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## Strategic Insights: Whiskey over Books, Again? Anti-Intellectualism and the Future Effectiveness of Army 2025

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February 23, 2016 | Dr. Don M. Snider

*Crossing the Plains on an expedition to Utah [in the 1850s], Major Charles A. May searched the wagons in an effort to reduce unnecessary baggage. When he reached the wagons of the light artillery battery, Captain Henry J. Hunt proudly pointed out the box containing the battery library. “Books,” May exclaimed. “You say books? Whoever heard of books being hauled over the Plains? What the hell are you going to do with them?” At that moment Captain Campbell of the Dragoons came up and asked permission to carry a barrel of whiskey. “Yes, anything in reason Captain, you can take along the whiskey, but damned if these books shall go.”<sup>1</sup>*

The Army’s new Chief of Staff just published his detailed vision for the Army in the near term. The focus is “to regain combined arms capabilities in tactical formations while improving key aspects of overall strategic readiness.”<sup>2</sup> However, “to regain,” means something has been lost. And that something, in General Milley’s view, is nothing less than one of the Army’s core professional competencies—combined arms operations at the tactical level. But, how do military professions lose the ability to perform one of their key professional practices?

One way this costly tragedy happens is by a persistent cultural bias to anti-intellectualism in ways both small and large, often isolated, and yet by their effects very widespread, penetrating, and influential on behavior. The history of such anti-intellectualism has been cogently and colorfully displayed in a splendid essay by one of our finest soldier-scholars, Lloyd Matthews.<sup>3</sup> I owe the epigraph above to the deep research displayed in his historical analysis.

Matthews ends his marvelous presentation with two notable conclusions, each one sentence long. “A profession lives or dies by the vitality of its professional expertise. If that expertise withers in stasis because the thinkers, innovators, conceptualizers, theorists, intellectual reformers, and philosophers have been dropped by the wayside, the profession will have no one to blame but itself.”<sup>4</sup>

Matthews's first conclusion was informed by an earlier research project brought to fruition in 2002 in the volume *The Future of the Army Profession*, which he edited. In it Gayle Watkins and I concluded that the "anti-intellectual" issue within the modern Army boiled down to whether or not the post-Cold War officer corps was dividing into two groups, the "doers" and the "thinkers," and whether the professional future for both groups was equally bright:

Since knowledge is the foundation of professions—expansion of that knowledge being fundamental to a profession's evolutionary success—it is essential to have valued members whose role is to create and develop expert knowledge *in addition to* those who apply professional expertise. If the Army is to flourish as a profession, both types of Army Professionals need to be equally esteemed, and to have equally bright futures. Unfortunately, this is not the case today nor without deep cultural change is it likely to be so in the future.<sup>5</sup>

Whether or not the future of doers and thinkers is more equally bright now in 2016 than it was in 2002 is a fascinating and cogent question; but for a long monograph, not this short set of insights. What we can do, however, is explore here several instances of current adaptations to Army expert practices. If such evolutions are not using the best expert knowledge available then perhaps the Army is, once again, choosing "whiskey over books." If, conversely, the best expert knowledge is being used then the "books" are winning, indicating positive professional potential for Army 2025.

So what expert knowledges are the stewards of the Army using today as they seek "to regain" needed expert practices amid a crunching set of defense reductions?

Without doubt the ethical conduct of the profession and its individual members is one of our most important and visible expert practices. After all, it is essential along with combat effectiveness in creating the trust with the American people that is the life-blood of our professional status.

Yet, Professor Charles Allen has recently argued that the Army today cannot assess the ethical climate of its own culture (nor can anyone within DoD, he claims, describing the situation as "unfathomable").<sup>6</sup> Without assessment, how can the stewards take informed action to foster ethical behavior and develop leaders within Army organizations and ranks?

Citing such respected leadership experts, like retired Lieutenant General (LTG) Walt Ulmer, Allen notes, even worse, that such instruments have for some time been designed and validated, available for the using! A profession that refuses to adapt available expert knowledge to address serious voids in one of its most core competencies—maintaining climates in which leaders of both competence **and** character can be developed—is struggling, indeed. Score one for the "whiskey!"

As second example, let's take the case of the Army's venerable individual leave form, the DA-31. Retired LTG Dave Barno and a colleague have recently noted that the Army has been using the same leave form for 23 years, and that one only marginally different from that used with carbon paper in 1975!<sup>7</sup> They continue that "the volume of manpower, energy, and effort" it takes to manage such an antiquated, though vital, aspect of our personnel system for just over one million Army professionals taking multiple leaves each year is "simply staggering."

Their recommendation? Adapt the cutting edge knowledge embedded in resource tracking software systems now used by American businesses and not-for-profits. One key to successful military professions is that they keep their precious professionals, uniformed and civilian, working **only** in expert practices. They do not waste them on routine, non-expert work that can be largely contracted out.

What, then, is so expert about accounting for periods of leave? Or in similar manner, what is so expert about remunerating our professionals; is the pay function still expert work based on a uniquely expert knowledge? So why does the Army still branch some portion of West Point and ROTC graduates each spring into the Finance Corps? And, more broadly, when was the last time Army stewards thoroughly rationalized our branch structure to the needs of Army 2025? Thus, when we consider such “back-office” operations of the Army’s personnel bureaucracy, score another one for the “whiskey.”

Now, how about an example from the profession’s operational jurisdictions? Accepting the fact that the militarization of America’s foreign policy is likely to continue involving the Army much as it has in recent decades, Dr. John Deni reports that the profession is increasingly, and correctly, embracing the security cooperation task as a core function. It has even added “engagement” to its list of warfighting functions along with the traditional mission command, movement and maneuver, intelligence, fires, sustainment, and protection.<sup>8</sup> Since Deni’s report, and notwithstanding the constraints of further downsizing, the Army’s new Chief of Staff has been earnestly seeking to create two new “advise and assist” brigades to better execute the engagement function.<sup>9</sup>

But with what expert knowledge are the decisions made to employ such capabilities? Here, Deni is quite less sanguine.

Some studies dealing with security cooperation have examined larger sets of cases, concluding that the most important factors include not just parallel interests and policy preferences on the part of recipient governments and their citizens, but also consistent, long-term funding by donors; recipient capacity and ability to absorb and utilize assistance; and donor and recipient goal alignment. . . . Rather, what unfortunately seems to be the case is that senior policymakers within both the executive and legislative branches of the U.S. Government have not yet internalized these lessons . . . if civilian policymakers ultimately make poor policy choices that fly in the face of existing evidence—the Pentagon [and largely the Army] is likely to be saddled with objectives that it has only a very small chance of achieving.<sup>10</sup>

Once again, then, the correct use of the right expert knowledge remains key to the effectiveness of the Army Profession. Whether decided by civilian or military leaders, the results of engagement in situations where expert analysis deems it has little chance of success have proven to be highly problematic, sadly with the waste of Soldiers’ lives and other national treasure, e.g., as was the case with the Iraqi National Army after 2008. Score another one for “whisky over books.”

Next, let’s consider a recent case where the Army has carefully recreated its own expert practice, that of mission command, only to find that in the current institutional environment its implementation is incapable of producing sufficiently the one thing most necessary for its

success—interpersonal trust between Army leaders and those led. Remember, doctrinally speaking, mission command is “the exercise of authority and direction by the commander using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander’s intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders in the conduct of unified land operations.”<sup>11</sup> (Whew . . .) Several operational principles are embedded in this definition, three of which are germane here: “Build cohesive teams through mutual trust,” “Exercise disciplined initiative,” and “Accept prudent risk.” The essential idea, which worked quite well in the decentralized operations in the Middle East, is that subordinate leaders exercise disciplined initiative within the commander’s intent and an acceptance of prudent risk stemming from those actions. The result was cohesive, effective teams at multiple levels of operations.

But more recently, Drs. Lenny Wong and Steve Gerras have reported in their study *Lying to Ourselves* that such trust within the ranks is not all that it must be.<sup>12</sup> Stated briefly, their work documents that the utterly undisciplined cascade of bureaucratic reporting requirements flowing down on subordinate leaders throughout the Army has fostered massive dishonesty in such reporting. Even the Chief of Staff of the Army just thought it necessary to emphasize “accurate reporting” as the first requirement to generating needed readiness.<sup>13</sup>

So how did the Army Profession wind up, in the words of Wong and Gerras, “. . . abetting the very behavior it deems unacceptable.”<sup>14</sup> Simply, it paid insufficient attention to what is well known in the literatures of ethical and moral reasoning and associated disciplines—that intense psychological pressures to succeed, to present a successful unit, and to simply get things done, etc., induce “ethical fading” and other forms of rationalizations for immoral behavior. In more common-sense language, if everything is a priority then nothing is, including the very lifeblood of the profession’s existence, trust. Score another one for “whiskey over the books.”

Lastly, let’s consider the case of the Army’s Ready and Resilient Campaign, which consists of “evidence-based health promotion programs . . . that are founded on the best available research and are recommended on the basis of a systematic review of the published, peer-reviewed research.”<sup>15</sup> But something is obviously missing in the current program—any reference to, or use of, Soldiers’ and Army Civilians’ participation in organized religious activities for their documented positive effects on human well-being . . . and this, even though over 75% of Army Professionals self-identify with such religions!<sup>16</sup>

Further, this is an area within the academic disciplines where there is no shortage of “systematic . . . published, peer-reviewed research.” No less a scholar than Alister McGrath has noted in discussing the impossibility of empirical ethics, “. . . there is now a large body of serious empirical work on the impact of religious commitment on human well-being which shows a positive observed correlation between faith and well-being.”<sup>17</sup> He cites the work of Koenig and Cohen published in 2002, “now supplemented by the many others.” That was almost a decade and a half ago!

As one Army professional serving within the Campaign has noted, “Leaving out religion from efforts to build and sustain resilience is comparable to leaving out nutrition in discussions about physical fitness.”<sup>18</sup> Anti-intellectualism comes in many flavors, and it would appear here, most sadly, that one of them is political correctness abetted by a lack of moral courage. Score again for the “whiskey.”

To sum up, the two defining characteristics, indeed imperatives, of a military profession—quite in contrast to those of a military bureaucracy—are its expert knowledge and its expert practices, ethical and effective. New Army doctrine on profession, promulgated in 2013 for the first time ever, has thoroughly adopted this axiom from study of the sociology of modern competitive professions.<sup>19</sup>

Let’s not miss the point here. Yes, there are bright spots within the Army Profession where the pursuit of new expert knowledge is proceeding apace, e.g. the Human Dimension Strategy in support of the Army’s new operational concept.<sup>20</sup> But overall, the Army’s expert knowledge is lagging.

As it works once again “to regain” lost practices, the Army Profession must broadly reverse its cultural biases toward anti-intellectualism. Amid dire resource shortfalls, as we have seen, there is simply too much effectiveness to be lost by not using the best expert knowledge available, not to mention the aversion of further loss of vital professional practices.

## ENDNOTES

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4. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

5. Don M. Snider and Gayle Watkins, Project Directors, “Introduction to Section II, The Profession’s Military-Technical Expert Knowledge,” in *The Future of the Army Profession*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002, p. 102.

6. Charles Allen, “Ethics and Army Leadership: Climate Matters,” *Parameters*, Vol. 45, No. 1, Spring 2015, pp. 69-83; and, “It’s Time to Establish Ethics-Related Metrics,” *Army*, February 2016, pp. 29-31.

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13. Milley, p. 3.
14. Wong and Gerras, p. 3.
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18. Koyn, p. 121.
19. See, Andrew Abbott, *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988. Abbotts' theses framed our research projects which produced the two books on *The Future of the Army Profession*, 2002 and 2005. The new doctrine is promulgated in Army Doctrinal Reference Publication 1: *The Army Profession*, Washington DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2013 and 2015.
20. "The Army Human Dimension Strategy," 2015, available from [usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/publications/20150524\\_Human\\_Dimension\\_Strategy\\_vr\\_Signature\\_WM\\_1.pdf](http://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/publications/20150524_Human_Dimension_Strategy_vr_Signature_WM_1.pdf), accessed on February 3, 2016.

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