



# SMALL WARS

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## JOURNAL

## The Times They Are A-Changing: A Few Thoughts on American Military Discipline and Organization

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*Like its politicians and its war, society has the teenagers it deserves. - J. B. Priestley*

As Americans, we are practical and unimaginative people, and our discussions of national defense reflect our love of numbers and hard facts: we focus on things like budgetary requirements, troop numbers, what hardware can be bought or designed and what the newest technology promises. But high technology is neither a stable nor enduring character of war. It is men who fight wars, not budgets or weapons, and it is the organization of the military that binds men together and gives them the purpose, common language and coherency of action that can turn political will into reality. Failing to maintain the organizational discipline of the military is far more problematic than failing to keep in lockstep with the latest technological offerings.

Every military organization is a social construction imbued with the values, mores, expectations and hopes of all its members and faces two competing forces as it organizes young men and women for war: the need to forge fighting men through discipline and acculturation into the military system; and the countervailing pressure of lifetimes spent being indoctrinated with societal values that, at least in the West, seem increasingly at odds with traditional military virtues. Yet we are charged with enforcing higher standards and stricter discipline than that enjoyed by civilian society. This puts us between a rock and a hard place: civilian oversight of the military will continue to become ever more stringent and will increasingly limit the effectiveness of traditional means of discipline and indoctrination as changing notions of social justice will be privileged over the laws of military necessity. At the same time, modern American values will continue to grow apart from traditional military values and will inexorably change the face of military culture. We can put soldiers in uniforms and cut their hair to make them look different from civilians, but we will always be limited in the extent to which we can remake their personalities and how permanently we can install those changes. Although boot camp is for many young men and women a transformative moment, a halcyon experience from which they emerge with the enthusiasm of the newly converted, we then allow them to enter massive bureaucratic organizations where they get lost and slowly return to being the people they once were. We need to prevent that from happening and maintain the rigor and vigor which boot camp instills in young men and women. What follows are a few painless organizational tweaks that can help reshape American military discipline.

**Shape Behavior Through Meaningful Rewards**

American youth understand rewards differently than do their elders. A prime reason for the common lamentation among staff NCOs and officers of a certain age that “kids coming out of basic training just aren’t good enough anymore” is that the rewards offered by the military aren’t tailored for today’s youth, but rather for young Americans from the 1940s. Although it is true that as a nation we are increasingly self-interested, undisciplined, and focused on short-term pleasures, today’s youth are also smarter, better educated, and more independent-minded than ever before. If we aren’t getting what we want from younger service members, it’s at least partly because our system of punishment and rewards is broken. They need tangible reasons to act the way they are supposed to, or they will simply slip back into old habits.

There are few rewards in the military commonly given to junior members which carry any value beyond that of public praise. Although we might say that doing a job well done is inherently rewarding, most 18 and 19 year olds do not share that view. Most see the military as a stepping stone to other careers, meaning that if we do not actually provide rewards there is no real incentive for them to do more than “just good enough”. Creating a reward structure that is actually meaningful to junior service members (hint: they really aren’t impressed by Certificates of Commendation) and encourages individual contributions to unit effectiveness would be an important step.

What we have currently is an “award structure” not a “reward structure” –ribbons and medals all have deep existential meaning for those of us who feel personally tied through tradition to the past and future communities of the military; but most young men and women have greater attachment and would be more encouraged by material rewards. And indeed, in an “all-volunteer, professional military” it would make sense for us to incentivize performance with monetary rewards much as is done in the rest of society. In fact, for the majority of history battlefield performance has been directly tied to monetary and material rewards through the accumulation of plunder, the granting of prizes, and the awarding of the titles, lands and property of the conquered to one’s loyal soldiers. It was only in the late modern era, with its use of mass conscript armies motivated by patriotism or revolutionary zeal that rewards became bureaucratized into awards and the quotidian replaced by the symbolic.

Obviously, I am not suggesting that we encourage the taking of booty on the battlefield – and arguably any sort of rewards for individual bravery on the post-modern battlefield is self-defeating – but certainly, at least in garrison, rewarding individuals and units who perform better than others is a wholly logical and American thing to do. Pushing young Americans to do better and then rewarding them for their effort in a way they understand simply makes sense. Giving them not only the leadership and management skills to be effective military and civilian leaders, but also that responsibility, rather than emphasizing trade skills and the chance to get out early to go to college, is another.

### **Decentralize Disciplinary Authority**

In order to maintain discipline across large organizations, punishments must be available that can correct and reform the individual as well as deter others from making similar mistakes. To do so, punishments must be logically tied to the offense, culturally acceptable, and either draconian in nature or delivered swiftly by someone intimately familiar with the culprit. Unfortunately, the range of punishments available to the military and the level at which they can be assigned has shrunk considerably in recent times. Preventing hazing and the abuse of power is important, but it is something that can be accomplished without hamstringing ourselves when it comes to correcting behavior.

The punishments available to today’s leaders are almost entirely bureaucratic - delivered impersonally through paperwork by people not particularly familiar with the incident or the humans behind it and thus lacking in psychological force and emotional weight. For example, punishment for insubordination or a

failure in leadership - things which at one time would have been considered the very worst offenses a human could commit, but which are now dwarfed by things like public intoxication - generally requires documentation of a number of previous offenses before leaders can actually mete out the punishment. This usually takes the form of restriction or loss of pay, to be delivered by a company or battalion commander who probably has never met the offender before.

But why not let the man or woman who is directly responsible for the offending individual have a little greater leeway in imposing punishments before things get to the level where higher brass needs to be called in? We need to relax the restrictions on what constitutes appropriate “extra military instruction” so that punishments are once again actually punishments and acknowledge that sometimes young people don’t learn unless they suffer a little boredom or sweat as a consequence of their actions.

If we can trust a sergeant to lead twelve of his peers into battle, and hold him accountable for not only his actions but theirs as well and thus implicitly make him responsible for their life and death in situations which are far beyond his control, we should give him a little respect and let him assign a few extra hours of standing watch or peeling spuds when his men don’t behave. Similarly, if a staff non-commissioned officer or lieutenant is to be trusted with perhaps forty or fifty lives and millions of dollars in equipment, it would make sense that he or she could perhaps take away some of their pay when they fail to accomplish assigned tasks or uphold standards.

Although standing tall before the man carries its own particular terrors, being punished by someone you don’t know in the form of having to initial a short stack of documents doesn’t offer much hope in reforming the individual or deterring others. We have only a few punishments left and these can rarely be tied to any crime in either nature or severity - there are few meaningful punishments in between yelling at someone and ending their career in a flood of paperwork. Further, rarely are serious punishments delivered by someone intimate with the offender - someone such as an NCO, Staff NCO, or junior officer. A greater range of meaningful punishments need to be made available to junior leaders rather than forcing them to exercise disciplinary authority in the breach and “when the Sir isn’t looking.”

### **Maximize the Potential of Small Units by Expanding the SOF Model**

Contemporary American military leaders pay constant lip service to the importance of small units, decentralized authority and junior leadership, but we don’t actually do much to establish it as part of the organizational structure and culture of the military. This is a pity, because pushing down authority to small units not only allows one to react quicker to threats, make better decisions at an appropriate level, and leverage modern technology to its fullest potential; but it is at the small unit level that group identities, loyalties, and behavioral controls are most meaningfully created. However, the hierarchical, stove-piped organization of the services makes it very difficult to exploit these advantages. Sure, there are thousands of squad or fire-team sized units in the military, but they are just cogs in a very large machine. Think about it: outside of special operations units, the smallest units to have a stable identity and composition are battalions composed of several hundred soldiers. Research shows that the largest groups that can effectively function as “teams” ( a group in which the talents and assets of all individuals are combined to create a product greater than the sum of its parts) are composed of no more than 8-12 people. Coincidentally, this happens to be the upper limits on the size of most SOF units.

As well as promising tactical benefits, permanently decentralizing authority to junior leaders and using small, squad sized units with a defined group identity and relatively stable composition will increase individual discipline and commitment to the larger unit. Hyper-individualized American youths have no particular reason to feel compelled by the wants and needs of large organizations or higher leaders with whom they have no interaction. But they care very much what their friends think, and the smaller the unit,

the greater their share of the pain and the joy of responsibility. It is only by bringing the weight of social pressure and the logic of military necessity down to this very personal level that most youths will understand the importance of their position. In a small, intimate unit, there is no place to hide from one's peers and no where to run if ostracized.

### **Discipline as Communication: Make Sure You Teach the Correct Lessons**

Discipline is the most important way of communicating our values and our strategic thought to those who serve us. Every act of discipline, be it punitive or salutary in nature, has symbolic value. This symbolic value is the most important part of any policy or order. Unfortunately, these messages are all too often either hidden or lost in translation. What seems reasonable at the level of a battalion, regimental, or division commander does not seem reasonable to the average individual or it is not made to seem reasonable to the average individual. This is not to say that we should put much stock in the normal grumblings and mutterings that comprise the majority of interpersonal communication between soldiers, however, we must pay closer attention to how our subordinates receive the unspoken messages that are part of every order and every policy we pass down. It is not enough to simply pass on a command and "watch stuff happen." We need to ensure that our subordinates understand what goals and virtues the order is meant to communicate.

Let us take as an example the recent decision by the Marine Corps to make wearing the Service Bravo uniform mandatory on Fridays. From a historical perspective, this may seem barely worth mentioning. After all, it was a policy that had been in place for many years prior to Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom; all Marines are required to own the uniform and should be prepared to wear it; and, of course, Marines like to look good and it is indeed a sharp looking uniform. Although these points were communicated to all Marines, the explicit message communicated by the writing of the order was not the same as the message that most Marines interpreted for themselves and their squad mates. Instead of being seen as a healthy return to traditions of the service, the policy was interpreted as a final symbol that the Marine Corps was beginning the transition to a boring, peace-time military organization in which having freshly pressed trousers would be more important than operational effectiveness. I heard innumerable Marines of all ranks say, "That's it, I'm getting out. The party's over." It is precisely these small perceived injustices that lead many good people to seek other career paths after exploring this one. We must be more attuned to our subordinates and think more closely of the signals we send. What if, instead of "Service Bravo Fridays," it was "10 Mile Hump Fridays" or "Ground-fighting Fridays"? There would certainly be at least as much grumbling, but it would be of a different timbre, and the ultimate message - that of a transition into a peace-time routine, a commitment to ensuring that physical standards are maintained and a refocusing of discipline across the entire force - would have been better understood.

### **Conclusion: Get Ahead of the Curve**

Effective organizations change to match the political and cultural contexts in which they are embedded and find ways to maintain high standards and output in the face of external pressures. We need to start implementing organizational changes in the military in order to maintain the cultural separateness that makes us effective organizations. Rather than try to at least match pace with the changing social environment, we are instead reactionary, constantly finding ourselves bludgeoned by Congress and public opinion over topics like the conduct of our soldiers and Marines on the battlefield, the inclusion of females in the combat arms, hazing, or any other bugbear of the moment. We need to get ahead of the curve and begin reshaping our organizations to ensure we can continue to do our job: to protect Americans regardless of the political whims and social fads of the moment.

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## About the Author



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