

Staffing the Postmodern Army

Major Gregory G. Washington, U.S. Army

A PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY of professional military leaders is to advise the government on the importance of maintaining a military force structure that can accomplish the National Command Authority's strategic objectives. Those leaders recognize that three pillars support the fielding of such a force: equipment readiness, resource support, and personnel readiness.

Each pillar encompasses myriad subordinate issues. Equipment readiness, for example, includes maintenance; transportation; research and development; and procurement. Resource support includes budgetary, land-usage, and supply issues. Personnel readiness, arguably the most important pillar, includes training, recruiting, retention, promotion, administration, and morale. This article focuses on personnel readiness by considering strategies that have been designed to help the Army achieve a high level of personnel readiness in the postindustrial United States.

In February 2000, General Eric K. Shinseki, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, commissioned the Army Training and Leader Development Panel (ATLDP) to determine why record numbers of officers were leaving military service.¹ The Army's senior leaders seemed surprised at the level of dispirit the panel found. Officers were disgruntled and quite clear about the underlying reasons for their dissatisfaction. Most notably, the ATLDP found that officers perceived a significant incongruence between the Army's stated values and its practiced values. This disparity between word and deed is symptomatic of the changes in societal values experienced in the United States in recent years. Ours is a society that is shifting to a postmodern perspective, partially as a result of the passing of the industrial era. As society shifts, so too must the Army.

Author Gregory G. Washington contends that the Army's current personnel readiness system is outdated, in part because it was designed for an industrial era that has passed. If the Army is to maintain personnel readiness, it must develop new strategies of personnel management to accommodate postmodern influences and realities that imbue 21st-century American society.

The current concept of a full military career is based on two assumptions that might no longer be valid. First is that soldiers must be the youngest and strongest adults in society. Second is that soldiers are no longer useful after 20 to 30 years of service.

What is Postmodern Thinking?

The word “postmodern” is used to represent one of three general frames of reference by which individuals and societies apply meaning to the world around them. Our perceptions of the world around us profoundly affect everything about us, from language and relationships to thoughts and actions.

Philosopher Walter Truett Anderson describes the three basic frames of reference using the terms “premodern,” “modern,” and “postmodern.” He contends that society has gradually evolved from premodern thinking and is moving more decidedly into an era of postmodernism.² In the premodern era, most people were illiterate, which limited their access to information, other than by word of mouth, from authority figures. Religious and political leaders determined what was to be accepted by the masses as truth and reality. Generally speaking, it did not occur to individuals that there could be any way but the “right way,” the way being what their social leaders dictated.

Anderson further explains that, while modern thought was born from those beliefs, modern thinkers accepted that people from other societies held different worldviews.³ People of that time traveled to new places, saw new things, and became enlightened to the fact that some societies were different from their own. While modern thinkers accept that people think differently, they tend to find fault with those differences and believe that the only correct way to perceive the world is from their own societal perspective. The postmodern era, on the other hand, tolerates difference and clearly understands that frames of reference determine individual and societal perceptions of reality. People who possess different worldviews attach different meanings to like stimuli.

Defining the Postindustrial Era

As the modernist, or realist, continuum outlines frames of reference for comprehending reality, the industrial, or technical, continuum refers to business management strategies. The three benchmarks along the industrial continuum are the preindustrial, industrial, and postindustrial eras.

During the preindustrial era, it was normal practice for complex business activity to be handled by trained craftsmen who worked as subcontractors.⁴ The craftsmen were forced to adapt to the environment and were generally limited to conducting specialized or single-unit manufacturing processes. With the birth of the industrial revolution came a move toward task specialization, dominating nature to meet specific needs, and mass production. Following the lead of theorists such as Fredrick Winslow Taylor and Henri Fayol, scholars and practitioners describe the role of managers and define the science of management by determining best practices.⁵ Sociologist Max Weber explained the benefits of bureaucracy to protect from abuses, such as nepotism and corruption, encountered in preindustrial society.⁶

The hallmarks of the postindustrial era are information management and knowledge creation. These two factors help mankind understand nature and to develop technology that changes the way people live. The more knowledge we gain, the faster we can gain more knowledge and create new, life-shaping technology. In 1973, economist Georges Anderla developed a statistical model for the Organization of Economic Development to show the exponential increase in the rate of technological advancement.⁷ As a benchmark, Anderla used the known technology



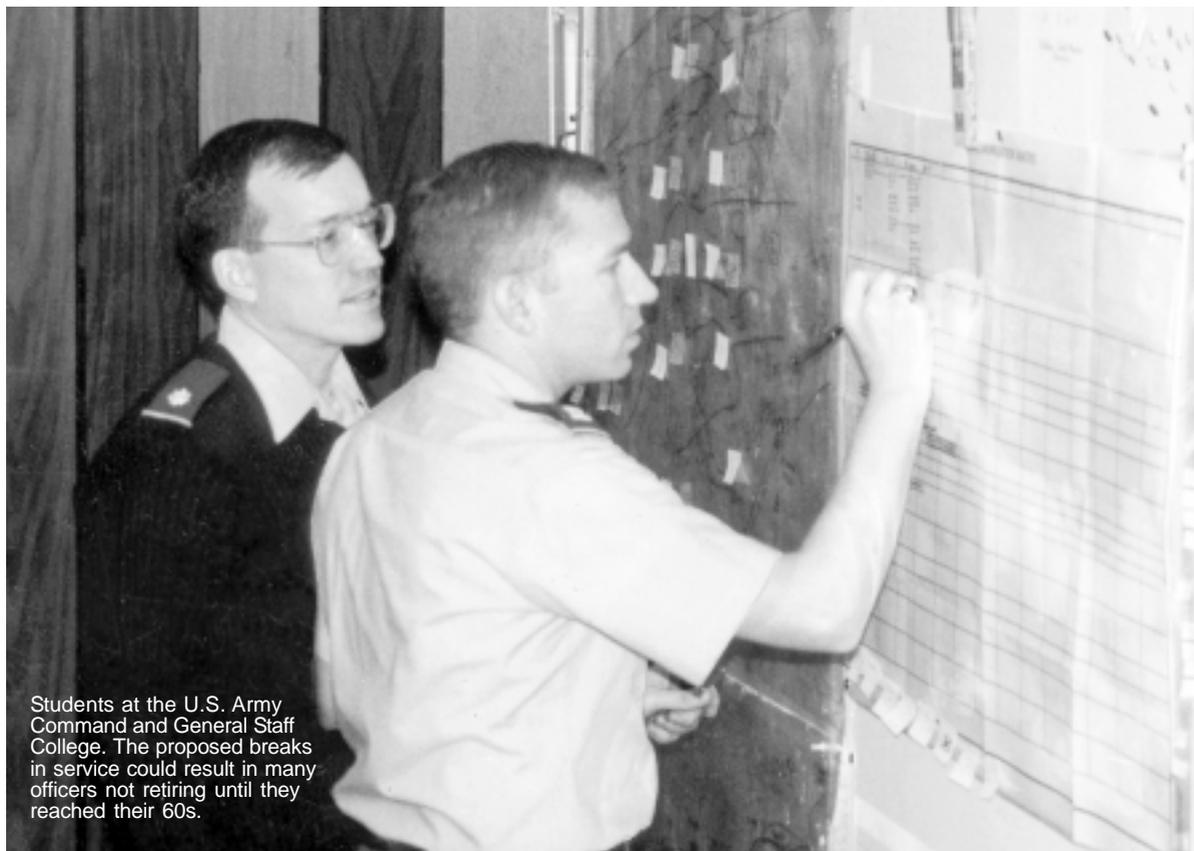
Members of the 101st Airborne Division take their oath of reenlistment at the site of the September 11 terrorist attack on New York City.

available in the year 1 A.D., a metric unit that radical philosopher Robert Anton Wilson calls one “Jesus,” to determine the doubling rate of knowledge. Anderla’s work showed that in the 1,500 years following 1 A.D., mankind doubled his technical knowledge: he had achieved two Jesuses. Statistically, he showed that we reached four Jesuses only 250 years later in 1750 and eight Jesuses by 1900.

Imagine the world in 1900. Now imagine it only 50 years later, when, according to Anderla, the amount of knowledge doubled at the turn of that century, bringing the world to 16 Jesuses. He proposes that the next doubling time took only 10 years, then 7 for the next, then only 6. So, in 1973, when Anderla’s study ended, the amount of knowledge available to humans had increased by a factor of 128 and had doubled in less than 6 years. If Anderla is correct, one can conclude that we are still experiencing exponential gains in life-altering technology far faster than in 6 years.

Technology and new knowledge have, in the postindustrial era, created unique social challenges, including globalization, changing societal roles, increased competition for consumers, increased competition for quality employees, and a greater demand for social and environmental awareness. Stagnation—refusing to adapt to these new challenges—is not a viable option. These special demands have caused postindustrial-era organizations to renege on what had been an implied promise—the concept of lifelong employment in the same organization.⁸ With that promise broken, employees must build and maintain a portfolio of

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Students at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. The proposed breaks in service could result in many officers not retiring until they reached their 60s.

Officers could apply for positions of interest and be hired based on their specific credentials. Each assignment would be for a standard term of service—2 or 3 years. There would be no implication that the officer would continue on active duty following each assignment, so it would be incumbent on each officer to manage his or her own career by applying for follow-on military assignments or civilian jobs or by pursuing military or civilian schooling.

marketable skills to be used when necessary. Organizations assume the responsibility for giving employees opportunities to develop those skills and allowing them to prepare for future job searches.

The Industrial-Era Army

The modern Army is well adapted to, and firmly entrenched in, the industrial era and the modernist paradigm. The evidence is manifested in current regulations, operational procedures, and methods employed to recruit and train personnel. Industrial-era paralysis is visible in the way the Army evaluates performance, promotes leaders, and assigns duties.

The Army has yet to come to grips with the new concept of the American family and continues to struggle with the requirement to adapt its programs and policies to reflect how modern American families look. Gone are the days when the average American family unit consisted of two biological parents and 2.4 children. Society has changed and is continuing to change. One need only pay attention to the news to see that American society and the U.S. military no longer share similar core values.

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At best, the differences in value systems create a communication barrier that results in faltering resource support. At worst, the conflict in

values creates a revolutionary environment wherein the military directly challenges its civilian authority to “protect” society from itself. Already the seeds are sown for creating a warrior class that is determined to resist change, evolution, and adaptation in favor of staunch adherence to traditional values and familiar perspectives of reality.

The Army’s structure is well suited for an organization in an industrial era; organizational hierarchy is well defined, which allows for easy command and control. Progression from one rank to the next is highly structured and managed so fairness is paramount. Personal skill and individual talent are secondary to time in grade, general experience in specific duty positions, superiors’ subjective value judgments, and qualifications received through formal military education.

The current concept of a full military career is based on two assumptions that might no longer be valid. First is that soldiers must be the youngest and strongest adults in society. Second is that soldiers are no longer useful after 20 to 30 years of service. In effect, the Army continues to promise lifelong employment (a concept that civilian organizations have come to realize is not practical) despite the fact that few people actually stop working after retiring from military service.

The U.S. Army attempts to attract young men and women and to retain them continuously to fill its ranks. The presumption is that all soldiers must be at a level of physical fitness that is far beyond what could be expected of older people and far beyond what is average for the civilian population. There are many military jobs that can be performed quite well by people who are at the same general level of fitness as the rest of our society, as is proven by the services’ increased reliance on Department of the Army civilians.

Strategy Proposals

To correct the disparities between the U.S. Army and the general U.S. populace, I posit the following proposals.

Outsource all but purely military functions. Outsourcing—relying on contractors to perform specific military functions—is a method of reducing cost while increasing functional expertise. Over the past decades, the Army has increasingly relied on contractors to perform a range of military duties during both peace and war. The precedence has been set for relying on civilians to deploy around the world to perform essential military services.

Current military organizational structure and career progression require service members to perform duties for which they did not ask and are not trained. The typical battalion or brigade S1, Personnel Officer, has received no formal training to perform those duties and is only interested in the job as a way station en route to future assignments, usually company command. The person is likely to remain in the job only for about 1 year, which means that just as he or she becomes proficient, it is time to move on to another job. The S1 is but one example; there are many more.

If the Army outsourced these functions, the advantages could be significant. Contractors would be able to ensure that only qualified individuals perform these functions. Personnel in these positions—and there is no reason they cannot hold reserve military rank—could focus 100 percent of their attention on the job at hand instead of looking forward to the next assignments. A contractor could provide more expert guidance

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and mentorship than traditional military commanders could. More important, though, is that military commanders would not lose any of the responsiveness the military requires of its staff officers because they would still influence who gets the contracts to fill the positions.

Clearly, there are some duties that could not be outsourced, primarily because there are no civilian requirements for certain jobs. Operations jobs should not be outsourced because of the unique tactical expertise staff officers possess. Their duties rely heavily on an intimate understanding of warfare rather than on the standard functional skills required of some other staff positions. The Army should study each job objectively to determine which ones could be successfully outsourced.

Allow seamless transitions between military and civilian jobs. It is vitally important that the military's value system match society's. The best way to do that is to ensure that officers maintain close ties with the rest of society. The Army cannot afford to be segregated from society. One method of maintaining close contact, while supporting officers' personal and professional development, is to allow officers to leave the Army for civilian schooling or to take civilian jobs and reenter the service at will. This would be a significant realignment of the Training With Industry Program, thus allowing anyone to participate.

In a society wherein the average person can expect to work well into his or her 60s, soldiers can expect to work after they leave the Army. In the postindustrial era, retiring soldiers will only be marketable in the civilian job market if they have advanced education and skills that are directly related to the corporate world and in keeping with management trends. Working as an Army officer for 20 or more years will not be sufficient experience to allow retiring officers to continue earning the type of income they earned previously. The Army must be redesigned to allow officers to pursue civilian education and to take civilian jobs periodically throughout their careers.

Develop a new full military career concept. The concept of a "normal" Army career should be the subject of much scrutiny. The intent of the current system is to provide soldiers with a pension that should allow them to stop working after a full military career of 20 or more years. For several reasons, including increased life expectancy, higher standards of living, and the fact that retirement compensation is not keeping pace with inflation, few military retirees can actually stop working when they retire in their 40s or 50s.

These facts provide sufficient motive to reconsider the concept of a full military career. Under the current system, active duty soldiers are expected to remain on active duty for 20 years or more to earn a retirement pension. The common expectation is that all 20 years will be served consecutively, and for most people, there is no opportunity to get out and then reenter the service. In keeping with the proposal to blur the line between who is considered a career soldier and who is not, the military services should adapt their personnel systems to expect the average soldier to have at least one, if not several, breaks in service.

A full military career might still be 20 or more years, but with breaks in service, instead of retiring between the ages of 42 and 52, the average soldier might not retire for 10 to 20 more years. He or she would still be younger than most civilian retirees would be. This proposal would clearly raise the average age of U.S. soldiers significantly. The days when the U.S. Army needed only the youngest and fittest citizens are gone.

Hire officers for specific jobs for standard terms of service. Under the current system, officers are assigned to posts based on the

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officer's availability and the Army's current needs. There is little formal consideration for either the officer's specific qualifications or the officer's personal desire to do the job. There is also a lack of continuity because officers rotate in and out of assignments after 12 to 18 months, especially at brigade level and below.

A possible solution for lack of continuity is to staff officer assignments the same way civilian companies hire employees. Officers could apply for positions of interest and be hired based on their specific credentials. Each assignment would be for a standard term of service—2 or 3 years. There would be no implication that the officer would continue on active duty following each assignment, so it would be incumbent on each officer to manage his or her own career by applying for follow-on military assignments or civilian jobs or by pursuing military or civilian schooling.

Open all assignments to women. The postindustrial era revolves around technology and knowledge management. Unlike days of old, physical strength is no longer the attribute of choice for an effective soldier. Technology is ubiquitous, which makes intelligence far more important than strength. The first standard argument against allowing women in combat is that they are not physically able to perform the tasks required of combat soldiers. To the extent that this is true, technology is the answer.

The second standard argument against women in combat is that their presence would cause men to display poor judgment by protecting women soldiers from harm. While this tendency may be accurate based on current societal values, this will change. Already, girls are playing competitive, traditionally male-dominated sports alongside boys. This trend will continue. As girls and boys grow up competing on sports fields, boys will learn that girls can be fierce competitors. They will no longer feel any more obligated to protect girls from harm than they will to protect anyone else on their team.

Change is inevitable. To ignore the inevitability of change is to ensure failure. The industrial era is drawing to a close, overcome by postmodern concepts and advances in technology that have shaped, and will continue to shape, the American society's values and expectations. Just as corporate America has realized that it has had to substantively change core concepts to remain viable, so too must the Army. Adapting to the postmodern reality of the postindustrial era is a matter of national defense. **MR**

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NOTES

1. U.S. Army Public Affairs, Army Training and Leader Development Panel, Washington, D.C., 2001.
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Major Gregory G. Washington, U.S. Army, is special projects coordinator, Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans, U.S. Army Special Operations Command, Fort Bragg, North Carolina. He received a B.A. from the University of Kentucky, an M.A. from the University of Phoenix, and he is a doctorate candidate at the University of Phoenix. He has served as Force Safety Officer, Sinai, Egypt, and as Group Adjutant, 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne), Fort Campbell, Kentucky.