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Distilling the Demographic Dividend: Retaining U.S. Army Officer Talent for the 40-year Career?

Kevin D. Stringer

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AN INSTITUTE OF LAND WARFARE PAPER

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by Kevin D. Stringer

Lieutenant Colonel Kevin D. Stringer, U.S. Army Reserve, is the Associate Academic Director and Chair, School of Business and Management at Webster University, Geneva Campus. A 1987 distinguished graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, he earned a Ph.D. from the University of Zurich and an M.A. from Boston University. Dr. Stringer is also a graduate of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. He has served in leadership and staff assignments in the 8th Infantry Division, the Southern European Task Force, European Command and Special Operations Command Africa. A former Department of State Foreign Service officer, he authored the books *Military Organizations for Homeland Defense and Smaller-Scale Contingencies* (Praeger Security International, 2006) and *Swiss-Made Heroes: Profiles in Military Leadership* (Hellgate, 2012). He won first place in the 2009 General William E. DePuy Writing Competition with his essay "Educating the Strategic Corporal: A Paradigm Shift." He teaches international affairs at institutions in Switzerland, Estonia and the Ukraine and is a life member of the Reserve Officers Association.

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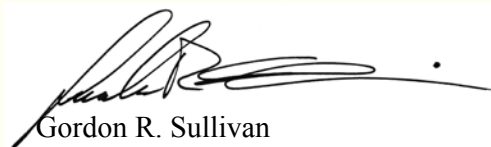
Foreword

Given the complexity of the strategic environment for future military operations, the necessity to retain hard-won officer expertise and knowledge and the imperative to address the demographic shift to an aging population, says this author, the U.S. Army must evaluate how to keep and develop selected senior field-grade officers for a 40-year career horizon.

While numerous reports focus on the retention of junior officers, in the author's view the Army should be stanching the tide of retirements of senior officers, who depart just when they offer the most value to the organization.

This paper explores the time, experience and energy required to develop the knowledge and expertise of officers to perform effectively in complex operations. It then highlights how the current military personnel system actually encourages retirements at the 20-year mark, just when officers are reaching their experiential and knowledge peaks.

In further support of his premise the author offers four historical vignettes of military leaders who made tremendous contributions in advanced age at all levels of warfare. In effect, he says, the Army is foregoing its talent dividend after years of investment. Concluding policy recommendations offer a path to ameliorate this situation.



Gordon R. Sullivan
General, U.S. Army Retired
President, Association of the United States Army

20 June 2012

Distilling the Demographic Dividend: Retaining U.S. Army Officer Talent for the 40-year Career?

Introduction

Given the increasing complexity of the strategic environment for future military operations, the necessity to retain hard-won officer expertise and knowledge and the imperative to address the demographic shift to an aging but active population, the U.S. Army must evaluate how to keep and develop selected senior field-grade officers for a 40-year career horizon. Senior talent for the purpose of this paper is defined as officers in the ranks of major, lieutenant colonel and colonel with 20 or more years of service.

While a number of articles have focused on the outflow or retention of junior officers, more critical to the Army is stanching the tide of retirements of senior officers, who depart just when they offer the most value to the organization.¹ In this vein, the paper first explores the time, experience and energy required to develop the knowledge and expertise of officers to perform effectively in complex joint, combined and interagency operations. It then shows how—with the population aging but having longer, healthier lifespans—progressive organizations seek to retain their valuable senior leaders and workers. It then highlights how the current military personnel system encourages officer retirements at the 20-year mark, when officers are reaching their experiential and knowledge peaks. The result is that the Army loses its senior talent just at the phase of highest significance and payback for the organization. In effect, the Army is foregoing its talent dividend after years of investment.

The paper then offers four historical vignettes of military leaders who made high-level contributions in advanced age at the strategic, operational and tactical levels of warfare. Reflecting on the current human resource system, with its strict focus on “up or out” promotions and the possibility of 20-year retirements, this paper shows that under the current U.S. system, these selected warriors would have retired long before they could make their noteworthy contributions. The paper concludes with policy recommendations that would enable the Army to better retain, develop and tap its officer corps well beyond the current 20-year mark—for a potential 40-year career of service.

Retaining Knowledge and Complex Expertise While Confronting Demographic Trends

Developing the set of skills necessary to manage violence in the nation’s service is a lifelong process that begins when an officer receives his commission and continues throughout a career. Mastering the art and science of warfighting encompasses every aspect of the

human experience—physical, intellectual and moral. As an officer rises in rank, the challenges become unique and more complex, and creative intelligence plays an increasingly critical role for success.² Officers at all ranks will gradually confront many more ill-structured problems, confounded by incomplete information, which place a premium on highly advanced conceptual skills. Beyond this challenge lies a more fundamental issue: the growing divergence between an increasingly dynamic future and an officer management system optimized for static conditions. It portends an instance of what futurist Thomas Homer-Dixon has termed the “ingenuity gap”—the growing gulf between the need for creative, new ideas and their likely supply.³

By 1997 the Army had recognized the need for officers with skills, knowledge and attributes different from those required in the past. This meant developing and retaining officers with the appropriate professional education, civil schooling, training and military experience to solve a wider range of problems in the future.⁴ Complex operations demand military officers who possess a comprehensive understanding of the battle environment and the capacity to integrate resources to achieve mission success. They must understand the capabilities and mission of their unit or platform as well as the role of forces from other services, allied military forces, civilian government agencies, intergovernmental organizations and nongovernmental organizations.⁵ Furthermore, to respond effectively to complex challenges, the U.S. military must develop and maintain a high degree of adaptability within the officer corps. In addition to demonstrating a superior level of proficiency in conventional warfare, officers must also build a broader knowledge of politics, economics and the use of information in modern warfare to cope with a more complicated and rapidly evolving international environment.⁶

In his book *Outliers*, author Malcolm Gladwell noted that excellence at performing any complex task requires a critical minimum level of practice. The emerging picture from studies shows that 10,000 hours of practice is required to achieve a level of mastery associated with being a world-class expert in anything.⁷ Since Army officers spend the first part of their careers typically in tactical units, expertise at the higher and more complex operational and strategic levels comes much later. These joint, combined and interagency activities require creative and experiential intelligence that develops only when an officer reaches the lieutenant colonel ranks. This premise implies that retention of older and more seasoned field-grade officers will more effectively address these tasks. Yet, just as commissioned officers are coming into this “expert zone,” the U.S. government offers and even encourages retirement, and the Army begins releasing its “experts” just as they master the complex areas of joint staff work and higher national security policy and affairs. Since it takes more than 15 years to grow lieutenant colonels, the loss of each one becomes critical.

This perspective is reinforced by business research. The global management consulting firm McKinsey & Company has divided jobs into three categories: “transformational” (extracting raw materials or converting them into finished goods), “transactional” (interactions that can easily be scripted or automated) and “tacit” (complex interactions requiring a high level of judgment). The company emphasizes that “tacit interactions” grow exponentially as the world becomes more complex.⁸ Applying this view to the military, the most challenging tasks—such as counterinsurgency, combined and joint planning, interagency stability operations and others—fall heavily into the “tacit” range of interactions. These types of activities seem best addressed by older age and broader experience. In fact, scientific research suggests that social intelligence and diplomatic skills increase with age. Older soldiers are more stable in crisis situations. Experience within special operations units also suggests that more mature soldiers are better suited for fighting in complex human environments.⁹ Since the future of warfare will

be exceedingly complex, unpredictable and unstructured,¹⁰ these older, more mature officer pools should be retained longer to meet the talent needs of the institution.

Parallel trends in demography, some of which are inexorable, will very much stress current Army retention practices.¹¹ Population aging in America is a demographic certainty.¹² Americans are living longer today than ever before. Improvements in living conditions and lifestyles, along with advances in science, technology, medical practice, pharmaceuticals and other interventions, have resulted in tremendous reductions in morbidity and death from formerly fatal infectious diseases, produced dramatic gains in life expectancy and caused a rapid growth in the number of older Americans. This demographic change has important implications for the nation's military institutions.¹³ The most relevant of these demographic factors will be the "graying" of the population—in America and all of the other advanced industrialized countries—as lower birthrates and longer lifespans project that a larger proportion of the total population will be above what was viewed, until recently, as the normal age for retirement.¹⁴ Retirement ages are being raised all across the civilian sector, in response to changing ratios of those under 65 and those over and also in response to changing assumptions about whether workers can still be effective at age 67 or older.¹⁵ This trend has natural implications for the military, as a microcosm of the larger society.

Currently, U.S. military personnel retire at a considerably younger age than workers in the civilian sector. This pattern can be explained in a variety of ways. Some military tasks demand the stamina of youth, as generally one cannot be effective in direct combat at the age of 45; if all military personnel served to the age of 65, most might not have any useful role. Earlier retirement is also widely viewed as something a Soldier has earned by risking death or wounding in younger years. A final argument is simply that traditionally the militaries of the world "have always done things this way" and therefore it is perfectly normal to have promotion policies of "up or out," where enlisted soldiers and officers are not allowed to continue year after year in the same rank and position.¹⁶

Yet the possibility exists, specifically for the officer corps, that demographic trends may align with changes in technology and military effectiveness to suggest a very different military career pattern for the future. The period of service before pension could approach 40 years instead of the current 20 to 30, with the retirement ceiling even reaching 65.¹⁷ Also, while combat effectiveness in the past may have depended on energetic youth and highly motivated competition for promotion, in the future it will depend more on experience and technological competence, training and education.¹⁸ John W. Rowe and Robert L. Khan posit that older Americans, even in late old age, are generally healthy and have little functional disability and that mental acuity endures into late life.¹⁹ The key to retaining the expertise of senior officers and accommodating the inexorable demographic aging trend will be to change the current officer personnel system.

Current Officer Personnel System

The current officer personnel system possesses a number of characteristics that do not allow the U.S. military to easily retain its senior leadership and talent beyond the generic 20-year mark. The existing process of Army officer development is reminiscent of an assembly line where interchangeable parts are added in a sequential manner to rapidly create large quantities of the same product. This method for producing Army officers was developed, practiced and improved during the industrial age, when the concept was probably appropriate if not necessary

for the threat environment at that time. Threats and operating environments have evolved dramatically since that time, and although the Army has adapted to the new threats through the introduction of new (and in some cases the reintroduction of old) tactics, techniques and procedures, the officer development process has not kept pace. Just as doctrine evolves with time, officer development must also adapt by creating a more versatile and balanced officer personnel system.²⁰ In fact, at the far end of the military career spectrum, the military has actually suboptimized its ability to retain its most talented officers due to a retirement system that prematurely separates officers from the service.²¹

First, the officer promotion system centers on “up or out” concepts first introduced by law in 1916 for the U.S. Navy.²² The Officer Personnel Act (OPA) of 1947 extended this process to the Army and the Air Force, where tenure for a “successful” regular officer career in all services was set for officers below flag rank at 30 years, and voluntary retirement was automatically provided upon reaching 20 years of commissioned service. OPA extended the “up or out” principle across the board.²³ The current Defense Officer Personnel Management Act supports this notion and leads to the discharge or retirement of officers twice rejected for promotion within a single grade. This policy 1) provides incentives for good performance, 2) creates advancement opportunities for officers in lower grades, 3) ensures the average age of the officer corps is fairly young and 4) forces out nonperformers. The result of this policy is that promotion is seen within the Army’s culture as the singular measure of success. Critics of this system believe this policy often moves officers out of positions before they become proficient, breaks unit cohesion and sacrifices depth of experience for breadth of experience.²⁴ Obviously, if the development of deep institutional knowledge and expertise for complex tasks and activities is the aim, the “up or out” approach is counterproductive.

Second, a legacy of the post-World War II era emphasizes “remobilization” capability. In the postwar period, this meant retaining the largest possible number of middle-ranking officers to take charge of greatly expanded forces in the event of another large war.²⁵ Whereas in 1945 there were approximately 1.3 field-grade officers for every 100 enlisted personnel, by 1950 the ratio stood at 4.0 to 100 enlisted. That this concept did not fully square with the emphasis on “youth and vigor” was not especially troubling at the time. The way to reconcile peacetime economy (a small officer corps) and mobilization flexibility (a nucleus sufficiently sized for emergency force expansion) was a system with two characteristics. Permanent numerical ceilings would be established for each field grade, but “temporary” promotions would be allowed for at least ten years to meet security requirements in excess of permanent grade limitations. Also, officers with reserve commissions would be continued on active service to meet temporary overstrength requirements. Lacking tenure, these officers could then be easily cut from the force in the event of future drawdowns.²⁶ The military has exercised this option in the drawdowns after the Korean, Vietnam and Cold Wars. The key to somehow maintaining the overall “right amount” was the “up or out” requirement and a 20-year retirement that would permit a large number of middle-level officers who would leave the Army before they became too old.²⁷ With World War II and the Cold War now historical events, continued maintenance of this approach should be questioned, especially since the current system constrains the efforts to match talent with requirements, resulting in short and rigid career timelines.²⁸

Furthermore, compared to private industry, U.S. military officers have relatively short careers.²⁹ Military officers are permitted to retire upon completion of 20 years of active-duty service. An officer who is commissioned as a 22-year-old second lieutenant right out of college or a service academy would be eligible to retire at age 42. At the other end of the spectrum,

unless an officer is promoted to flag or general rank, he or she will be forcibly retired after 30 years of service or, in the case of the 22-year-old second lieutenant, at age 52.

In comparison, in the civilian world, most executives are just beginning to hit their stride at age 40. Former Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld noted this trend, commenting, “It seems to me in most entities across the globe that are successful financially, like private sector companies, they very much value people who are over 46.”³⁰ In fact, military personnel, who typically “retire” in their forties, are easily able to secure attractive civilian jobs at the completion of their military careers due in part to the fact that they’re still in the prime of their performance capability.³¹

At 18 years of service, most officers begin to consider retirement. This assessment is often done with their families who, along with the officer, have become worn down from the high operational tempo of the Army.³² At 18 years of service, the Army Career Alumni Program (ACAP) sends a letter to each officer letting them know about services that are available to help them retire from the Army and find a job in the civilian community. At 18 years of service, flight pay goes down for Army aviators. At 18 years of service, Variable Special Pay goes down for dental and medical officers. At 20 years of service, members of the military may retire, receive 50 percent of their base pay for the rest of their lives and maintain many benefits from active duty. Although there are many incentives for the Army officer to leave the service at 20 years, there is little done to officially encourage officers to stay beyond 20 years of service.³³

After 20 to 21 years for most officers or 25 to 26 years for officers who make it to the rank of colonel, the military becomes potentially less fulfilling in terms of professional reward and compensation. The value put on patriotism and service to the nation remains high, but many officers view their own contributions as less appreciated by the institution. In other words, most officers would be willing to continue serving if the Army needed them. But by policy, structure and culture, once an officer is passed over—for promotion, command or school—he or she becomes part of the attrition equation without much remaining usefulness. On the other hand, the opportunities outside the military are seemingly limitless. Officers retire and can then succeed in many industries and professions.³⁴

The Army’s main impediment to change is its lack of a talent management system and approach.³⁵ Talent can be defined as the intersection of three dimensions—skills, knowledge and behaviors—that create an *optimal* level of individual performance, provided the individual is employed within his or her talent set.³⁶ Talent management is to assure that the supply of talent is available to align the right people with the right jobs at the right time based on strategic business objectives. But talent management is much more than just another human resources process. It is a mindset that goes beyond the rhetoric toward a holistic and integrated approach to leveraging the greatest competitive advantage from people.³⁷ It also refers to those special strategies an organization deploys to recruit, retain and develop its pool of top talent—at both the junior and the senior levels.³⁸

Since the Army cannot possibly know what specific officer competencies will be demanded years from now, the best way for it to mitigate risk is to continuously access new candidates while retaining seasoned talent. Talent adds the critical dimensions of the aforementioned creative intelligence as well as aptitudes for rapid learning and adaptation. These officers have powers of reasoning to discern quickly patterns of activity within new situations and can conceive alternatives to address situations for which they have never been specifically trained. Such officers leverage these innate aptitudes to become expert in the competencies to which

they are drawn. These may range from deep technical skills to broad conceptual or intuitive abilities, all of which the Army requires.³⁹ For senior officers, a talent management system would position the Army to compete with the civilian market that recruits officer talent beginning at the 20-year service mark. It would translate directly into better officer development and retention from the 20- to potentially 40-year service mark through increased job satisfaction and other measures. Talent management would also facilitate job matching, which would allow the Army to achieve the right breadth and depth of officer competencies to meet evolving requirements.⁴⁰

One method to inform the discussion on the value of retaining older and more mature officers in the force is through the lens of historical case studies. Military excellence in age is not a modern phenomenon. In ancient battles, experience and training often outweighed youth. Soldiers in the contingents of Alexander the Great's armies were seasoned campaigners, having in many cases served with Alexander from the beginning; several of them were in their 50s, some even in their 60s, and they were supreme battlefield warriors.⁴¹ Antigonus Monophthalmus (382–301 BC), one of the so-called Successors, took to the battlefield at 60 in the aftermath of Alexander's death, personally leading his cavalry and infantry in combat. He made himself Lord of Asia by 316 BC; at a point which many now consider retirement age, he was entertaining dreams of world dominion. Ultimately, octogenarian Antigonus died in a shower of javelins on his last campaign, in 302–301 BC.⁴² The case of Antigonus Monophthalmus, transposed to the modern era, demonstrates the potential of older leaders and warriors given 21st century man's greater longevity, better health and higher levels of physical robustness.

Historical Vignettes

The following four vignettes highlight leaders who achieved their greatest military impact in their later years. While the historical, cultural and personnel system context of the selected cases may not exactly match the current U.S. structure, these chosen subjects powerfully illustrate the human potential to be unlocked and distilled from older officers regardless of army or era.

Case 1: Marshal Henri-Philippe Pétain, France. Henri-Philippe Pétain (1856–1951), born into a relatively prosperous peasant family in northern France, entered the military for its social mobility opportunities.⁴³ Pétain graduated from the prestigious French military academy at St. Cyr in 1877, and for the next 37 years he served with and commanded elite *Chasseur Alpin* mountain infantry regiments and taught at the French army's infantry school as well as at the War College in Paris. Pétain insisted that firepower, generated by closely coordinated infantry and artillery, was the key to modern warfare. Pétain's unfashionable theories and personal bluntness resulted in his being denied general officer rank.⁴⁴

In 1914, at the age of 58, Pétain was an undistinguished colonel, just two years short of mandatory retirement. In 1918, at the age of 62, he was one of only three Marshals of France (the country's highest honor), known throughout the world and revered in France.⁴⁵ Had World War I not occurred, his career would have ended in obscurity with mandatory retirement at the age of 60. As it was, he was to remain in positions of national eminence—military, political and diplomatic—for another 26 years.⁴⁶

His transformation was a reflection that the strength of strategic conceptions, which were essentially defensive, was well suited to trench warfare. Pétain's name became particularly associated with the defense of the fortress of Verdun in 1916.⁴⁷ The Battle of Verdun was one of

history's longest and bloodiest battles, lasting almost 10 months and costing more than half a million French and German casualties. The French victory marked Germany's descent into the abyss. Pétain's highly developed tactical sense, his continual refinement of defensive methods and the constant improvement he effected in the organization of higher units ultimately saved the fortress at Verdun.⁴⁸

General Pétain had the idea that given the state of weapons technology, available manpower and the terrain and likely tactics on the Western Front, the best way to defeat the German army was to pound it relentlessly with as much artillery firepower as could be mustered. Pétain did not believe that courage and persistence could force flesh and blood through barbed wire and gunfire. For 10 months, Pétain subordinated nearly all other tactics and concerns to put that one idea into action. In the end, his idea and the enormous efforts of the French army did, in fact, stymie the German attacks and—in Pétain's view—save France. After 1917 Pétain became identified with a defensive stance in both strategy and tactics, which won him the undying devotion of thousands of soldiers.⁴⁹

Pétain was ideally placed to gain rapid promotion—young enough to stand the pace, senior enough to be out of the carnage and intelligent enough to understand the reality of industrialized warfare.⁵⁰ If he were counterfactually inserted into the U.S. military system as it now stands, he would have retired as a colonel in 1907, after a 30-year career—well short of when his institution needed him to address the complexities of trench warfare.

Case 2: Marshal Carl Gustav Emil Mannerheim, Finland. Marshal Carl Gustav Mannerheim (1867–1951) is widely viewed as the ultimate Finnish war hero, towering above all other characters in the annals of the 1939–40 Winter War and preserving Finnish independence in this perilous period.⁵¹ Mannerheim was born to a distinguished Swedish–Finnish family in Russian-controlled Finland in 1867.⁵² The future Marshal of Finland, twice head of the Finnish State, three times commander-in-chief of the Finnish Armed Forces, began his military career in the Imperial Russian army, as did so many other Finns during the long period in which Finland, as a grand duchy, formed part of that empire.⁵³

In the Imperial Russian Army, Mannerheim was a first-class regimental officer who became a very competent general. When World War I began, he found himself posted to the staff of Russian General Alexei Brusilov. In 1915 Mannerheim was named commander of the 12th Cavalry Division, and in the wide and mobile expanses of the Eastern Front, he distinguished himself in a number of large engagements. Eventually he rose to the level of corps commander, but by that time the rot had set in throughout the Czarist army as a whole. With the 1917 Russian Revolution, Mannerheim's world came apart; recuperating in Odessa, he survived the initial revolutionary period that killed so many of his aristocratic comrades.⁵⁴ With the collapse of the Russian Empire, Finland declared its independence on 6 December 1917, and Mannerheim decided to return home. As a citizen of an independent state, he felt justified resigning his commission and leaving the Russian Army. On 18 December 1917, he reached Helsinki.⁵⁵

Mannerheim's return generated no parades; after all, outside of his own class hardly anyone knew him well. He was coming home but to a land to which he had paid little attention during the 35 years he had served in the Imperial Russian Army.⁵⁶ He was essentially an unknown Russian lieutenant general who had lost his career, army and adopted homeland to revolution.⁵⁷ But his years of service in the Imperial Army had prepared him for senior service to his fatherland and for his selection as the Finnish commander-in-chief in 1918.⁵⁸

Finland in 1918 was also in revolutionary turmoil, and the Finnish Bolsheviks attempted to seize power, acting in alliance with the pro-Bolshevik units of the Russian Army still on Finnish soil. Because of this military presence and a common border with Russia, there was a great chance that the seizure of power would succeed. Since Mannerheim was the most experienced warrior the Finns had, he created an antisocialist Finnish army from scratch in 1918 and defeated the Red Guards in a four-month civil war.⁵⁹ He was 51 years old at the time. The following year he headed the new regime in Finland as regent. Defeated in the presidential elections of 1919, he went into retirement and engaged in philanthropic activity until the government appointed him head of the Finnish Defense Council in 1931 and finally commander of the Finnish forces against the Soviet Union in the Finnish–Russian War of 1939–40.⁶⁰

Finland was drawn into that war by Stalin’s desire for territorial concessions that would make the strategic position of Leningrad more secure and by the Nazi–Soviet Pact that placed Finland in the Soviet sphere of influence along with the Baltic States.⁶¹ In October 1939 the Soviets demanded territorial concessions that would make the approaches to Kronstadt, Leningrad and Murmansk less vulnerable to foreign invaders. The Soviets also insisted on the sale of some Gulf of Finland islands and the leasing of naval base facilities at Hanko (Hangö) at the Gulf’s mouth. On all matters but the issues of the base, the Finns proved willing to negotiate. Field Marshal Mannerheim, believing the army unprepared for war, urged the government to offer the Soviets Jussarö Island, east of Hanko, for their base, but the politicians refused. The Soviets considered the base the key issue. The Kremlin ended the Moscow discussions on 13 November 1939 and prepared for war.⁶²

On 30 November 1939 the Red Army invaded Finland without a declaration of war and achieved tactical surprise at numerous points along the 900-mile common border. Despite their overwhelming odds in men and firepower and their virtual monopoly of armor, Soviet forces suffered severe and humiliating reverses during the first weeks of that 105-day conflict. A partial explanation for the Finns’ resilience is that about a third of Finland is north of the Arctic Circle, where one of the coldest winters on record had already begun; the Finns were prepared for combat in this environment. A second reason was the leadership of Marshal Carl Gustav Mannerheim.⁶³ Mannerheim motivated his commanders and soldiers for combat and had prepared a fortified line of defense (the Mannerheim Line) across the Karelian Isthmus. The Finns’ defense of their tiny country was a military triumph; David thrashed Goliath. The Finns humiliated their invaders, ripping the Red Army to shreds and inflicting at least 330,000 casualties, including 125,000 deaths; the Finns suffered roughly 66,000 casualties.⁶⁴ In 1940 the Soviet army broke through the Mannerheim Line, which was subsequently dismantled as part of the peace terms.⁶⁵ Credit for this tenacious defense goes to Carl Gustav Mannerheim, who as the 72-year-old commander of the Finnish forces, exhibited such tenacity and skill in handling his troops as to be universally recognized as the hero of the Winter War.⁶⁶

Although Mannerheim was a general officer in 1918 at the age of 51, and again in 1939 at the age of 72, his successful performance in complex political and military realms during both periods offers insight into the potential value of keeping selected majors, lieutenant colonels and colonels in the force longer to profit from expertise and experience accumulated over 30 to 40 years rather than just 20 years.

Case 3: Brigadier General Teddy Roosevelt, Jr., U.S. Army.⁶⁷ A case closer to the modern era is that of Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. (1887–1944). The eldest son of President Theodore Roosevelt, he served in combat in both world wars, earning every combat decoration available

to a ground soldier. During World War I, he commanded a battalion of the 26th U.S. Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division and then the regiment itself. He was gassed and severely wounded during combat in France. He was decorated five times, including the Distinguished Service Cross, the Silver Star, the Purple Heart and the Croix de Guerre.

Recalled to active duty in April 1941, Roosevelt first commanded his old World War I regiment. A week after Pearl Harbor, he was appointed brigadier general on active duty and from November 1942 through 1943 fought courageously in North Africa and Italy. He then became the assistant division commander of the 1st Infantry Division. He served with the Big Red One throughout the North Africa and Sicily campaigns until both he and the division commander, Major General Terry de la Mesa Allen, were relieved by General Dwight D. Eisenhower. They were both recognized as outstanding combat leaders, and their reliefs were “without prejudice.” Eisenhower felt these two veteran and proven commanders were tired and needed a rest from combat. Both returned to combat leadership positions soon with Roosevelt as assistant division commander of the 4th Infantry Division and Allen as commander of the 104th Infantry Division (Organized Reserve).

The 4th Division was preparing for a key role on D-Day—an assault landing on Utah Beach—when Roosevelt arrived. Although he was 56 years old in the countdown to D-Day and wizened and lame with arthritis, he persuaded General Omar N. Bradley that his presence in Normandy would be inspirational to the assaulting forces. Roosevelt insisted on going in with the first wave to “steady the boys.” Major General Raymond O. Barton, the division commander, recognized that Roosevelt was considered one of the bravest men in the U.S. Army. Barton believed Roosevelt’s presence could be a steadying influence for the assault troops so he eventually granted his request, though he thought he was sending the 56-year-old Roosevelt to his death.

On the morning of 6 June 1944, Roosevelt hobbled ashore from the first boat to hit Utah Beach and at once took command of a landing operation that threatened to degenerate into bloody chaos. He seemed to be everywhere, rallying hesitant soldiers and leading groups of men inland despite German small-arms, mortar and artillery fire. His lack of concern for his own safety inspired his troops. He also made an important command decision: realizing that the first wave had landed at the wrong place, he directed the follow-up waves to land behind the first wave rather than adjusting to the correct landing spot. The original location was heavily defended; this decision prevented Utah Beach from turning into the bloodbath that characterized neighboring Omaha Beach. His all-day heroism, courage and leadership under constant fire earned him the Medal of Honor.

By the time it was awarded, on 28 September 1944, he was dead. Roosevelt, who had a bad heart, had died of cardiac arrest in Normandy on 12 July 1944. He never knew that he had been selected that same day to take command of the 90th Infantry Division (Organized Reserve) and receive promotion to major general. He was buried in Normandy two days later. General George S. Patton, Jr., an honorary pallbearer at the funeral, described him as “one of the bravest men I have ever known.” His example illustrates the benefits of applying high levels of command maturity and expertise, accrued through long service, to complex and chaotic situations such as those found at Normandy on D-Day.

Case 4: Lieutenant General Oliver P. Smith, U.S. Marine Corps. The last case is that of Lieutenant General Oliver P. Smith, USMC (1893–1977). Smith is famed for his command of the 1st Marine Division during its fighting withdrawal from the Chosin Reservoir in the Korean War. He readily demonstrates the rationale for retaining older officers in the modern

era. Although World War II generated faster promotions and applied different personnel rules than today, Smith was still 51 at the time he was promoted to brigadier general in World War II on 11 April 1944. The average lifespan for males in 1944 was 60.8 years, compared with 81.9 years in 2005 and a projected 85.5 years for those born in 2015.⁶⁸ This meant that someone in his 50s then was further along his life's continuum than would be true today.

The military culture of the time also did not include the physical fitness ethos that it does today. For example, when Smith arrived in Honolulu in preparation for the Okinawa campaign, the 10th Army was in the throes of an extensive physical conditioning program for which Lieutenant General Simon Bolivar Buckner was the motivating force. Smith believed he was on the wrong track:

The program General Buckner devised was suitable for battalion commanders, but not staff officers, many of whom had passed their fiftieth birthday. . . . An Army staff officer is subjected to considerable mental stress, but he can do with only a reasonable amount of physical conditioning.⁶⁹

Certainly, personal hardiness was a required characteristic for officers of this era. The World War II Pacific campaigns were strenuous, and Smith had been sleeping out in the open, eating when he could, walking miles in the mud and heat and climbing rope ladders. In this, he was no different from the other men who were senior commanders and staff officers in World War II. In addition to physical hardships, they were also under tremendous mental stress.⁷⁰ Yet despite his relatively advanced age by 1944 standards, Smith's greatest contribution had not yet occurred.

On 26 October 1950, as the 1st Marine Division advanced up the Korean Peninsula, General Smith celebrated his 57th birthday.⁷¹ One month later, Smith led his division in a fighting withdrawal during the Chosin Reservoir operation (26 November to 11 December 1950). At Chosin Reservoir, the 1st Marine Division found itself surrounded and outnumbered eight to one by the Chinese Army. The worst weather in 50 years cut off air support and assaulted the Marines with snow, wind and temperatures of -40 degrees Fahrenheit. Smith brought his division out intact, transporting with it virtually all its dead, wounded, equipment and fighting spirit, in a hard fight to the sea. The 1st Marine Division had destroyed the Chinese 9th Army Group, with 10 decimated Chinese infantry divisions and 37,500 combat casualties out of 60,000 personnel.⁷² Smith's demonstrable high level of command expertise, planning skills and leadership acumen came from his long years of accumulated combat, command and staff experience.

Looking more closely at this 57-year-old division commander's achievements, Smith had engaged in a wide spectrum of challenging and strenuous combat operations. He began with an opposed amphibious landing under the most difficult of circumstances at Inchon, then proceeded to the taking of a large city in street-by-street fighting in Seoul, followed by an administrative landing at Wonsan. Then, after a long march north, he led the 1st Marine Division in a fighting withdrawal, bringing them safely to the sea against overwhelming odds. After rest and recuperation, he reorganized his division for a month of guerrilla warfare, during the course of which a North Korean division was all but destroyed. This success was immediately followed by a frontline commitment in Central Korea in traditional land combat. In all of these situations, Smith and his division had been successful.⁷³ Smith's track record illustrates the enormous benefits that can accrue by keeping older talent and expertise in the force in order to apply their experience to the complex and often intertwined activities characterized by war-fighting, counterinsurgency, humanitarian operations and peace enforcement actions.

A Contemporary Case: Colonel Paul Yingling, U.S. Army. Finally, a recent example rounds out the four historical vignettes. In a December 2011 *Washington Post* op-ed, U.S. Army Colonel Paul Yingling related his reasons for leaving the service at the age of 45 to become a secondary-school teacher. Yingling served five combat tours, produced a number of influential military reform articles and was a professor of security studies at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies.⁷⁴ Viewed through the talent optic, his non-retention is a loss for the Army's senior expertise pool needed to confront the complex human environments that characterize national security affairs. Given U.S. demographic and health trends, Colonel Yingling could offer 15–20 more years of valuable service to the institution as a colonel with the right parameters and incentives. As it stands, his retirement results in the U.S. Army's forfeiting a potentially large human capital "dividend," given its years of institutional investment in the officer.

Policy Recommendations

The four historical vignettes and the contemporary case support the argument that the U.S. Army needs to retain its selected senior officer talent for a potential 40-year career horizon to tap and utilize their accumulated expertise for dealing with complex activities and tasks. The current loss of senior Army officers is real and has an enormous organizational cost. From August through December 2011, a number of senior talent departures at the rank of colonel, with 24 years of service, were noted. This group included, among others, a senior director on the National Security Council, an experienced Special Operations interagency task force commander and a counterinsurgency and advisory assistance commander.

At the 20–24 year career point, the military seems to lose interest in the development and contributions of senior officers. With its "up or out" culture, inconsistent assignment system and a flawed centralized promotion system, the Army actually encourages retirement. For promotion in particular, there are two major criticisms. First, detached/centralized boards make selections based solely on the files presented; therefore, the Army selects the best documented file but not necessarily the best individual officer. Second, officers not selected for promotion or command do not receive feedback or specific reasons for non-selection from the board.⁷⁵ This approach defies best practice norms of transparency and talent management.

Industry, though, is keen to capture these experts. Since most senior officers have run organizations, managed budgets and made hiring and firing decisions, they are highly sought after. For this seasoned group, the Army competes directly with the private sector for the best candidates.⁷⁶ The paradox for the Army is that it must develop and retain the necessary senior expertise to meet its needs for a future where the cognitive demands on officers are growing based on the environmental changes mentioned. Failing to meet this reality poses perhaps the greatest risk to future military successes. The private sector, in contrast, can respond to unanticipated changes by simply "buying" the expertise it needs in an open labor market.⁷⁷

To address this issue, the following paragraphs offer five main concepts for change. They are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but each offers a way to partially address the retention of senior talent. Not all must be implemented, but the adoption of any single proposal would require significant changes to the current setup, and the Army would need to commit ample resources, develop appropriate policy and reevaluate existing organizational designs to these ends.⁷⁸ One major assumption is that the current 20-year "up or out" system can transform to allow longer careers while simultaneously permitting more time, depth and variety at each career step. This hypothesis is eminently feasible and is supported by an extensive RAND

study advocating a focus on managing officer competencies. This approach would generate a more flexible system, enabling certain officers to have longer assignments and careers.⁷⁹ The second assumption is that the current pension system will not change. While the pension system is under radical attack from a number of constituencies due to cost, any fundamental change holds the potential for enormous political backlash, hence modifications will probably come only very slowly.⁸⁰

The proposals are as follows:

Concept 1: Extensions. Extend commissioned careers for all field-grade officers, pending successful certification, to 36 years with an option for 40 years, while legally increasing the mandatory retirement age to 62 years. This practice mirrors private sector and nongovernmental organization policies and would keep highly qualified officers in service while they are still fully capable of being strong leaders and important sources of knowledge.⁸¹ This step, which would lengthen military careers and delay retirement, would also require a slowing of the promotion process.⁸² This length of career is not without historical precedent. The first general (non-disability) retirement law, applicable to both the Army and the Navy, was enacted on 3 August 1861. Officers who had served 40 years, upon application to the President, could retire voluntarily. The purpose of the law was to both induce and require the departure of superannuated officers, while keeping top performers.⁸³ Furthermore the original assumption of military retirement legislation enacted in the 1950s was that 30-year careers would be the norm.⁸⁴ The services' predictions at the time that most successful officers would pursue a full 30-year career proved to be off the mark.⁸⁵

Concept 2: Sabbaticals. Allow military officers up to two sabbaticals in a career, with the time spent on sabbatical not counting toward retirement. In this constellation, an officer would not be eligible for retirement until age 46–48, in effect giving the military the advantage of four to six additional years of maturity and wisdom. At the other end of the retirement spectrum, assuming another sabbatical at the 22-year mark, a senior officer could be retained until age 58–61, allowing the military and the nation to benefit from an additional six to nine years of experience before the officer retires.⁸⁶ Sabbatical options seem to be a strong motivator for officers based upon a recent survey.⁸⁷ Besides allowing intellectual broadening, this choice would also lengthen line officers' careers to provide sufficient opportunities to master new fields of knowledge outside the military.⁸⁸

Concept 3: Stabilization of tours and the introduction of a “bid” personnel system for senior talent. Officers beyond 20 years of service have family and spousal needs for stability. Often children are in the final years of high school and spouses are ready to reenter the work force after years of constant moving. Providing stabilized tours of five to seven years for senior Army talent would potentially ameliorate the retirement exodus. The Army could adopt a system for Army field-grade officers similar to that of the Department of State (DoS), where assignments are organized through a preferential “bidding” process. In the DoS process, Foreign Service Officers (FSOs) compete within their peer group for upcoming open assignments via three steps: a published and transparent bid list of all available assignments for all FSOs eligible for reassignment in an upcoming year; an unofficial acceptance from the desired post of assignment; and then an official review of personnel records against post requirements by a panel in Washington, D.C. Throughout the process, officers have access to resources for assistance and support, including career development counselors, and can appeal a seemingly unreasonable decision.⁸⁹ Unlike the pre-1975 system where the Army did allow a type of bid system for

battalion and brigade command, this modified DoS method would apply for all eligible field-grade positions. Such an arrangement seems to offer more merit and transparency for senior Army talent, especially for those beyond the 20-year service mark, where the quality, variety and impact of a particular assignment is more compelling than a “punch the ticket” job to remaining in uniform.

Concept 4: Bonus incentives. This option would offer a monetary bonus by giving incentives either as a cash bonus or in funds for the Thrift Savings Plan to every officer serving past 20 years of service. Alternatively, this option could target the officers serving in branches or positions that are the most critical for retention or those officers with essential skills and experience. This approach would conceptually align with the enlisted model used for retaining critical military occupational specialties.⁹⁰ Although a financial incentive at this stage of the career may not appeal to every officer and would be strongly weighed against civilian alternatives, it could serve as a supporting measure if used in conjunction with the other concepts.

Concept 5: Amendment of legislation. Under the Army and Air Force Vitalization and Retirement Equalization Act of 1948, the initial legislation allowed 30-year or 20-year voluntary retirements, but the 20-year system was enacted with the eventual unforeseen consequence that most officers retired after 21 years of service.⁹¹ Congress could amend current laws to make retirement voluntary after 30 years of service instead of 20. Earlier retirement should be possible, even as early as 15 years of service, but based only upon the needs of the service.⁹²

A great example of officers who stay for extended careers, benefit from stabilization and receive some cash incentives are doctors. Medical officers remain for 30 years with regularity because promotion opportunities are very good, and they have an excellent chance to stabilize in one location for five, seven or even 10 years. They are also paid to stay for their skills. Similar candidates for longer-term careers might include public affairs officers, strategists and personnel in many other functional areas.⁹³

The current structure of the Army’s personnel system does not encourage retention and development of capable and expert senior field-grade officers in the ranks of major, lieutenant colonel and colonel with 20 years or more of service for a 40-year career horizon. The result is that the Army loses its senior talent just at the point of highest value and payback for the organization—when they are in the prime of their performance capability. In essence, the Army is foregoing its talent dividend after years of investment. Since future uses of military force will demand much more from Army officers than just warfighting skills, this is a concerning development.⁹⁴ The aforementioned historical cases, coupled with the changing demography of our times, demonstrate that military organizations dealing with complex human environments and activities need the well-developed expertise of older and more experienced officers for improved effectiveness and more efficient avenues to success. The proposed policy concepts offer pragmatic directions for achieving this end.

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