

REVIEWS

Author's Recipe for Fixing Personnel Problems Doesn't Attack Army's Core Weaknesses

The Downsized Warrior, America's Army in Transition by David McCormick, New York University Press, New York, N.Y., 1998. 268 pages, \$24.95 (hardback).

In the realm of articles and books which address new doctrine, tactics, and organizations on the digitized battlefields of tomorrow, this book addresses the cultural foundation of the Army, its officer personnel system. Whether the Army's drawdown worked will not be known until the next real war (but is being seen currently at the National Training Center). But David McCormick's *The Downsized Warrior* reveals troubling signs among the Army's 65,000 commissioned officers. Yes, the Army learned from the last several drawdowns, which followed the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and executed the "build-down" more efficiently. But condensing a Cold War army without restructuring a personnel system designed at the end of World War II left a dispirited officer corps. As a result, an already rigid Officer Personnel Management System (OPMS), designed to support the Defense Officer Management Act (DOPMA) of 1980, leaves officers, particularly commanders, more concerned with surviving the bureaucracy than surviving the battlefield.

For officers who enjoy reading only battle essays and dramatic acts of leadership under fire, this is a hard read. But, it must be read and reread if officers are to understand how the "system" works. McCormick opens the door on a process few of us have had the privilege to view. The professional value of this book far outweighs its modest price of \$24.95. I highly recommend it to everyone's professional reading list in order to understand the impacts of military culture on military effectiveness.

The author, a West Point graduate and former Engineer officer who served with the 82nd Airborne Division in the Gulf War, concludes: "Morale within the officer corps has greatly declined as a result of downsizing, as have career expectations. The officer corps as a whole is less committed to the Army and the military profession than it was before downsizing began." He explains the complexities behind the latest problems with the officer corps as no one has since Colonel William Hauser (USA, Ret.) did in the late 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s. McCormick's book disputes the claims by many senior officers that the drawdown has only highlighted careerism and that it will subside after the drawdown is over. McCormick counters this excuse by using the drawdown as a catalyst that exposes larger

flaws in the Army's officer personnel system and the laws that bind the "system."

He quotes an unnamed captain as saying, "At Fort Bragg, captains didn't cooperate at all. It's become so competitive ... I've seen captains do each other in. They would catch someone doing something, not illegal, but a judgment call, and they'd say, 'Hey, I'm going to slam him by telling the boss.' And they did." A major at Fort Hood, Texas, adds, "I see a lot more competitiveness among majors and a lot less cooperation." To reach these painful points, and support his thesis, McCormick has conducted research where he analyzed hundreds of primary and secondary sources that deal with both the officer corps and society's impacts on how the Army conducts its personnel business. He also interviewed hundreds of officers impacted by the drawdown, and hundreds of other personnel, including former Chiefs of Staff of the Army, who have been behind the scenes of personnel actions or directly involved with the drawdown's planning and execution.

He paints a thorough picture on how Army senior leaders painstakingly and compassionately approached the hard mission of cutting the Army following our victory in the Gulf War. But the Army leaders weren't fault-free. The then-Chief of Staff at first reacted slowly to Congressional demands for a "peace dividend," and offered up few cuts or new force structures that would justify existing strength. The Army, which has the reputation of being notoriously bad at legislative relations, again found itself under a barrage of floor speeches calling for deeper reductions.

When the Army finally woke up, it found Pentagon civilians under Defense Secretary Dick Cheney already mapping the service's future force structure. At this point, the Army became more a manager of the drawdown than its chief executive officer. With its centralized personnel system, it was very good at this, with detrimental impacts to officer professionalism. In sum, civilians set overall strategy and the Army sweated the details. Again, this was something the Army was good at; it has a long historical tradition of "pursuit of meaningless details."

The climax of the book is McCormick's attack on the Holy Grail of the Army, its officer personnel management system. The system was built, designed, and sustained by the senior ranks to support the "up-or-out" promotion system, with traditions that stem from World War II and George C. Marshall's view of the officer corps in the future. Specifically, McCormick conducts an all-out attack on the OPMS studies of 1971 and 1983, and says, with a little insight into our current new OPMS

XXI system, "If past history is any guide, however, we might expect to see a relatively conservative set of recommendations that do little to challenge the status quo."

He addresses the Army's fascination with themes like a "vigorous and youthful officer corps" and the "generalist" reasoning that results in moving officers through numerous assignments for short periods of time. These traditions are based on the mobilization problems experienced by the Army at the start of World War II, when there was a small officer corps and no plan for expansion into a force structure that would support an army to fight a global conflict.

McCormick also touches upon, but not in detail, the negative effects of another tradition born in World War II, the Army's maintenance of a larger than necessary officer corps. Again, only William Hauser and some academics have challenged the Army's rationale at undercutting readiness by keeping so many officers in peacetime. McCormick points out in detail that, over the last decade and through the next decade, officers are gaining less and less experience in jobs that will demand critical decisions in combat. A significant example is the average time officers are serving in battalion positions such as company commander, operations officer, or executive officer, prior to becoming a battalion commander (the average is 54 months in a 16-year career). This comes at a time when the Army is embracing information technology that calls for experienced officers to assimilate and digest massive amounts of information, and then make a decision on a 24-hour-a-day future battlefield.

McCormick also addresses the impacts of the Army's "rigid" management system on officer education. He discovered the drawdown fostered an "anti-intellectualism" (it's actually been a tradition, stemming from officer resistance toward the first proposal to use examinations in order for officers to enter the School of Artillery and Cavalry (prelude to C&GSC) at Ft. Leavenworth in 1888). It has been a tradition in the Army to place officers in career-ending jobs in Army educational institutions, such as Fort Leavenworth and West Point. The Army forced military instructors and professors to retire. Command and General Staff College became known as "SERBia" — a mocking reference to the Army's use of selective early retirement boards, or SERBs, to cull the force of officers. McCormick reports that in 1992 alone, the Army forced 28 lieutenant colonels, a "substantial portion" of the faculty, to retire. The same occurred to ROTC

Continued on Page 61

Downsized Warrior

(Continued from Page 58)

instructors, who found themselves booted off college campuses, as well as officers assigned at the War College and the Combined Armed Services School. The result is that the officer corps has fallen back to more "traditional muddy boots career patterns." This will have a long-lasting impact on the Army as generations of officers avoid academic assignments, opting instead for short-term career satisfaction.

"Morale, career expectations, and organizational commitment within the officer corps have fallen, careerism has risen, and initiative has declined in the post-Cold War Army," says McCormick, as he offers proposals that go beyond those recommended under the label of OPMS XXI. However, they fall short of the type of revolution that is necessary to create a professional officer corps for the future. His recommendations include "flexible career patterns" and an end to anti-intellectualism by allowing officers to attend more schooling. He mentions nothing about reducing the size of the officer corps in relation to the force, based on historical models, nor the necessity of combining officer policies with a personnel system that promotes unit cohesion.

What McCormick discovered may be insoluble with the type of evolutionary reforms the Army has attempted to use to "cure" its officer problems. The Army, with its individual focus, summed up in the "be all you can be" phrase, maintains that the only way it can attract sufficient numbers of young men and women is to promise them professionally satisfying lives, complete with rapid promotions, travel, a subjective evaluation system that demands less than competence, and more education. When you recruit based on careerism, we should not be surprised if more officers are putting resume ahead of country.

MAJ DONALD VANDERGRIF
Duke University