B. Officership

Officers as Professionals

What is an officer? The officer corps of the United States military is "professional" when using that term as an adjective to mean competent or nonamateurish. For this research, we are more interested in the use of the term as a noun to convey a calling of an occupational group that requires specialized knowledge and long and intensive preparation.\(^1\) Officers seek careers in the profession of "officership." We use the term "officership" to describe a construct that deals with the standard, defining criteria of a profession as applied to military officers.

Is "Officership" a Profession?

The professionalization of the officer corps, which began in the 19th century in Europe, increased dramatically in the United States after World War II. This development paralleled that of other professions (e.g., law and medicine), which have evolved from the 19th century to the present, with rapid development during the 1960s and 1970s. A variety of social, political, and economic changes have combined to alter the environment that facilitated the emergence and dominance of certain professions, military officers included.\(^2\) As the military faces further uncertainty and change, it is useful to discuss the present status of the officer profession to help evaluate how change may affect the profession in the future.

What do we mean by profession and how do officers fit the defining characteristics of a profession? The term professional refers to occupational groups that have the capacity to control the production and distribution of certain kinds of goods and services. This control includes the ability to negotiate freedom from external intervention and to influence the conditions and content of the work. In the case of the officer profession, this general definition implies that officers, as an occupational group, have the capacity to control the production and distribution of certain goods and services.

\(^1\)This useful distinction between uses of the term “professional” is made by Terry Willett, “The Canadian Military: A Design for Tomorrow,” Canadian Defense Quarterly, Spring 1993, p. 45.

of U.S. national security. Of course, the capacity of the profession is limited; it is not a monopoly, but the officer profession can significantly shape the development and implementation of national security activities.

The general definition implies several criteria for determining whether officership is a profession (see Figure B.1). Does it require or possess

- knowledge and skill expertise gained by formal education and long-term experience in the workplace, validated by formal examinations and credentials?
- career commitment and a closed community with strong feelings of loyalty?
- accession, assignment, and promotion based on competence?
- a formal code of law and ethics developed, maintained, and applied by the profession?³

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Knowledge and Skill

First, a prerequisite of even the most general definition of a profession includes specific occupational groups applying abstract knowledge to particular problems. In the development of other professions such as law and medicine, the increasing body of knowledge and the uneven quality of informal apprenticeship programs provided the impetus for establishing formal education programs. Similarly, in the military, as size, technology, and requisite skills changed, a need arose for establishing the military academies to train officers initially in military science, a body of knowledge and skill that is gained through formal education and experience. The military curriculum across services emphasizes both theory and practice. Some of the core components of the officer curriculum include military history, military science, operational art, military engineering, weapons design, personnel management, and leadership training, which facilitate teamwork, decisionmaking, and control of ambiguous environments during military maneuvers that promote national security.4

Although formal educational experiences are crucial in developing officers, additional professional development comes through experience—long-term experience. As former Army Chief of Staff General John Wickham stated,

Out of a twenty-year career, most officers spend three years in military schools, but the bulk of their careers is spent with troops or in staff positions. The cumulative experience gained in repetitive assignments in branch, joint, and functional positions—at progressively higher levels of responsibility—continues the professionalization of the officer corps.5

Commitment

Second, career commitment, loyalty, and identification with a specific occupational group are also professional criteria. Ideally, commitment to an occupational community stems from a sense of a “calling” and responsibility to serve the common good. Officers’ responsibility to serve the common good explicitly reflects their commissioning oath to serve nation and constitution. Interviews with officers have revealed comparisons between officership and the ministry, both of which involve long-term commitment to a set of values that


transcend individual self-interest. Furthermore, there is evidence that those who anticipate a career as an officer espouse pro-military values and that these values are held before exposure to the socializing effects of actual military service or training.

The values that are the bedrock of the officer profession are loyalty, duty, selfless service, integrity, and subordination of the military to the authority of the civilian government. Loyalty involves faithfulness and fidelity to the unit; the institution; and those above, below, and alongside in the hierarchy. Duty encompasses the moral and legal obligations that soldiers have to defend the United States. Doing what is best for nation, branch of service, and unit—in opposition to one’s own interests—encapsulates the value of selfless service. It is the higher good that comes before selfish ambitions and individual desires. An additional value constituting the bedrock of the officer profession is integrity. Officers are to be honest with their superiors, officers of similar rank, and their subordinates. Finally, in a democracy, the military is subject to the authority of the civilian government, and this value is embedded in officers as they are socialized into the profession.

Commitment to a career as an officer entails entree into a closed community with strong feelings of loyalty. Sociologist Erving Goffman referred to this community as a “total institution,” characterized by (1) all activities being carried out under a single authority, (2) the influence of the immediate company of others who hold the ideals of the institution, (3) a disciplined life fixed by a set of formal rules and procedures, and (4) all activities aimed toward fulfilling the official aims of the institution. A former general officer describes this more bluntly: “There is only one military in our nation. You are either in or out.”

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There are no lateral transfers to another military. In other words, the ‘company’ is also the entire profession!¹⁰

Describing the development of a community within the military academy, the Superintendent of West Point stated in a recent speech,

> West Point succeeds in teaching . . . important values because its cadets are immersed for four years in a value-rich, professional military culture. They live twenty-four hours-a-day within a military organization, subject to an honor Code and military regulations, as well as the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Throughout the four years, they are educated by predominantly-military faculty role models who exemplify the essential values of the profession.¹¹

In a more general way, the following comments by an officer emphasizes the unique experiences that foster commitment to the military community,

> The Army is a total institution that replaces individual values with the institution’s values. It does this by providing its members with experiences that are significantly different from those encountered in their past civilian lives. These experiences are attributed to powerful [psychological] processes, which create intense comradeship and egalitarianism.¹²

Commitment to the values of the officer corps profession and the periodic intense socialization events lead to a unity of experience and orientation, out of which develops a community loyal to a common purpose and action (i.e., professional culture).¹³

**Competence**

A third element of officership is competence. Not only must a professional apply abstract knowledge to specific problems, he or she must apply it proficiently. Samuel Huntington (1957) described the skills required by officers as being neither craft nor art, but “an extraordinarily complex intellectual skill requiring comprehensive study and training.” Despite the varied array of departments and experts (engineers, doctors, pilots, intelligence, communications), a “distinct sphere of military competence” is common to officers. The duties of the officer include the organization, equipping, and training of the force; planning its

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¹¹Graves, op. cit., p. 5.
activities; and the direction of its operation in and out of combat. This unique competence is typically described as effective military experience.

Competence is emphasized throughout the career of a military officer. Centralized promotion boards that in principle make promotion decisions based on experience and competence in different roles promote those who have the greatest leadership potential to meet the challenges of increased responsibilities. In the current workings of the system, the best-qualified advance in the profession; those who are fully qualified may be allowed to continue in the profession, but most are separated “out.” This separation of the fully qualified is atypical; in a profession, all who are qualified normally continue. Although debate continues about whether certain characteristics (e.g., gender, ethnicity, and race) remain significant determinants of officer career paths, ability and achievement have become critical as the officer profession has developed since the 19th century.

**Formal Code**

A fourth element of the officer profession is that there is a formal code of law and ethics, which is developed, maintained, and applied by the profession. Each branch of the military has guidelines for behavior and conduct that are strictly enforced. Failure to comply leads to sanctions such as punishment or discharge. Formulation of the ethical standards, investigation of violations, and application of sanctions are also conducted by military officers. Self-regulation of ethical principles of conduct relating to the professional group’s conduct of practice, behavior toward clients, interaction with colleagues, and relationships with allied professions is a professional criterion that applies to military officers as it does to other professions.

In summary, given the criteria typically used for determining whether an occupational group is a profession, characteristics of military officers’ roles, values, culture, and activities suggest that “officership” is a profession. Despite the debate in the sociology of the military literature about whether the military in general constitutes a profession, the consensus holds that the term profession is applicable to military officers.

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Change and the Defining Characteristics of Officbership

The nature and meaning of officbership have as much importance as concepts for career flow structures and personnel functions in the design of an officer career management system, because the career management system must support the future construct of officbership. Change affects requirements for officers, the objectives and structures of the career management system, and the defining characteristics by which one understands officbership. One can assess the amount and direction of future change in officbership by reviewing the defining characteristics and how they have changed and may change.

At present, the military is facing many changes that are interrelated in complex ways. The purpose here is simply to highlight some likely changes as they relate to the defining characteristics of officbership that will have implications for future officer management. As previously stated, the national military strategy has changed from emphasis on the containment of the former Soviet Union and communism. The perceived threat will most likely no longer be primarily a single entity as it was in the past. Other changes in technology, the economy, demography and culture, and the demands of officers will affect the defining characteristics of the officer profession, particularly the knowledge, skills, and nature of the closed community. Amidst this complex web of change, it is unlikely that emphasis on a core of military values will change as much as some of the other defining characteristics of officbership.

The movement away from large-scale wars to other types of conflict management is likely to change the requisite knowledge and skills of officer as they relate to military science and management. As van Creveld points out, the ability to fight and win a war—classic military effectiveness—has given way to much broader notions about military effectiveness including a redefinition of war as deterrence or as the “creation and maintenance of armed forces.” As this happened, the military profession started to alter in ways that have yet to completely play out.

During the fifties defense and security gradually supplanted war, thus gaining a double advantage. First unlike war, defense and security were continuous and could be presented as of overriding importance even in peacetime. Second they included not only strategy (how to deploy one’s forces), operations (how to maneuver them in the theater of war), and tactics (how to make them fight when in contact with the enemy) but almost every conceivable aspect of human existence.

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18 Van Creveld, Command in War, op. cit., p. 102.
19 Ibid., p. 71.
This broader notion of national security means that knowledge about it is not just in the purview of the military officer. Many academic institutions in the United States offer courses (apart from ROTC) that deal with national security. The national security community has come to include a vast array of politicians, academics, businessmen, and serving military officers.

Also, conflict is no longer left to the full-time uniformed military in the United States. It is no longer a case of being “in or out” of a total institution but a case of fuzzy boundaries about in and out. Beginning in 1970, the Total Force Policy stipulated that all sources of manpower—full time, reserve, civilian—should be considered in building forces. “Amateurs” and those without any prior military experience can count in a theater of operations. Indeed, a civilian, Robert Oakley, was described by the former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff as the CINC in Somalia; a DoD civilian was the first casualty in that operation. For the future, there is not “in and out” but maybe only some groups who are more “in” than others.

An additional strand in this change is technology, more specifically the merging of civilian and military technologies in the service of national security in the broadest sense. At the same time that the defense laboratories are attempting to adapt military technologies for civilian use in order to stay relevant to society, the military is moving toward greater use of commercially available technologies for military use. Communications is another example. Not only can the battlefield be monitored in real time from the White House or the Pentagon, but it can also be watched from the living rooms of the nation via CNN and other news sources. Everyone is more connected to military forces.

Economic constraints on the military (e.g., budget) are another change confronting the military. With a downward shift in resources allocated to the military and the changing nature of its mission, there will no doubt be changes in military priorities. How much will the military be able to spend on advanced technologies? Will cost constraints result in common, generalist platforms or specialized platforms? How many officers will the military be able to attract and retain? The answers to these questions will have significant implications for defining the nature of officers’ knowledge, skills, and specialties and the managing of the military and officers’ careers.

The relationship between the military and society is also likely to change, with significant effects on the closed nature of the military community. Over time, the military has become less isolated from society, making it more difficult to maintain a closed community. This relative autonomy of the military vis-à-vis society is likely to decrease even more if current trends continue. For example,
military bases are less like islands in the sea of society and are becoming more integrated with local government and economic infrastructures for housing, schooling, medical care, banking, retail, restaurants, and many other goods and services. Some have argued that this integration of the military into local communities is helpful for generating the public’s confidence, decreasing costs, increasing satisfaction, and decreasing dependence of officers and their families on the military alone.20 Furthermore, as American society continues to become more diverse—demographically and culturally—the pressures on the military to accommodate these changes will increase. The recent debate over gays in the military is but one example. Public debate about what our nation’s national security policy should be in the post–Cold War era is yet another example.

Finally the demands of officers themselves have shifted and altered the defining characteristics of the officer profession, and they will continue to do so. For example, the requirements for joint duty assignments may result in a culture of jointness that supplants the separate cultures of the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines.21 In addition, if civilian spouses of military personnel increasingly seek employment on their own and if the number of dual military and single parent households within the military continues to rise, issues of rotations and deployment will be problematic. Also, if the vast majority of the U.S. military force becomes stationed on this continent as anticipated, those officers who are interested in mobility and adventure are likely to be disappointed. Furthermore, the nature of overseas missions may change from officers being the managers of warriors to soldier diplomats and soldier statesmen, especially if there is more involvement in peacekeeping missions.22 All of these changing demands from within the military are likely to change both the knowledge and skills as well as the closed nature of the military community.

In short, changes in threat, military strategy, technology, societal demographics and culture, the economy, and the demands of officers themselves are likely to change the defining characteristics of officership. Most likely to change are the needed knowledge, skills, and experience and the nature of the closed community. But in the face of these changes, a defining characteristic of officership that is likely to be maintained is the core values of the military. The military is likely to continue promoting specific values: loyalty, duty, selfless service, integrity, and respect for the Constitution and what it means in civil-military relations. Management

22Segal, Organizational Designs, op cit., p. 39.
theory claims that values constitute the foundation of organizational cultures; the military has a long tradition of cultural acculturation of its members; officers will probably continue down this path. However, given the present national security issues, what this culture is oriented toward will change. No longer can the educational institutions and the officer profession assume a singular orientation characteristic of the Cold War era. Rather, the increasing complexity of national security priorities will have an effect on how the bedrock values of the military are carried out in flexible and adaptable ways.