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A failure in generalship

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By Lt. Col. Paul Yingling for the *Armed Forces Journal*

"You officers amuse yourselves with God knows what buffooneries and never dream in the least of serious service. This is a source of stupidity which would become most dangerous in case of a serious conflict." — Frederick the Great

For the second time in a generation, the United States faces the prospect of defeat at the hands of an insurgency. In April 1975, the U.S. fled the Republic of Vietnam, abandoning our allies to their fate at the hands of North Vietnamese communists. In 2007, Iraq's grave and deteriorating condition offers diminishing hope for an American victory and portends risk of an even wider and more destructive regional war.

These debacles are not attributable to individual failures, but rather to a crisis in an entire institution: America's general officer corps. America's generals have failed to prepare our armed forces for war and advise civilian authorities on the application of force to achieve the aims of policy. The argument that follows consists of three elements. First, generals have a responsibility to society to provide policymakers with a correct estimate of strategic probabilities. Second, America's generals in Vietnam and Iraq failed to perform this responsibility. Third, remedying the crisis in American generalship requires the intervention of Congress.

The Responsibilities of Generalship

Armies do not fight wars; nations fight wars. War is not a military activity conducted by soldiers, but rather a social activity that involves entire nations. Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz noted that passion, probability and policy each play their role in war. Any understanding of war that ignores one of these elements is fundamentally flawed.

The passion of the people is necessary to endure the sacrifices inherent in war. Regardless of the system of government, the people supply the blood and treasure required to prosecute war. The statesman must stir these passions to a level commensurate with the popular sacrifices required. When the ends of policy are small, the statesman can prosecute a conflict without asking the public for great sacrifice. Global conflicts such as World War II require the full mobilization of entire societies to provide the men and materiel necessary for the successful prosecution of war. The greatest error the statesman can make is to commit his nation to a great conflict without mobilizing popular passions to a level commensurate with the stakes of the conflict.

Popular passions are necessary for the successful prosecution of war, but cannot be sufficient. To prevail, generals must provide policymakers and the public with a correct estimation of strategic probabilities. The general is responsible for estimating the likelihood of success in applying force to achieve the aims of policy. The general describes both the means necessary for the successful prosecution of war and the ways in which the nation will employ those means. If the policymaker desires ends for which the means he provides are insufficient, the general is responsible for advising the statesman of this incongruence. The statesman must then scale back the ends of policy or mobilize popular passions to provide greater means. If the general remains silent while the statesman commits a nation to war with insufficient means, he shares culpability for the results.

However much it is influenced by passion and probability, war is ultimately an instrument of policy and its conduct is the responsibility of policymakers. War is a social activity undertaken on behalf of the nation; Augustine counsels us that the only purpose of war is to achieve a better peace. The choice of making war to achieve a better peace is inherently a value judgment in which the statesman must decide those interests and beliefs worth killing and dying for. The military man is no better qualified than the common citizen to make such judgments. He must therefore confine his input to his area of expertise — the estimation of strategic probabilities.

The correct estimation of strategic possibilities can be further subdivided into the preparation for war and the conduct of war. Preparation for war consists in the raising, arming, equipping and training of forces. The conduct of war consists of both planning for the use of those forces and directing those forces in operations.

To prepare forces for war, the general must visualize the conditions of future combat. To raise military forces properly, the general must visualize the quality and quantity of forces needed in the next war. To arm and equip military forces properly, the general must visualize the materiel requirements of future engagements. To train military forces properly, the general must visualize the human demands on future battlefields, and replicate those conditions in peacetime exercises. Of course, not even the most skilled general can visualize precisely how future wars will be fought. According to British military historian and soldier Sir Michael Howard, "In structuring and preparing an army for war, you can be clear that you will not get it precisely right, but the important thing is not to be too far wrong, so that you can put it right quickly."

The most tragic error a general can make is to assume without much reflection that wars of the future will look much like wars of the past. Following World War I, French generals committed this error, assuming that the next war would involve static battles dominated by firepower and fixed fortifications. Throughout the

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interwar years, French generals raised, equipped, armed and trained the French military to fight the last war. In stark contrast, German generals spent the interwar years attempting to break the stalemate created by firepower and fortifications. They developed a new form of war — the blitzkrieg — that integrated mobility, firepower and decentralized tactics. The German Army did not get this new form of warfare precisely right. After the 1939 conquest of Poland, the German Army undertook a critical self-examination of its operations. However, German generals did not get it too far wrong either, and in less than a year had adapted their tactics for the invasion of France.

After visualizing the conditions of future combat, the general is responsible for explaining to civilian policymakers the demands of future combat and the risks entailed in failing to meet those demands. Civilian policymakers have neither the expertise nor the inclination to think deeply about strategic probabilities in the distant future. Policymakers, especially elected representatives, face powerful incentives to focus on near-term challenges that are of immediate concern to the public. Generating military capability is the labor of decades. If the general waits until the public and its elected representatives are immediately concerned with national security threats before finding his voice, he has waited too long. The general who speaks too loudly of preparing for war while the nation is at peace places at risk his position and status. However, the general who speaks too softly places at risk the security of his country.

Failing to visualize future battlefields represents a lapse in professional competence, but seeing those fields clearly and saying nothing is an even more serious lapse in professional character. Moral courage is often inversely proportional to popularity and this observation is nowhere more true than in the profession of arms. The history of military innovation is littered with the truncated careers of reformers who saw gathering threats clearly and advocated change boldly. A military professional must possess both the physical courage to face the hazards of battle and the moral courage to withstand the barbs of public scorn. On and off the battlefield, courage is the first characteristic of generalship.

Failures of Generalship in Vietnam

America's defeat in Vietnam is the most egregious failure in the history of American arms. America's general officer corps refused to prepare the Army to fight unconventional wars, despite ample indications that such preparations were in order. Having failed to prepare for such wars, America's generals sent our forces into battle without a coherent plan for victory. Unprepared for war and lacking a coherent strategy, America lost the war and the lives of more than 58,000 service members.

Following World War II, there were ample indicators that America's enemies would turn to insurgency to negate our advantages in firepower and mobility. The French experiences in Indochina and Algeria offered object lessons to Western armies facing unconventional foes. These lessons were not lost on the more astute members of America's political class. In 1961, President Kennedy warned of "another type of class, new in its intensity, ancient in its origin — war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins, war by ambush instead of by combat, by infiltration instead of aggression, seeking victory by evading and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him." In response to these threats, Kennedy undertook a comprehensive program to prepare America's armed forces for counterinsurgency.

Despite the experience of their allies and the urging of their president, America's generals failed to prepare their forces for counterinsurgency. Army Chief of Staff Gen. George Decker assured his young president, "Any good soldier can handle guerrillas." Despite Kennedy's guidance to the contrary, the Army viewed the conflict in Vietnam in conventional terms. As late as 1964, Gen. Earle Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, stated flatly that "the essence of the problem in Vietnam is military." While the Army made minor organizational adjustments at the urging of the president, the generals clung to what Andrew Krepinovich has called "the Army concept," a vision of warfare focused on the destruction of the enemy's forces.

Having failed to visualize accurately the conditions of combat in Vietnam, America's generals prosecuted the war in conventional terms. The U.S. military embarked on a graduated attrition strategy intended to compel North Vietnam to accept a negotiated peace. The U.S. undertook modest efforts at innovation in Vietnam. Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS), spearheaded by the State Department's "Blowtorch" Bob Kromer, was a serious effort to address the political and economic causes of the insurgency. The Marine Corps' Combined Action Program (CAP) was an innovative approach to population security. However, these efforts are best described as too little, too late. Innovations such as CORDS and CAP never received the resources necessary to make a large-scale difference. The U.S. military grudgingly accepted these innovations late in the war, after the American public's commitment to the conflict began to wane.

America's generals not only failed to develop a strategy for victory in Vietnam, but also remained largely silent while the strategy developed by civilian politicians led to defeat. As H.R. McMaster noted in "Dereliction of Duty," the Joint Chiefs of Staff were divided by service parochialism and failed to develop a unified and coherent recommendation to the president for prosecuting the war to a successful conclusion. Army Chief of Staff Harold K. Johnson estimated in 1965 that victory would require as many as 700,000 troops for up to five years. Commandant of the Marine Corps Wallace Greene made a similar estimate on troop levels. As President Johnson incrementally escalated the war, neither man made his views known to the president or Congress. President Johnson made a concerted effort to conceal the costs and consequences of Vietnam from the public, but such duplicity required the passive consent of America's generals.

Having participated in the deception of the American people during the war, the Army chose after the war to deceive itself. In "Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife," John Nagl argued that instead of learning from defeat, the Army after Vietnam focused its energies on the kind of wars it knew how to win — high-technology conventional wars. An essential contribution to this strategy of denial was the publication of "On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War," by Col. Harry Summers. Summers, a faculty member of the U.S. Army War College, argued that the Army had erred by not focusing enough on conventional warfare in Vietnam, a lesson the Army was happy to hear. Despite having been recently defeated by an insurgency, the Army slashed training and resources devoted to counterinsurgency.

By the early 1990s, the Army's focus on conventional war-fighting appeared to have been vindicated. During the 1980s, the U.S. military benefited from the largest peacetime military buildup in the nation's history. High-technology equipment dramatically increased the mobility and lethality of our ground forces. The Army's

National Training Center honed the Army's conventional war-fighting skills to a razor's edge. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 signaled the demise of the Soviet Union and the futility of direct confrontation with the U.S. Despite the fact the U.S. supported insurgencies in Afghanistan, Nicaragua and Angola to hasten the Soviet Union's demise, the U.S. military gave little thought to counterinsurgency throughout the 1990s. America's generals assumed without much reflection that the wars of the future would look much like the wars of the past — state-on-state conflicts against conventional forces. America's swift defeat of the Iraqi Army, the world's fourth-largest, in 1991 seemed to confirm the wisdom of the U.S. military's post-Vietnam reforms. But the military learned the wrong lessons from Operation Desert Storm. It continued to prepare for the last war, while its future enemies prepared for a new kind of war.

Failures of Generalship in Iraq

America's generals have repeated the mistakes of Vietnam in Iraq. First, throughout the 1990s our generals failed to envision the conditions of future combat and prepare their forces accordingly. Second, America's generals failed to estimate correctly both the means and the ways necessary to achieve the aims of policy prior to beginning the war in Iraq. Finally, America's generals did not provide Congress and the public with an accurate assessment of the conflict in Iraq.

Despite paying lip service to "transformation" throughout the 1990s, America's armed forces failed to change in significant ways after the end of the 1991 Persian Gulf War. In "The Sling and the Stone," T.X. Hammes argues that the Defense Department's transformation strategy focuses almost exclusively on high-technology conventional wars. The doctrine, organizations, equipment and training of the U.S. military confirm this observation. The armed forces fought the global war on terrorism for the first five years with a counterinsurgency doctrine last revised in the Reagan administration. Despite engaging in numerous stability operations throughout the 1990s, the armed forces did little to bolster their capabilities for civic reconstruction and security force development. Procurement priorities during the 1990s followed the Cold War model, with significant funding devoted to new fighter aircraft and artillery systems. The most commonly used tactical scenarios in both schools and training centers replicated high-intensity interstate conflict. At the dawn of the 21st century, the U.S. is fighting brutal, adaptive insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq, while our armed forces have spent the preceding decade having done little to prepare for such conflicts.

Having spent a decade preparing to fight the wrong war, America's generals then miscalculated both the means and ways necessary to succeed in Iraq. The most fundamental military miscalculation in Iraq has been the failure to commit sufficient forces to provide security to Iraq's population. U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) estimated in its 1998 war plan that 380,000 troops would be necessary for an invasion of Iraq. Using operations in Bosnia and Kosovo as a model for predicting troop requirements, one Army study estimated a need for 470,000 troops. Alone among America's generals, Army Chief of Staff General Eric Shinseki publicly stated that "several hundred thousand soldiers" would be necessary to stabilize post-Saddam Iraq. Prior to the war, President Bush promised to give field commanders everything necessary for victory. Privately, many senior general officers both active and retired expressed serious misgivings about the insufficiency of forces for Iraq. These leaders would later express their concerns in tell-all books such as "Fiasco" and "Cobra II." However, when the U.S. went to war in Iraq with less than half the strength required to win, these leaders did not make their objections public.

Given the lack of troop strength, not even the most brilliant general could have devised the ways necessary to stabilize post-Saddam Iraq. However, inept planning for postwar Iraq took the crisis caused by a lack of troops and quickly transformed it into a debacle. In 1997, the U.S. Central Command exercise "Desert Crossing" demonstrated that many postwar stabilization tasks would fall to the military. The other branches of the U.S. government lacked sufficient capability to do such work on the scale required in Iraq. Despite these results, CENTCOM accepted the assumption that the State Department would administer postwar Iraq. The military never explained to the president the magnitude of the challenges inherent in stabilizing postwar Iraq.

After failing to visualize the conditions of combat in Iraq, America's generals failed to adapt to the demands of counterinsurgency. Counterinsurgency theory prescribes providing continuous security to the population. However, for most of the war American forces in Iraq have been concentrated on large forward-operating bases, isolated from the Iraqi people and focused on capturing or killing insurgents. Counterinsurgency theory requires strengthening the capability of host-nation institutions to provide security and other essential services to the population. America's generals treated efforts to create transition teams to develop local security forces and provincial reconstruction teams to improve essential services as afterthoughts, never providing the quantity or quality of personnel necessary for success.

After going into Iraq with too few troops and no coherent plan for postwar stabilization, America's general officer corps did not accurately portray the intensity of the insurgency to the American public. The Iraq Study Group concluded that "there is significant underreporting of the violence in Iraq." The ISG noted that "on one day in July 2006 there were 93 attacks or significant acts of violence reported. Yet a careful review of the reports for that single day brought to light 1,100 acts of violence. Good policy is difficult to make when information is systematically collected in a way that minimizes its discrepancy with policy goals." Population security is the most important measure of effectiveness in counterinsurgency. For more than three years, America's generals continued to insist that the U.S. was making progress in Iraq. However, for Iraqi civilians, each year from 2003 onward was more deadly than the one preceding it. For reasons that are not yet clear, America's general officer corps underestimated the strength of the enemy, overestimated the capabilities of Iraq's government and security forces and failed to provide Congress with an accurate assessment of security conditions in Iraq. Moreover, America's generals have not explained clearly the larger strategic risks of committing so large a portion of the nation's deployable land power to a single theater of operations.

The intellectual and moral failures common to America's general officer corps in Vietnam and Iraq constitute a crisis in American generalship. Any explanation that fixes culpability on individuals is insufficient. No one leader, civilian or military, caused failure in Vietnam or Iraq. Different military and civilian leaders in the two conflicts produced similar results. In both conflicts, the general officer corps designed to advise policymakers, prepare forces and conduct operations failed to perform its intended functions. To understand how the U.S. could face defeat at the hands of a weaker insurgent enemy for the second time in a generation, we must look at the structural influences that produce our general officer corps.

The Generals We Need

The most insightful examination of failed generalship comes from J.F.C. Fuller's "Generalship: Its Diseases and Their Cure." Fuller was a British major general who saw action in the first attempts at armored warfare in World War I. He found three common characteristics in great generals — courage, creative intelligence and physical fitness.

The need for intelligent, creative and courageous general officers is self-evident. An understanding of the larger aspects of war is essential to great generalship. However, a survey of Army three- and four-star generals shows that only 25% hold advanced degrees from civilian institutions in the social sciences or humanities. Counterinsurgency theory holds that proficiency in foreign languages is essential to success, yet only one in four of the Army's senior generals speaks another language. While the physical courage of America's generals is not in doubt, there is less certainty regarding their moral courage. In almost surreal language, professional military men blame their recent lack of candor on the intimidating management style of their civilian masters. Now that the public is immediately concerned with the crisis in Iraq, some of our generals are finding their voices. They may have waited too long.

Neither the executive branch nor the services themselves are likely to remedy the shortcomings in America's general officer corps. Indeed, the tendency of the executive branch to seek out mild-mannered team players to serve as senior generals is part of the problem. The services themselves are equally to blame. The system that produces our generals does little to reward creativity and moral courage. Officers rise to flag rank by following remarkably similar career patterns. Senior generals, both active and retired, are the most important figures in determining an officer's potential for flag rank. The views of subordinates and peers play no role in an officer's advancement; to move up he must only please his superiors. In a system in which senior officers select for promotion those like themselves, there are powerful incentives for conformity. It is unreasonable to expect that an officer who spends 25 years conforming to institutional expectations will emerge as an innovator in his late forties.

If America desires creative intelligence and moral courage in its general officer corps, it must create a system that rewards these qualities. Congress can create such incentives by exercising its proper oversight function in three areas. First, Congress must change the system for selecting general officers. Second, oversight committees must apply increased scrutiny over generating the necessary means and pursuing appropriate ways for applying America's military power. Third, the Senate must hold accountable through its confirmation powers those officers who fail to achieve the aims of policy at an acceptable cost in blood and treasure.

To improve the creative intelligence of our generals, Congress must change the officer promotion system in ways that reward adaptation and intellectual achievement. Congress should require the armed services to implement 360-degree evaluations for field-grade and flag officers. Junior officers and non-commissioned officers are often the first to adapt because they bear the brunt of failed tactics most directly. They are also less wed to organizational norms and less influenced by organizational taboos. Junior leaders have valuable insights regarding the effectiveness of their leaders, but the current promotion system excludes these judgments. Incorporating subordinate and peer reviews into promotion decisions for senior leaders would produce officers more willing to adapt to changing circumstances, and less likely to conform to outmoded practices.

Congress should also modify the officer promotion system in ways that reward intellectual achievement. The Senate should examine the education and professional writing of nominees for three- and four-star billets as part of the confirmation process. The Senate would never confirm to the Supreme Court a nominee who had neither been to law school nor written legal opinions. However, it routinely confirms four-star generals who possess neither graduate education in the social sciences or humanities nor the capability to speak a foreign language. Senior general officers must have a vision of what future conflicts will look like and what capabilities the U.S. requires to prevail in those conflicts. They must possess the capability to understand and interact with foreign cultures. A solid record of intellectual achievement and fluency in foreign languages are effective indicators of an officer's potential for senior leadership.

To reward moral courage in our general officers, Congress must ask hard questions about the means and ways for war as part of its oversight responsibility. Some of the answers will be shocking, which is perhaps why Congress has not asked and the generals have not told. Congress must ask for a candid assessment of the money and manpower required over the next generation to prevail in the Long War. The money required to prevail may place fiscal constraints on popular domestic priorities. The quantity and quality of manpower required may call into question the viability of the all-volunteer military. Congress must re-examine the allocation of existing resources, and demand that procurement priorities reflect the most likely threats we will face. Congress must be equally rigorous in ensuring that the ways of war contribute to conflict termination consistent with the aims of national policy. If our operations produce more enemies than they defeat, no amount of force is sufficient to prevail. Current oversight efforts have proved inadequate, allowing the executive branch, the services and lobbyists to present information that is sometimes incomplete, inaccurate or self-serving. Exercising adequate oversight will require members of Congress to develop the expertise necessary to ask the right questions and display the courage to follow the truth wherever it leads them.

Finally, Congress must enhance accountability by exercising its little-used authority to confirm the retired rank of general officers. By law, Congress must confirm an officer who retires at three- or four-star rank. In the past this requirement has been pro forma in all but a few cases. A general who presides over a massive human rights scandal or a substantial deterioration in security ought to be retired at a lower rank than one who serves with distinction. A general who fails to provide Congress with an accurate and candid assessment of strategic probabilities ought to suffer the same penalty. As matters stand now, a private who loses a rifle suffers far greater consequences than a general who loses a war. By exercising its powers to confirm the retired ranks of general officers, Congress can restore accountability among senior military leaders.

Mortal Danger

This article began with Frederick the Great's admonition to his officers to focus their energies on the larger aspects of war. The Prussian monarch's innovations had made his army the terror of Europe, but he knew that his adversaries were learning and adapting. Frederick feared that his generals would master his system of war

without thinking deeply about the ever-changing nature of war, and in doing so would place Prussia's security at risk. These fears would prove prophetic. At the Battle of Valmy in 1792, Frederick's successors were checked by France's ragtag citizen army. In the fourteen years that followed, Prussia's generals assumed without much reflection that the wars of the future would look much like those of the past. In 1806, the Prussian Army marched lockstep into defeat and disaster at the hands of Napoleon at Jena. Frederick's prophecy had come to pass; Prussia became a French vassal.

Iraq is America's Valmy. America's generals have been checked by a form of war that they did not prepare for and do not understand. They spent the years following the 1991 Gulf War mastering a system of war without thinking deeply about the ever changing nature of war. They marched into Iraq having assumed without much reflection that the wars of the future would look much like the wars of the past. Those few who saw clearly our vulnerability to insurgent tactics said and did little to prepare for these dangers. As at Valmy, this one debacle, however humiliating, will not in itself signal national disaster. The hour is late, but not too late to prepare for the challenges of the Long War. We still have time to select as our generals those who possess the intelligence to visualize future conflicts and the moral courage to advise civilian policymakers on the preparations needed for our security. The power and the responsibility to identify such generals lie with the U.S. Congress. If Congress does not act, our Jena awaits us.

Army Lt. Col. Paul Yingling is deputy commander, 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment. He has served two tours in Iraq, another in Bosnia and a fourth in Operation Desert Storm. He holds a master's degree in political science from the University of Chicago. The views expressed here are the author's and do not necessarily reflect those of the Army or the Defense Department.

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