

The "Right Stuff" Equals the "Right Role"

by

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The first advance [sic] I am going to give my successor is to watch the generals and to avoid feeling that just because they were military men their opinions on military matters were worth a damn. --John F. Kennedy

Lead, Follow, or get the hell out of the way! We as professional military officers must begin to stand up and vector the winds of change rather than sit back and sulk because we liked the old way better. The military is not the same as it was a few years ago, nor should it be. The world has changed and presents new challenges to us as a nation, and to us as a military. Never should we lose the faith of our nation because we refused or did not think it appropriate, at any level, to engage in the tradition of debate. The question for discussion becomes apparent: What is the proper role of the military officer in the national security policy process? I begin with an example.

In the fall 1993 edition of *Airpower Journal*, Colonel Ed Mann suggested that the US military is ill prepared for the changing focus of security policy toward humanitarian operations or combinations of diplomatic and military processes that are commonly called "peace efforts." His purpose was clear--to engage in debate over the issues that are critical to the men and women of the military at the "pointy-end" of the spear. As one thinks back to the recent events in Somalia, which placed our troops in an unacceptable position leading to loss of life, Mann's relationship of political/military objectives to military operations hits one square in the face. As so clearly stated by Jerome Murphy, "When you are up to your ass in alligators, it is difficult to remind yourself that your initial objective was to drain the swamp."

On the one hand, the traditional military role is to obey and carry out the orders of those appointed to positions of authority above them. Certainly, this authority includes the senior civilian leadership as mandated in the Constitution. On the other hand, the military officer, as a professional, has a responsibility to become articulate in the profession of arms. Is it then outside the role of the military officer to enter into the policy making process, as an articulate professional who best understands the application of the operational art? In reality, these two positions are not diometrically opposed. While military officers must continue to support the national policy making apparatus, they must also continue to engage in constructive debate. They are included as the most consummate professionals in the security policy making process, where military strategies are considered.

It may first appear an easy matter to simply engage in debate. However, there are appropriate avenues for debate that the military officer, who is not a member of the senior staff or a select member of an advisory staff to the Executive, can pursue. The traditional role of the military profession--duty, honor, public service, and career commitment, have in the past predisposed the

officer to nonpartisan alignments and limited the scope of his influence in the policy making process. Yet, the many unclear situations presented by changing world events would suggest that the role of the military officer is to give sound, honest military advice to politicians, no matter how unpalatable, so that risks can be assessed and informed decisions made. In the very least, as Clausewitz through Mann, and countless others have demanded: We must have clear objectives with a desired end state. Anything less is nothing more than a "policy in search of a problem." The ability of military officers to act as an "interest group" in the formulation of national security policy is based in part on the US's high respect for the professional specialist. That respect however, is not a constant. It must continually be groomed and nurtured through the persistent application of articulate debate and scholarly endeavors. Otherwise, we as an institution risk being held suspect, as evidenced by the opening quote, and losing the trusted relationship nurtured during the Gulf War.

A tradition in the military is to engage. However, the engagement discussed here is not one of engaging the enemy with overwhelming firepower. Rather, it is an engagement of the intellect, to continually refine our vector toward a mobile target--national security. This type of engagement requires a very special combination of tactical expertise and the ability to understand and critique current strategic and operational concepts. In addition, and perhaps most important of all, we need "forward thinking" and the ability to suggest innovative strategies toward the future.

The military officers who dare to engage, not only read military history and professional journals--they think, critique, and develop innovative ideas. Little good this does however, if they then fail to write about those ideas. Yes, dare I say it--military officers must be able to write to engage in serious debate. Yet, to be visionary, these writings do not necessarily need to be major research efforts. To the contrary, many times innovative ideas are simply reactions born out of critical thinking about better ways of doing things. The important point is to become "engaged" with issues which affect one's profession.

Offering advice is an essential role for the military officer in the national security policy making process. Tangentially to advisory groups, advice may be offered in the form of commentary presented in journals, newspapers, and periodicals. As part of the professional community which deals with national security, military officers should become familiar with not only the relevant issues, but also the respected forums for those issues. Then as they follow a particular issue or set of issues, they should offer commentary in the form of support, rebuttal, or alternative. The exchange of information, through that type of debate, presents an avenue, open to military officers, to express their ideas.

The written word offers additional benefits beyond the constructive advice given. Once the officer becomes involved in a set of debated issues, he/she tends to develop an acquired expertise that is recognized within the professional community. Needless to say, the direct benefits to the officer are those related to career advancement within the area of expertise as well as opportunities to expand into areas where several fields overlap. More importantly, there is a benefit to the profession as the officer advances to a higher level of authority, which lends increasing credibility to the military's role in the policy process.

In the final analysis, a military officer's role in the policy process is one that must be cultivated and groomed throughout the officer's career. It begins with a solid foundation in the military tradition and continues with the education of the young officer in the operational art and science of warfare. Additionally, the officer must have a firm foundation of military history as well as political-military relationships. As the officer continues to increase in competence, debate must become the crucible where the officer begins to formulate and test ideas, concepts, and positions. It is that continuing process that creates military officers competent and articulate enough to present themselves as national military advisors. For...

"The nation that will insist on drawing a broad line of demarcation between the fighting man and the thinking man is liable to find its fighting done by fools and its thinking done by cowards." -- Sir William Butler