

Education, Experience and Training: Responsibilities to the Army as a Profession

By **LTG James M. Dubik**
U.S. Army retired

Discussions concerning the defense budget cuts and associated force structure and modernization decisions are already taking up much of the Army's horizon. These are important subjects; they represent decisions that will affect the Army for the coming decade and beyond. The Army is facing another budget decision, however, one that is much more fundamental than the others: how to address Army leader education, experience and training.

During the last 10 years of war, the Army decided to alter its standard "select, train, and promote" model. The near-absolute pre-9/11 requirement for an officer or an NCO to attend professional-development school before promotion to the next rank was

suspended. War requirements precluded, the argument ran, following the pre-war norm. The Army also decided to narrow leader assignments. Officers were kept in command or other essential positions for extended periods in order to preserve unit cohesion in preparation for and conduct of a rotation into a war theater. The same standard applied to NCOs. Frequent rotations resulted in many leaders, officers and sergeants having sequential troop assignments, leaving little time for education or for broadening assignments. Finally, the Army focused its training narrowly on a "road to war" preparation for deployment, again entirely necessarily.

The powerful argument to suspend professional education, narrow assignments and focus training reflected the realities of war. The result: increased unit cohesion and stability in

a unit's set of leaders, and increased trust and competency that follow from that cohesion, stability and the focused road to war training programs. These conditions were huge combat multipliers, and the tactical performances of Army units and Army leadership were indicative of the positive results of this cohesion-stability-focused decision. There were negative consequences as well, however.

The Army now has a set of lieutenant colonels, colonels and senior NCOs—in both the active and reserve components—who are less than fully prepared for senior leadership. That these leaders are immensely qualified in combat leadership is unquestionable, and the importance of this qualification cannot be overrated. Fighting experience and combat leadership provide the foundation for all senior leadership—officer and NCO.

The skill set demanded of Army senior leadership, however, is greater than combat leadership. The Army expects its senior leaders to understand more than tactics, regardless of how complex those tactics may be. Colonels run large portions of the Army; lieutenant colonels and colonels are the pool of potential general officers. To run the Army and provide senior executive leadership, lieutenant colonels, colonels and generals—regardless of component—need experience in major headquarters and an education in how the Army runs; how the Army fits into the larger set of national security institutions; how leadership requirements change from the tactical, through the operational, to the strategic levels; and how, as an institution, the Army contributes at the community and national levels in a civil-military environment. Similarly, NCOs without varied experiences and appropriate professional education are also handicapped relative to the demands of senior leadership. Sergeants major and command sergeants major with very narrow developmental and educational experiences simply cannot serve at senior levels as effectively as these positions demand.

Simply put, the Army's future rests not just on the backs of senior leaders and their fighting ability but also, and perhaps more important, on their intellect and the variety of their experiences. Ten years of war have necessarily overdeveloped one aspect of the Army's corporate brain and experience base, while other aspects were underdeveloped. This begs the question: How will the Army address this developmental challenge, especially in this period of reduced budgets?

The fact remains that not much can be done about missed assignment experiences. The Army must do its best to assign officers and NCOs to positions that widen their leadership experience base by means of professional education and training, which offer more options.

Some people have suggested that we give "constructive credit" to those leaders who have missed developmen-

tal schooling. Bureaucratically, and probably from a budgetary perspective, constructive credit makes sense, but that is the easy solution. The personnel system can plug in the proper codes, which won't cost the Army much, and the institution can then return to "normal" more quickly. As a profession, however, the Army would be making a big mistake if it took this approach.

The problem is a complex one. The officer problem differs from the enlisted, and the problem in the active

component differs from that in the reserve components. Perhaps some constructive credit is necessary, but to wipe the slate completely clean by policy declaration seems more than inappropriate; it seems wrong. Not only will the solution create wide disparities—education and experience gaps—among the components of the Army, but it also will diminish the Army as a profession.

Professions develop and promulgate expert knowledge. Professions set and enforce standards of leader-

ship expertise in the effective and ethical application of that expert knowledge, and professions ensure that such knowledge and expertise—the basis of trust between a profession and its clients—are transferred to each generation of professionals. American political leaders and citizens—the military profession's clients—trust the military to provide common defense and competent, ethical leadership to citizens who become soldiers, which means that the profession's expert knowledge includes more than combat leadership. To acknowledge underdeveloped areas of expert knowledge and its application and then ignore these areas by giving constructive credit to too wide a population not only produces less than proficient leadership but also breaches professional faith.

The Army needs fully experienced and educated leaders. The Army's immediate future requires leaders with a full set of competencies—leading, developing and achieving—at the direct, organizational and strategic levels. The immediate future also requires that

Army leaders be experts in the full range of leader behaviors—influencing, operating and improving—also at these levels. Finally, the immediate future needs leaders of character, presence and intellect. Leadership abilities in all three of the foregoing categories result from varied experiences, progressive education and broadly focused training. Constructive credit for missed professional education will not help generate these abilities; instead, it will denote their absence.

The Army's long-term future as a profession requires close attention to the development and transfer of expert knowledge and its application. The profession's jurisdiction over knowledge, transfer and application has been eroding for at least 20 years and has accelerated in the last 10.

For the past 20 years, the availability of information has given nonprofessionals access to the body of professional knowledge that was once the sole jurisdiction of the profession. This form of erosion is a natural consequence of information technologies,

and it will not be reversed. The trend puts a greater demand on the profession with respect to the understanding of the complete body of professional knowledge as well as its competent and ethical application.

This same period has seen a second form of erosion in a slowly shifting jurisdiction for the development and transfer of expert knowledge from uniformed Army officers and NCOs to civilians and retired military leaders. This shift has changed the cadre responsible for doctrine development and teaching in Army schools. While understandable, necessary and useful from some perspectives, the cumulative effect of this trend represents a significant change in critical conceptual and educational elements of the Army's professional life.

Giving constructive credit carte blanche for missed professional education would cause erosion of a third sort. Such a policy would communicate to Army leaders that progressive education is not really essential in the military profession and that what a leader learned in combat is all that is necessary. Neither reflects reality, and both ignore the fact that the Army's future lies with a set of leaders—officers and NCOs, active and reserve components—who are broadly educated and widely experienced.

Training is the other core method by which the military profession transfers expert knowledge and its application. This method of transfer has also eroded in the Army during 10 years of narrow focus on application in one primary form of war and an overly centralized road to war approach to prepare units for deployment. Recognizing this focus and approach as understandable and necessary does not mean one cannot also recognize both as erosive. Neither the focus nor the approach is healthy for the profession over the long run.

While budget cuts, reduced force structure and end strength, and loss of modernization funding may be the headline items requiring urgent attention, attending to the health of the Army as a profession—that is, struc-

turing a suitable, nuanced, multifaceted approach to the education and experience gap and redressing Army training—may well be much more critical. The Army will not be able to have a one-size-fits-all policy; the problem is too complex. Army leaders will have to use constructive credit as part of whatever set of solutions it designs, but such use must be the exception, not the norm. Finally, the Army will have to find new ways to educate, ways that complement its current set of resident, nonresident and mobile training team approaches as well as create new curricula for its courses. All crises have hidden opportunities for innovation.

The Army is lucky to have the set of senior leaders—civilian and military—it has now. As a set and as individuals, all have spoken about the Army’s future being in its soldiers and leaders, about the importance of professional education and broad experience, and about resetting Army training. One of the difficulties will be



U.S. Army/Jonathan Koester

MSG Jason Boorn addresses a class at the Electronic Warfare School at Fort Sill, Okla. The Center for Army Leadership seeks input from NCOs on the positives and negatives of Army culture and leadership.

translating these acknowledged requirements into a set of policies that match the complexity of the problem and are actionable in the world of reduced budgets. Another will be that the onus of conceiving, developing and implementing the solutions to this complex problem will fall on some of those

whose education and experience have been stunted for the past decade. □

LTG James M. Dubik, USA Ret., is a former commander of Multi-National Security Transition Command-Iraq and a senior fellow of AUSA's Institute of Land Warfare.