaten the Iraqis," Hillen said. Neither numbers nor weapons won that fight, he said. It was the skill and training of U.S. troops.

The irony, said Hillen, is that the Second Armored Cavalry kept those skilled troops trained and together in spite of military policy, not because of it. Under normal conditions, there are always individuals transferring in and out of combat units. The six-month Gulf War buildup, however, gave U.S. forces in the desert a rare chance to stabilize and train intensely as a team. Yet even in this case, some individuals, even commanders, were actually replaced on the eve of the offensive because their prescribed time in a particular job was up. "We spent huge amounts of time trying to preserve the coherence of our crews," Hillen said. "We probably broke a lot of Army regulations."

And when peace returned, so did the bureaucracy. Of eight promising young lieutenants in Hillen's unit–all of whom won Bronze Stars and Silver Stars–only half stayed in uniform. Hillen himself won a Fulbright scholarship to Oxford and asked the Army for a sabbatical to study there. Instead, it ordered him to report to a supply job to "count socks and tires." So he quit the Army. Hillen's actions might seem unsoldierly and selfish–except that the Army had already scheduled him to attend a civilian graduate school. He was just supposed to do it a few years later in his career, and the personnel bureaucracy simply could not adjust its schedules to accommodate his opportunity at Oxford. Now he runs an electronic stock exchange in New York City.

Hillen is not alone. More than 2,600 Army captains and lieutenants quit last year; the Air Force and Navy are hemorrhaging pilots to the commercial airlines; and even the Marines, whose retention and esprit de corps usually are the highest among the services, are struggling to retain their best members. Conventional wisdom points to the still-strong civilian economy as the lure for troops to leave the services. But people motivated by money generally don't join the military in the first place. And decades of official exit surveys show that low job satisfaction, not poor pay, is the No. 1 reason people quit the ranks. "People I meet now do want to serve their nation," said Army Maj. Donald Vandergriff, a Reserve Officer Training Corps instructor at Georgetown University and a self-educated personnel reformer. "The myth that this generation doesn't want to do that is horse crap." What they do lack, he said, is their elders' tolerance for red tape.

Cutting that tape will be as difficult as anything Secretary Rumsfeld tackles as he attempts to remake the military. Many ambitious reform efforts of the past have failed. In the 1980s, the Army tried to keep groups of several hundred young soldiers together through boot camp and their first four-year enlistment. Units made up of these "cohorts" often performed brilliantly in combat exercises. But a personnel bureaucracy accustomed to moving individuals couldn't digest the groups. New soldiers who were transferred into the cohorts to replace dropouts remained outsiders; promising soldiers from a cohort

could not be transferred out to undergo special training. And because cohort officers still moved in and out of the unit, the soldiers were often unable to bond with their leaders.

"I did the last study on Army cohorts and made the recommendation to kill it," recalled retired Army Lt. Gen. Ted Stroup, a former personnel officer now at the Association of the United States Army. "A great idea, but not supportable.... The system wasn't set up properly." The bureaucracy could not manage one part of the Army in cohorts and the rest as individuals, said Stroup, and "to take the whole Army to the cohesion concept would [have required] a major restructuring" just when the military was in the throes of the post-Cold War downsizing. So he recommended that it be shelved.

Rumsfeld's reforms will fare no better if they attempt to fix part of the personnel system without addressing the whole. Even well-regarded reforms can create unintended consequences if policy makers have not looked at the broader implications. For example, Congress's last major effort at reforming the military's command structure, the landmark 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act, requires that any aspiring general or admiral has to have a specified amount of experience in a "joint" job–a job in which he works with, or commands, troops from a different service–an Air Force general in charge of Navy missile submarines, for example. But that well-intended requirement took the officer away from time he could have spent with his own troops.

The lesson of the cohort program and Goldwater-Nichols is not that reform is impossible. It is that any new system must be designed carefully and flexibly to solve today's problems without creating more. And any change must take into account not just the problem at hand, but also the entire interlocking complexity of the personnel system.

Turn, Turn, Turn

John Tillson has come a long way since his service in Vietnam. The former Army officer who served in the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment now studies military manpower management in the air-conditioned offices of the Pentagon-funded Institute for Defense Analyses. But his concerns today remain much the same as they were in Southeast Asia 30 years ago. In Vietnam, the average soldier's tour in a unit was just 12 months–six for officers. "Too many times, I had replacements come in the evening with the resupply chopper, and I dusted them off the next morning as casualties," he recalled. "They were brand-new. We never had time to really integrate them into the unit; they would end up doing something stupid." Nor was it only his men who came and went: "Just as I was getting comfortable, thinking that I was able to do a reasonable job commanding the troops, it was my turn to pass it on to somebody else"–despite studies showing that the longer an officer stayed in command, the lower the casualty rate in his unit.

The military has come a long way since Vietnam, as well. Even in some hardship posts such as Korea, where one-year tours remain the norm for troops, commanding officers must stay two years. The law requires an even longer stay for those in certain specialized jobs, such as weapons-buying. Eighteen to 24 months in a job is the norm all four services strive for, and a year is the minimum. That goal is much better than six months. But is it long enough?

Rumsfeld doubts it. "No company would put people in for 12 months, 13, 14 months, then jerk them around, send them to another job," he said in a recent interview with Army Times. Harvard Business School professor David Garvin agrees: "If you

move people every one or two years, it's much too frequent. [In business practice], three to five years is about right."

The question isn't simply how much time a person spends in one office or another, but what kind of work is done in that office–or ship, or plane, or airborne brigade. The Navy, for example, trying to avoid spreading its officers too thinly across too many fields, gives each officer only two tracks, akin to a major and a minor in college. All of an officer's at-sea assignments would be spent in one area, flying airplanes, for example, and all of his or her shore duty would be in another–say, accounting. But mastering two such complex and unrelated fields can be a stretch, especially when each one is a different world unto itself, and a single specialty can demand very diverse talents. An officer whose at-sea "specialization" is surface ships, for example, might find himself leading the engine crew for a destroyer one tour and overseeing the launch team for cruise missiles the next–exercising two very different sets of skills.

The other services have similar but less-formal alternations. The Air Force and Marines may move one person across multiple fields. By contrast, the Army has recently abandoned dual-tracking and ordered midcareer officers to specialize in one field–but the more-junior officers, such as John Hillen, must still switch from a combat job, for example, to a supply job to a staff job before they can specialize.

The admirable intention is to build a bench of generalists able to lead any military organization, thus tying the disparate elements of the armed services into a common culture. But sometimes, general-management skills are not all it takes to understand, let alone oversee, specialized technical work. Neil Byrne is a retired Navy captain and an expert on computer simulations of sea combat. He said he saw too many instances where "some poor guy whom they just got off the bridge of his submarine, cruiser, or air squadron" is suddenly put in charge of something he doesn't know much about, such as computer war games. "There may be a uniform who is titularly in charge," Byrne said, but the officer knows so little about the specialty that the man's own subordinates usually end up using him "as a ventriloquist's dummy."

The other problem with bringing up a corps of generalists is that few officers have enough time to practice the thing that defines their role in the military: commanding combat troops. Many officers don't even get to serve a full two years commanding a combat unit. And for many officers, those two-year tours are islands in a sea of staff work. "You really have to work hard, over and over again, to be a good commanding officer," said retired Navy Capt. Larry Seaquist, whose commands included a battleship. "After I had done it four times, I was beginning to get the hang of this." But officers rarely get that many chances.

And today, as in Vietnam, it is not only the officers who come and go. Across all ranks, according to Seaquist, "we would average about 50 percent of the crew a year being new." An Army division averages 100 percent turnover every 13 and a half months.

High turnover also hurts unit cohesion. Skills reside not just in individuals but in teams as well. In the military, doing the exact same job but with a totally different group of people isn't really doing the same job at all. Trusting in your comrades' capabilities, understanding their strengths and weaknesses, intuitively sensing what the other person will do next–abilities that are gained only by long hours training together–all these must be relearned when the team changes, even if the task itself does not. Even the

comfortable rhythm of a white-collar office slows down when a new receptionist doesn't know which calls the boss would like to take at once and which to dump politely into voice mail. But in combat, teamwork is literally a matter of life and death. That's what John Hillen's unit had going for it in the Gulf War, and what Tillson's troops did not in Vietnam.

Yet all four armed services build their personnel policies around the career of the individual, not the cohesion of the team. An emphasis on the individual may seem normal to modern-day Americans, but it is a huge departure from military campaigns throughout history. Roman soldiers spent 20 years in the same legion. A British regiment in the Victorian period recruited only from a given region of the country and kept its men, and most of its officers, together their entire careers. Even in the total wars of the 20th century, with huge armies facing constant turnover because of heavy losses, the British and the Germans made every effort to train new troops in batches that would stay together. Such a group then joined the same front-line unit, filling in around a cadre of surviving veterans who had served side by side in battle after battle. Armies in ancient times found it far easier to achieve cohesion than do modern armies, which have to overcome vast size, technological complexity, and faster turnover in personnel. But cohesion is not unachievable.

Perhaps the best balance between ancient unity and modern flexibility is found in the Marine Corps. After an intense tour at sea, a Marine unit comes ashore and partially dissolves. "You lose about one-third [of your personnel], one-third stay where they're at, and one-third stay but change assignments," said Col. Gordon Bourgeois of the Corps's personnel office. The gaps are filled by experienced Marines who transfer in as individuals and by 100-man packets of recruits who all just went through boot camp together and who will mostly stay together for four years (in a looser version of the Army's cohorts). Since last year, new lieutenants have also been assigned in groups that trained together. After about six months, with the infusion of personnel largely complete, the unit stabilizes and begins a year of increasingly intensive training to prepare for its next six-month tour at sea. The Navy has a similar cycle.

In the past two years, the Air Force has implemented a similar cycle of its own, organizing its squadrons into 10 "Air Expeditionary Forces," which are rotated so that two are always ready to deploy quickly. For decades, reformers have repeatedly suggested similar systems for the Army–without success. The reason, the Army says, is its different mission. Under the Marines' readiness cycle, for every Marine unit at sea, two are in training, and a third is just back from tour and is standing down. And that's OK for a service whose role is as a quick-strike, crisis-intervention force. But the Army, with its unique mission to fight and win large-scale land wars, says it can't afford to have that many units in a state of unreadiness. Said the Army's deputy chief of staff for personnel, Lt. Gen. Timothy Maude: "The standard that's been set for us is, all of our divisions are always ready."

But Army Col. Douglas MacGregor, who in his landmark book, Breaking the Phalanx, outlined a new rotation cycle for the Army, says that Maude's argument "presupposes you're ever ready at all." In, fact, MacGregor says, the Army often is not ready to fight. "You've got thousands of people coming and going all the time," he said, so in a crisis, the Army must always scramble to put working teams together. For an example, recall the Apache helicopter task force in Kosovo, which took months to deploy

in 1999, was never used, and ended up losing the war's only U.S. dead, both of them in training accidents.

"Would it be ideal to have absolute stability in all formations all the time? Intuitively, heck yes," responded Maude. "[But] what we found impossible is to keep that crew together." Individuals must move on–to specialized schools, to elite training, or simply to assignments in different fields. Teams cannot be kept intact for long if their members must move from job to job, and specialty to specialty, every two years. And individuals must keep moving, as long as the military seeks to build a bench of leaders with broad expertise. That is the logic behind the system that channels military people from job to job–the system known as "up or out."

Up and Around, or Out

Military personnel experts sometimes sound like plumbers, as they talk about maintaining and releasing pressure on the various career tracks in each service. Mundane as such hydraulic metaphors may be, they do capture one essential aspect of the military personnel system: It flows. Troops sign up, move from job to job and rank to rank, then leave. Tinker with any part of that system, and the whole flow changes. Take Secretary Rumsfeld's desire to keep experienced senior officers for another tour of duty, waiving their mandated retirements. It sounds simple. But what about the people next in line for those jobs? And the people next in line to the ones next in line? When you keep even a few top people in place longer than scheduled, said one retired officer, "you clog the system instantaneously."

So when promising young captains quit and veteran generals must retire, personnel managers at the Pentagon do not see an unmitigated loss of talent, but an essential venting of the system. "Attrition is good," Maude said. "We don't need as many sergeants as we need privates, [or] as many colonels as we need lieutenants." Not everyone can move up in rank, so some must move out.

But "up or out" is only part of it. It's also "up and around." The rapid flow of talent out of the armed forces is intimately connected to the rapid flow from job to job within it. People must prove their ability to move sideways before they can move up. The higher an officer's rank, the more, and more-different, functions he must oversee: A Navy ensign may work only in the engine room, but the captain must command engineers, gunners, radar operators, the cooks in the galley, pay clerks, and on and on. So a military career cannot just be a straight rise to the top of one specialty, but must spiral upward through several related areas. The catch is that at no point in this spiral can anyone say, "I can serve best here," and stop, or even slow down significantly, because the current of people behind him must rush ahead on schedule. He must keep moving around and up, or move out.

Making the pressures of the flow even worse have been years of new policies and legislation that have laid on ever more requirements for tours of duty in command, in the staff, in headquarters, in the field, in schools, and in cross-service jobs mandated under Goldwater-Nichols. As a result, officers in particular must jump from job to job every two years, sometimes less, and then, at the peak of their profession, leave–assuming that "good attrition" has not already kicked them out for failing to earn promotion fast enough. Said Robert Goldich of the Congressional Research Service: "There are so many

things for the officer to do that it is virtually impossible to cram them into a military career of 22 or 23 years."

So why not slow the spiral down? Why not bring fewer people in at the bottom, kick fewer out at each step along the way, keep everyone a longer time in the same number of jobs, and just have longer careers? The short answer is, it's illegal. At least, it is for officers, who are the most pressed for time. A series of laws, starting in 1947 and most recently revised in the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act of 1980, codified how long an officer could remain at a certain rank before being fired or retired. The act also set maximum lengths for careers, and even established guidelines on what percentage of officers could be promoted from one rank to the next.

So why the laws? "We have the up-or-out [system] because at the start of World War II, [Army Chief of Staff] George Marshall discovered there was a lot of deadwood," said retired Brig. Gen. Howard Prince, who taught at West Point. "The reaction to that was, 'Never again.' " Promising officers such as Dwight D. Eisenhower had been stuck in the junior ranks for more than a decade; the top jobs were clogged with superannuated soldiers who lacked the stamina to work wartime hours in the Pentagon, let alone to lead men in battle. So after the war, Marshall and others persuaded Congress to impose an up-or-out system by law, and intertwined it with up-and-around. The intention was to prevent the arteriosclerosis of the prewar force. Instead, "up and around or out" would constantly refresh a pool of young, broadly qualified generalists. Any officer would be able to step into any role required when the next war came, be it replacing casualties or commanding whole new units.

But, skeptics say, that system rests on two outmoded assumptions about what that next war will require. The first is youth. As health care, diet, and exercise habits have improved, "people in fact stay vigorous for an additional five or 10 years," said Goldich. "There are an awful lot of people out there for whom being 55 or 56 or 60 isn't what it used to be." (Donald Rumsfeld, 68, is among them.) Yet the legal maximum length of careers remains unchanged.

The second assumption is about skill. It is hardly safe to assume that America will never again mobilize for mass warfare. But as both technology and missions become increasingly complex, the idea that a generalist officer, who spends only two years in this field and two in that, can step into any job as needed seems increasingly likely to produce not good soldiers, but dead ones. Said Gulf War veteran John Hillen: "This is not Pickett's charge, where, if one man falls, another man steps up to fill the line."

The Army, in fact, has increasingly recognized the need for specialists. Traditionally, like the Navy, it dual-tracked officers. "Before, we were having an infantryman also become an expert on Eastern European politics ... or human resource management ... or strategic communications," said Maude. Now, "instead of having everybody be a mile wide and an inch deep, we want people to be a mile deep."

So following a four-year transition to the new 21st-century Officer Personnel Management System (called OPMS-XXI), all midgrade officers have to have a single specialty: Logisticians will stick to logistics, infantry officers to combat units, public affairs officers to press desks, and so on. This specialization narrows the "up-and-around" spiral to let officers spend more time in each of fewer jobs, and it improves their skills without diminishing their chances of promotion.

But the new system still operates within the limits of the law, it still requires officers to display considerable breadth within a given field, and it does not apply to junior officers at all. Thus Mark Lewis, a former Army captain who left the service in 1999, was ordered from the elite, lightly equipped Airborne Rangers to the staff of a heavy mechanized unit with tanks. "It was frustrating," he said. "Had I stayed in light forces and airborne forces, I might still be wearing the uniform.... I suppose the perfect guy can learn both, [but] if you don't stick around, the Army gets nothing." When told of Lewis's story, Maude said he didn't know the details of the case but added: "If that kind of adaptability is not part of your comfort level, you ought not to be a soldier."

Where does the balance lie between specialized skill and general adaptability? It is an increasingly crucial question, as warfare becomes more complex, and as it requires both greater technical depth and the broad-based flexibility to integrate intersecting disciplines.

In the Air Force, the most high-tech and futuristic service, leaders are in fact increasingly worried that their force is overspecialized–with its members becoming technicians, not warriors. As ever-more skilled specialists, especially pilots, leave for civilian life, those who remain must spend ever-more time doing technical work, which leaves little time for those broadening "up-and-around" assignments. So the Air Force has set up an internal think tank on "Developing Aerospace Leaders" and has required all new officers to attend an "Aerospace Basic Course" to build a common foundation.

"We have a lot of people who have technical skills, [but] you have to have individuals who understand how the person next to them works and how the team works," said Lt. Gen. Donald Peterson, the Air Force's deputy chief of staff for personnel. "I grew up flying fighters, and I love it, and I miss it. [When] my boss told me I'd go down and be assistant chief of maintenance for our F-15 wing, I thought that was the end of my life. [But] later on ... I was a much better wing commander because I had had that opportunity."

But does everyone need to be a Lt. Gen. Peterson? "Not everybody is qualified for the top," said military author and retired Army Col. Ralph Peters. "They may be very, very good at a certain level. But they're not destined to be the general." So why force them?

Military thinkers such as Tillson, Vandergriff, and MacGregor speak of allowing multiple career paths: Not just the separate-but-equal specialties of the Army's Officer Personnel Management System, but rather fundamentally different kinds of careers, where a few generalists fast-track to the top, but most can stay in the midgrades as specialists in their chosen field. Such a system would require a fundamental redefinition of a successful military career–but today, fewer than 1 percent of officers make it to general, anyway. And allowing officers and senior enlisted personnel alike to stay in one job longer would allow them to stay with one unit longer, which would nurture not just skilled individuals but cohesive teams.

Implementing such a system would require new laws. It would also require a fundamental change in attitude. For more than 50 years, America's military personnel system has cycled individuals up, around, and out in order to make them as interchangeable as possible: human spare parts for an Industrial Age war machine. But the insight of the Information Age is that individuals can knit together into networks, whose strength lies not in standardizing their component parts but in tapping the rich

uniqueness of each one. The challenge for the military and for lawmakers alike is to create a system that not only nurtures specialized skills and cohesive units, but intertwines them into a greater whole.

"Today's military–and Rumsfeld has got this dead right–it's based on an Industrial Age mentality. It's Henry Ford's assembly line," Peters said. "[But] the great thing about America isn't that we're all the same.... We have to start looking at the different contributions different people can make."

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