

REAPING THE WHIRLWIND

Systemic Failure of Leadership in the U.S. Army, 1969-1971

The problems of the United States Army in the late stages of the Vietnam War were widespread and substantial, but remained largely below the surface until the allegations of an enlisted Vietnam veteran sparked critical analysis of the Army's troubles. In March of 1969, an ex-serviceman named Ron Ridenhour sent numerous members of Congress and the press copies of a letter relating details of an apparent war crime committed by U.S. Army troops. Ridenhour, an aspiring journalist, wrote of a place called "Pinkville" where a year previously American troops of the 11th Brigade had deliberately murdered 300 to 400 people. Ridenhour's detailed allegations, assembled from stories that he had heard from soldiers who had been present, were disturbing enough to U.S. Representatives Mendel Rivers and Morris Udall that they called for an inquiry into the matter by the Department of Defense. What came to be known as the My Lai Massacre (a misnomer, as My Lai was just a subhamlet of a larger village named Son My which encompassed the area within which the killings took place), one of the worst atrocities ever committed by American troops, came to light not through official channels but through the efforts of an individual draftee. The media fallout from the My Lai revelations was disastrous for an already embattled Army, but the facts themselves were deeply disturbing to the service's leadership. Independent of the damage that the atrocity and subsequent cover-up did to the Army's reputation, the failure of discipline, leadership and ethics that surrounded the events at Son My in March of 1968 were a damning indictment of the Army officer corps.¹

In the wake of the publicity surrounding Ridenhour's allegations, Army Chief of Staff William Westmoreland appointed Lt. Gen. William Peers, a respected veteran with a reputation for honesty and evenhandedness, to investigate the events at Son My. After several months of surveying the scene and interviewing over four hundred officers and

¹ Col. George Walton, *The Tarnished Shield: A Report on Today's Army*, New York (Dodd, Mead and Company, 1973) pp.110-111;

enlisted men in connection with the incident, the Peers Commission issued its report and recommendations. The "Peers Report," as it came to be known, created a stir within the Army. Peers' analysis of the events at Son My spread blame not only to officers on the scene and involved in the subsequent cover-up, but to the officer corps at large.

Following the investigation the details of the massacre appeared relatively straightforward, though perhaps even more chilling. On 16 March 1968, a fairly routine tactical operation undertaken by Task Force Barker, a battalion-sized provisional unit of the 11th Brigade of the Americal Division, turned into a brutal atrocity as American troops indiscriminately and methodically killed hundreds of non-combatants. The investigation substantiated that while under the supervision of their officers, several squad and platoon-sized elements of Task Force Barker had killed at least 175 and perhaps more than 400 unarmed individuals, including women and children. The troops' behavior could be traced to the failure of the officers in command to give their troops clear orders and adequate explanation of the situation they were entering; moreover, officers of Task Force Barker had displayed an air of indifference to Vietnamese lives and property which encouraged their men to treat all Vietnamese encountered on the operation as hostile.²

The atrocity itself was only part of the Army's failure at My Lai, however, as Peers' report revealed in its analysis of the failure of the chain of command to investigate or report the incident. Officers of Task Force Barker and their superiors in the 11th Brigade and Americal Division command had substantial information about the massacre shortly after it took place but chose to dismiss it rather than properly investigating the situation. Hovering overhead in his helicopter, Americal Division commander Major General Samuel Koster should have had *some* reaction to reports that Task Force Barker had killed 128 Viet Cong at the cost of one killed and two wounded; as Peers noted, had this actually been the case, it would have constituted the 11th Brigade's greatest combat success up to that date. Yet

² Lt. Gen. William R. Peers, *Report of the Department of the Army Review of the Preliminary Investigations into the My Lai Incident: Volume I--The Report of the Investigation* (subsequently referred to as *The Peers Inquiry*), Washington, D.C. (Department of the Army, 14 March 1970), pp. 1-7, 2.1-2.4.

Koster chose not to investigate the unusual situation even after he received word of twenty or so civilians accidentally killed, supposedly by artillery and helicopter gunships. Despite the unusually high body count and the report of civilian deaths, which Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) headquarters required to be investigated and reported to Saigon, Koster and his subordinates accepted the day's events uncritically and did not report any of the unusual details up the chain of command. Subsequently, officers throughout the Americal Division chain of command sought to conceal information regarding the incident from their superiors and from MACV and the Vietnamese government.³

The "Peers Report", as it came to be known, was deeply worrisome to the Army officer corps because it revealed a failure of leadership from top to bottom--failure in professional competence, in communication, and most of all in ethics. William Calley, the second lieutenant responsible for many of the killings and subsequently the only man convicted by a court martial in connection with My Lai, was an inexperienced, undereducated young man of limited talents, operating beyond his depth; the system had failed by placing such a man in command of troops in combat. Captain Ernest Medina of C Company, the unit that committed most of the killings, had dominated and denigrated the unit's young and inexperienced platoon leaders to the point where their authority over the men under their command was negligible; coupled with his lack of respect for Vietnamese life, his interference with the chain of command produced tragic results. Eleventh Brigade commander Colonel Oran Henderson and Brigadier General George Young, Americal Division executive officer, were required by MACV policy to investigate the My Lai incident but made no legitimate effort to do so. General Koster, a highly respected officer who was serving as Superintendent of West Point at the time of the investigation, had failed to exercise proper supervision over his subordinates and had allowed the incident to be covered up despite his awareness of facts which merited immediate and thorough investigation. From top to bottom, the events at Son My and the cover-up that followed

³ Ibid. pp.8.9-8.13, 12.1-12.4

tarred the Americal Division leadership and, by extension, the Army officer corps at large with a widespread and disastrous failure to live up to the standards of military professionalism.⁴

While the information within the text of the investigation's official report gave an alarming impression of the state of the Army all by itself, a confidential memo from General Peers to Army Chief of Staff William Westmoreland that accompanied the official report proved even more disturbing. The hundreds of interviews Peers had conducted in the course of his investigation had led him to believe that My Lai was merely a symptom of a deep-seated sickness in the moral and ethical fiber of the Army officer corps. Major General Franklin Davis told a civilian writer later that, "The memo... shook Westy to the core."⁵ Peers' report on My Lai and on the climate in the officer corps which contributed to the tragedy produced a feeling of deep concern in Westmoreland's office that led the Chief of Staff to push the Army officer corps to mount an exhaustive self-examination of its professionalism and ethics.

Cause for Concern:

When the Peers Report appeared in 1970, the Army leadership was already aware of growing problems with racial tensions, drug abuse, and other examples of indiscipline. General Peers' contribution was important, however, because he traced the source of these problems back to a larger failure of leadership within the Army officer corps. Following the receipt of Peers' memo, the Chief of Staff ordered the Army War College to undertake a more systematic study of the state of military professionalism within the officer corps. The results of this study echoed Peers' findings: the evidence suggested that My Lai was a dramatic example of a widespread breakdown of Army leadership, a failure also evident in the service's other mounting difficulties. The poor state of leadership in the Army in 1970 and 1971 was cause for deep concern because it was not an individual or situational

⁴ Ibid. pp.12.3-12.4

⁵ Stuart H. Loory, *Defeated: Inside America's Military Machine*. New York (Random House, 1973) pp.27-28

problem; rather, it was the logical end product of a system of officer career advancement that rewarded self-interested behavior at the expense of the Army's collective interest. Having "sowed the wind" by creating and maintaining a flawed system of personnel management, the Army had to weather a storm of internal conflict and crises as the Vietnam War drew to a close.

THE ARMY AND AMERICAN SOCIETY:

While the Peers Report produced a much-needed period of internal inquiry in the Army, the Army's problems in the waning years of the Vietnam War can only be properly understood when considered in light of the changing American society from which the Army drew its recruits and its orders. The Army's problems were numerous as the war ran down in 1970 and 1971, but the problems were not entirely of the Army's own creation. A number of the service's difficulties stemmed from sources largely beyond the Army's control. The changing social makeup of American society combined with the political restrictions of fighting a limited war to produce significant negative effects on the Army's ability to build and field a cohesive fighting force.

The draft Army, as senior officers were fond of pointing out, was in many ways a reflection of American society, sharing its problems as well as its strengths. The Army had to work with a broad segment of American youth, and societal trends among American youth in the late Sixties and early Seventies made them increasingly challenging material for the Army. To an extent, the facts of changing American society bear out Army officers' frequent assertion that the Army's problems were problems that its recruits brought with them from civilian society. A clear relationship can be seen between the Army's racial troubles and the tumult following the civil rights movement. The Army had greater power than civilian society to forcefully integrate, but it could not expect to change recruits' entrenched racial attitudes. As a result, tension between black and white roiled below the Army's apparently placid green surface, awaiting the right conditions to break out into open conflict. To an extent, the Army's drug problems also reflected societal trends. As a result

of rising drug use among young Americans, many recruits came to the Army as current or former drug users. Eventually the Army began testing new recruits for drugs in an attempt to avoid taking on more men at high risk for drug use, but due to deficiencies in the testing process, the Army's high demand for manpower at the height of the Vietnam era and the magnitude of the civilian drug culture many such individuals continued to enter the ranks.⁶

In addition to drug and racial problems, the broad trend among young people toward increasing reluctance to passively accept higher authority posed a major difficulty for the fundamentally authoritarian military. Army leaders recognized that the period of relative affluence in the post-Second World War era had contributed to rising individualism and decreased sense of social responsibility among youth. As a result, recruits were more likely than ever to resist orders that were not accompanied by a satisfactory explanation of their purpose. The Army made an effort to appease the increasingly independent-minded soldier, particularly as the elimination of the draft began to appear increasingly likely. The "Volunteer Army" program (VOLAR) established in 1970 represented the most ambitious (and most publicized) effort to improve living and working conditions for soldiers. In addition, Army officers emphasized the need for greater communication and empathy with their charges. Despite the Army's attempts at accommodation, however, the necessity of maintaining military discipline virtually ensured that friction would continue to exist.⁷

The Army had to contend with declining public prestige as well as the problems brought in by recruits. The rising tide of civilian opposition to the Vietnam War greatly complicated the Army's efforts to attract and retain talented people in both the officer corps and the enlisted ranks. The pressure of anti-war sentiment was particularly difficult for the Army to counter since political considerations had led civilian officials to avoid attempting a full mobilization of the national will in the war effort.. Politically-motivated decisions such

⁶See Lt. Col. William L. Hauser, *America's Army in Crisis: A Study in Civil-Military Relations*, Baltimore (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973) pp.73-77, 124-129 for an insightful discussion of the complexities of the relationship between Army and society with regard to racial and drug issues.

⁷Brigadier General Willard Latham, "The Modern Volunteer Army Program: The Benning Experiment, 1970-1972," Washington, D.C. (Department of the Army, 1974) pp.v, 7-8

as avoiding a formal declaration of war and fighting the war without calling up the Reserves limited the Army's ability to counter its critics: since the government had sought to keep the war on the periphery of the national consciousness, it was difficult for the Army to mobilize public support.⁸ As the unsatisfying limited war dragged on, many civilians came to see the Army's actions in the worst possible light, expanding from opposition to the war to outright anti-military beliefs. While the antiwar movement never gained majority support, anti-military activism further complicated the Army's position in a traditionally non-military society.

The Johnson administration's decision to keep the Vietnam War strictly a limited war, a policy also adhered to by the Nixon administration, had direct effects on the Army's options for fighting the war. Since the reserves were not to be called up the Army had to rely on its Regular Army cadre, filled to combat strength primarily by draftees. The draft provided a ready source of additional manpower, but it was not a perfect system. Thanks to the changing social attitudes described earlier and the dubious progress of the war in Vietnam, Selective Service became increasingly unpopular with the American public; as the war ground on, the draft became less useful for the military as well. As a concession to political pressure and individual morale, draftees only spent a one-year tour in Vietnam out of their two years of obligated service. The end result was that most units in Vietnam were composed of draftees who shuffled rapidly in and out of units, greatly complicating the task of leaders.⁹

Further complicating matters was a reluctance on the part of the government (perhaps justified by global strategic considerations, but nonetheless damaging to the effort in Vietnam) to take offensive action outside of South Vietnam against the Vietnamese Communists' sanctuaries and supply lines lest the scope of the war expand and China or the Soviet Union increase their involvement. The Army might have preferred to follow more

⁸ Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy II: A Critical Analysis of the Gulf War*, New York (Dell Publishing, 1992) pp.9-10,17-19.

⁹ *Ibid.* pp.8-10; Richard A. Gabriel and Paul L. Savage, *Crisis in Command: Mismanagement in the Army*, New York (Hill and Wang, 1978), p.41

stable personnel policies and conduct more aggressive operations, but the political realities of limited war restricted the service's options considerably. The political realities of the limited war era prevented the Army from enlisting men "for the duration" or pursuing a strategy which would bring the war to an early conclusion, while at the same time the continuing need for men necessitated further draft calls that further alienated reluctant potential draftees and their sympathizers.¹⁰

TURBULENCE:

While external factors limited the Army's freedom of action somewhat, its problems in the early Seventies were of its own making to a significant extent. Changes in American society complicated matters but the disappearance of military discipline which led to racial problems, widespread drug abuse, desertion, and mutinous actions in 1969-1971 was due less to the declining motivation of recruits than to the difficulty of building and maintaining effective fighting units under the enlisted and officer personnel policies employed by the Army during Vietnam. The enlisted personnel rotation system, designed with political requirements in mind rather than military considerations, greatly hindered the maintenance of both unit cohesion and combat readiness.

The Army rotated enlisted men into and out of Vietnam in twelve-month tours, which meant that units experienced a constant stream of green new men entering and veterans leaving. The political liability of employing a draftee Army in a limited war led civilian officials to demand a personnel policy that would minimize the risk to individual soldiers. On paper at least, the twelve-month rotation system appeared to promise this result. The problem, however, was that the system obtained relatively high individual morale at the price of unit morale: with men rotating in and out of units as individuals on their own timetables, there was little ability for men to get to know each other and certainly even less opportunity for officers to get to know their men. On paper, the short tour policy seemed

¹⁰ Gabriel and Savage, *Crisis in Command*, . pp.45-50; While numerous military apologists have blamed the government for micromanagement of military affairs, Harry Summers perceptively noted that senior generals could have resigned to protest civilian interference but declined to do so; thus, they must share responsibility for the flawed strategy that the nation employed (*On Strategy II*, pp.52-54).

expedient, but many observers came to believe that in practice it was a central cause of the Army's discipline problems in the Vietnam era.¹¹

The manpower demands of fighting the war in Vietnam without a Reserve callup and while maintaining its commitments elsewhere in the world stretched the Army's personnel system beyond its limits. Out of the Army's official strength of 1.2 million men in 1970, 670,000 left the service. These men in turn had to be replaced by newly inducted recruits. While the new recruits were training, still more men would fulfill their obligations and leave the service. All the while, more men were needed for Vietnam and there were simply not enough to fill both Vietnam units and those elsewhere in the world. As a result, units in the United States and Europe were stripped of men, particularly from the combat arms, resulting in a worldwide decline in Army readiness.¹²

Exacerbated by politically-motivated low draft calls in 1970, the manpower situation came to a head by the end of the year. When a crisis situation arose in Jordan in October of 1970, the 82nd Airborne--supposedly the Army's elite fire brigade, maintained at the highest level of readiness for instant deployment--found itself able to field only two of its three brigades due to manpower and equipment shortages in crucial areas. Over two thousand of the 82nd's soldiers had been shipped to Vietnam, leaving the Army's main rapid reaction force a hollow shell. Similarly, the Seventh Army in Germany was short by about 20,000 of its official 185,000 strength and the Eighth Army in Korea was down by around 10,000. Non-Vietnam units found that they did not have enough men to deploy to train effectively, much less present an acceptable level of readiness. Acknowledging the breadth of the Army's trouble with turbulence, Lt. Gen. Walter T. Kerwin, Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, declared that, "Personnel turbulence is one of our biggest problems--not to mention drugs and racial matters. The Vietnam war is primarily the cause."¹³

¹¹ For a good description and analysis of individual and unit morale among soldiers in Vietnam, see Charles Moskos, *The American Enlisted Man: The Rank and File in Today's Military*, New York (Russell Sage Foundation, 1970), pp.134-156

¹² Lloyd Norman, "Turbulence and Army Readiness," in *Army 21*, no.7 (July 1971) pp.13-14

¹³ *Ibid.* pp.12, 13-14

While units in Vietnam received adequate manpower, they experienced turbulence problems of their own. As men completed their Vietnam year, they had to be replaced. The result was a manpower turnover rate reaching 20-30 percent per quarter, meaning that some units were composed of entirely different people at the end of the year than they had had at the beginning. As Gen. Kerwin noted, "Soldiers don't get to know their officers or non-commissioned officers, and the officers don't get to know their men. And that makes it difficult to deal with other problems such as drugs and racism."¹⁴

CRISES: DISCIPLINE AND LEADERSHIP:

The My Lai revelations and in particular General Peers' ominous memo to Westmoreland gave focus to a growing perception that, whatever issues the Army inherited from civilian society, the Army had deep internal problems. While the social conditions of the late Sixties and early Seventies and the unique character of the war in Vietnam provided challenges that the Army had never faced before, its apparent inability to overcome these obstacles was what was remarkable given its past history of social isolation and neglect by civilian society. As perceptive observers, civilian and military, viewed the late Vietnam Army, it became apparent that despite its increasingly reluctant recruits and loss of civilian support, the Army itself was responsible for creating many of its own problems and exacerbating others.

The depth of the Army's difficulties in Vietnam was such that many observers came to believe that retreat from Vietnam was the only thing that saved the service from complete collapse; while the reality of the situation may have been somewhat less drastic, the fact remains that Army discipline had reached a distressingly low level by 1971. Though social trends may have made the drill sergeant's task of instilling discipline more difficult than previously, the collapse of discipline was, to a significant extent, a failure of military leadership. In effect the Vietnam War was a trial by fire for the Army's established leadership, a test which the Army failed. From 1968 onward, the Army experienced

¹⁴ Ibid. pp.13-14

increasing incidence of indiscipline, a trend that culminated in 1971 in a service wracked by widespread drug use, racial violence, desertion, AWOL, and outright refusal to follow orders, a stance underlined in some cases by troops actually "fragging" their officers. The magnitude of these problems graphically illustrates the extent of the problems in the service and in each instance reflects shortcomings of leadership.

Race:

Racial tension was both a significant indicator of indiscipline and a contributing factor to other disciplinary problems in the later stages of the American commitment in Vietnam. The civil rights movement had opened up long-ignored racial issues and raised African-Americans' consciousness of their racial identity and oppression. In these circumstances, an increase in racial confrontation in the Army is not surprising. As one general remarked, however, the Army's problem was that, "we haven't been aware of how deep-seated the racial problem is." Military men had assumed that the only color the Army cared about was green, and that they did not need to concern themselves with racial issues. Having prided itself on being the nation's first and most fully-integrated institution, the Army had not expected or prepared for the level of racial problems which it experienced.¹⁵

There were important warning signs of potential racial problems in the mid to late Sixties, however, particularly a marked decline in the already miniscule number of black officers. While blacks constituted a representative portion of the enlisted ranks, both volunteer and draftee, a decline in the percentage of black officers from 3.6 percent of the officer corps in 1965 to only 2.6 percent in 1970 indicated a growing disillusionment with the Army among more educated African-Americans. The proportion of blacks in the junior officer ranks declined even more sharply as young blacks rejected service in an Army perceived as a bastion of the increasingly vilified white Establishment. The end result was a service that was 11.9 percent black in the enlisted ranks but which had negligible numbers

¹⁵ Larry Carney, "Third Army Fights Racial Tension," *Army Times*, March 18, 1970.

of black leaders. The absence of black officers to serve as role models or peacemakers contributed to the Army's problems when racial problems boiled over in 1970 and 1971.¹⁶

Racial tension in the Army was most pronounced away from the front lines. Only a few incidents of racial violence or intimidation took place in combat situations, though these received a high level of publicity. While there were complaints about the overrepresentation of blacks in combat units and on casualty lists, most racial incidents were the product of boredom and social friction away from the front lines. When racial conflict broke out into the open in Vietnam, it occurred primarily at the larger bases far from the major fighting. The series of incidents over the winter of 1969-1970 at the huge American base at Cam Ranh Bay was typical. Following base commanders' decision to restrict American personnel from traveling to the nearby Vietnamese village in their off-duty hours, blacks and whites confined to the base grew bored and restless. Eventually, the inactivity led to racial violence, resulting in finger pointing by whites and blacks, each group blaming the other for the violence and further exacerbating tensions.¹⁷

The lack of black officers and noncommissioned officers compounded the Army's central failure in racial matters, the inability to understand blacks' concerns. The white-dominated Army leadership had tried to avoid dealing with racial issues repeatedly over the years, first claiming that integration would never work then arguing that it was an instant success that eliminated the need for the Army to address the racial debate raging in civilian society in the Sixties. When faced with increasingly anti-Establishment young black recruits with cutting-edge racial consciousness, the Army had little experience on which to draw. In effect, the Army officer corps did not speak blacks' language, let alone know what to say.¹⁸

Drugs:

¹⁶ Hauser, *America's Army in Crisis*, pp.77-78

¹⁷ Ibid. pp.77-79; "Spec," "Trouble In the Sand Pile," *Army Times*, January 14, 1970.

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A second major indicator of indiscipline was the skyrocketing level of drug use in the Army, particularly in Vietnam. Army leaders were usually quick to point out that increased drug use was part of civilian youth culture in the late Sixties and early Seventies, resulting in more recruits bringing drug habits with them from civilian life. The fact remained, however, that drug use in the Army reached far greater levels than in civilian society.¹⁹ Drug use had increased gradually in the Army in Vietnam, but by 1971 it had become a major problem. The military had initially reacted with alarm to rising marijuana use among troops in Vietnam, but by 1971 that attitude had changed to one of tacit acceptance as a far more serious epidemic of heroin use swept the Army. Ironically, a military crackdown on marijuana users and suppliers in mid-1970 led both dealers and users to turn to heroin. Increased penalties for marijuana led them to turn to hard drugs, since the penalties were no longer more severe and heroin was more easily concealable than marijuana. The degree to which the Army acknowledged the reality of marijuana use in order to combat heroin is reflected to some extent in the inclusion in briefings to soldiers newly arriving to Vietnam of information on how to recognize and avoid marijuana laced with heroin.²⁰

The staggering level of drug use in the Army during 1970 and 1971 more than justified the Army's concern. A survey administered by the Army-funded Human Resources Research Organization (HUMRRO) produced some shocking statistics. Among troops stationed in Vietnam, 13.8 percent used marijuana on a daily basis; half had used it at least once in the past year, and nearly 25 percent of those who had used marijuana admitted to using it more than one hundred times during that time. Though the level of marijuana use was substantial, the Army felt compelled to largely abandon attempts to combat it when the

¹⁹ Studies showed that some men did enter the service with drug habits and maintained them throughout their time in the Army; on the other hand, however, the small number of users who entered the military were joined by a flood of others in Vietnam. See "Drug Abuse in the Military: Hearing Before the Senate Committee on Drug Abuse in the Military of the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, 92nd Congress, 2nd session," Washington, D.C. (United States Government Printing Office, 1972) pp.547

²⁰ "Staff Report on Drug Abuse in the Military: Report of the Subcommittee on Drug Abuse of the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, 92nd Congress, first session (Washington, D.C., United States Government Printing Office, 1971). pp.17, 22).

heroin problem emerged. A urinalysis program for men about to leave Vietnam begun in June 1971 returned 10 percent positive results in the first few days but tailed off rapidly to about 2 percent. The Army initially claimed that the reduction reflected the fact that only "true" addicts were unable to rid themselves of narcotics when they became aware that they would be tested. Gradually, however, it became clear that substantial numbers of heroin users were able to beat the system by quitting use in the days immediately prior to their departure from Vietnam or by substituting a non-user's sample. A program of unannounced periodic testing in mid-tour was introduced in September and produced slightly higher results, but many officers believed that drug users were still evading the system. HUMRRO's survey supported this contention: according to their research, by the end of 1971, nearly a third of the Army personnel in Vietnam had tried heroin or opium and 9.2 percent were using it daily.²¹

The drug problem existed in Germany and on American bases as well as in Vietnam. While drug use was not as pronounced as in Vietnam in either Germany or the U.S., a substantial problem existed in both areas. One important discovery that congressional investigators made in Germany was command interference in the drug testing process: 10 percent of the men in each unit were to be selected for testing at periodic unannounced screenings in an effort to keep drug users from beating the system, but the results thus produced were skewed by some unit commanders' practice of carefully selecting which men would be tested. Some officers repeatedly tested suspected drug users in an attempt to catch them in the act, while other leaders insured that only the men they felt certain were not using drugs were tested in order to avoid giving their command a bad image.²²

²¹ Allan H. Fisher, "Preliminary Findings from the 1971 DoD Survey of Drug Use," Alexandria, Va. (HUMRRO Division no. 7--Social Science, March 1972) pp.23, 25--reproduced in "Drug Abuse in the Military: Hearing Before the Senate Committee on Drug Abuse in the Military of the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, 92nd Congress, 2nd session," Washington, D.C. (United States Government Printing Office, 1972) following p.387; Hauser, *America's Army in Crisis*, p.120

²² "Staff Report on Drug and Alcohol Abuse Among U.S. Military Personnel and Dependents in Germany: For the information of the Subcommittee on Drug Abuse in the Military of the Committee on Armed services, United States Senate, 92nd Congress, Second session," Washington, D.C. (United States

As in the case of racial problems, a failure of communication between officers and men was an important factor in the drug problem. Officers spent too little time in command to get to know their men personally, and they were often separated by class and racial gaps from understanding their men collectively. Thus they often failed to recognize the symptoms of drug use and misunderstood the gradations of the drug culture. The drug epidemic occurred against the background of chronic alcohol abuse by some officers and many NCO's, but officers could not understand that many of their men saw marijuana use as being as socially acceptable (or more so) than drinking. Commanders found themselves unable to comprehend drug users' attitudes and motivations. Officers initially failed to discern the depth to which marijuana use had penetrated the culture of American youth. While their efforts to eradicate marijuana use stemmed from valid military concerns, leaders' lack of understanding of the drug culture led them to employ methods that helped produce the far more serious heroin problem. By 1970, Lieutenant General John Tolson, post commander at Fort Bragg explained that officers had to shift their attitudes on drugs in order to combat the heroin problem because the men would "turn you right off if you talk about marijuana as a drug."²³

Desertion and AWOL:

Where the drug problem was virgin territory for the Army, desertion and AWOL were familiar, if unwelcome, problems that nonetheless grew to excessive levels in the last years of the Vietnam commitment. In 1970 the Army reported over 76,000 deserters dropped from the rolls for being absent from their units for more than thirty days, nearly double the number it had in 1968 with a far larger force in Vietnam. By 1971, the desertion rate stood at 73.4 per thousand men; as recently as 1968 the figure had been only 29.1 per

Government Printing Office, 1972), pp.1-2, 6. The report did not state whether this interference significantly influenced the overall statistics in either direction; given the terror of negative statistics in the officer corps, it would seem more likely that commanders would choose the second course if they chose to meddle with the testing process. While I did not discover any direct evidence of similar practices in Vietnam, the pronounced drug problem there and the systemic nature of the officer corps' concern for statistical measures suggests that these methods may have been employed there as well.

²³ Hauser, *America's Army in Crisis*, pp.117-118

thousand. The previous record high desertion rate in modern times, set in 1944 at the height of the Second World War with all the discipline problems attending the massive expansion of the Army and heavy combat, had peaked at 63.0 per thousand. In the Vietnam era, desertion levels were high despite the relatively small number of men in combat and the comparatively low casualties suffered; in fact, the desertion rate increased even when American combat units began to restrict their activities in 1971. While large numbers of men were deserting, many others went absent without leave for weeks at a time but returned before the thirty-day cutoff to be listed as a deserter.²⁴

The officer corps' own actions contributed to the AWOL and desertion problem in some respects. Frequently, men who went AWOL but returned within thirty days received minimal punishment from officers relieved not to have to report desertion in their units--a much-used practice was to list men who went AWOL as being on leave. Officers concerned with putting on a good statistical front in order to maintain their career prospects often preferred to deal with AWOL incidents with non-judicial punishment (if offenders were punished at all) rather than accept the negative reflection on their leadership that would accompany involving the formal disciplinary structure. Sweeping the AWOL and desertion problem under the rug could benefit individual officers, as they only commanded their units for six months before moving on, but the long-term effect on discipline was disastrous.²⁵

Combat refusal and fragging:

While drugs, racial issues, and AWOL were all vexing problems, the growth of combat refusal and fragging was even more disturbing to the Army leadership because both involved direct assaults on the basis of military authority, obedience to direct orders or the officer's person. While efforts by individuals to avoid combat were not unique to Vietnam,

²⁴ "Nomination of Robert F. Froehlke: Hearing before the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, 92nd Congress, first session-- on the Nomination of Robert F. Froehlke to Be Secretary of the Army , June 28, 1971," Washington, D.C. (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971) p.9; Gabriel and Savage, *Crisis in Command*, pp.42-43,181-182; U.S. Army War College, *Study on Military Professionalism*, Carlisle Barracks, Pa. (U.S. Army War College, 30 June 1970), p.B-29.

²⁵ Gen. Hamilton H. Howze (USA ret.) "Military Discipline and National Security," *Army 21*, no.1 (January 1971) p.11

the rate of incidence was considerably higher in Vietnam and Korea. Several highly publicized incidents where whole units refused to follow direct orders to go into combat served as dramatic examples of the level of confrontation between officers and enlisted men. According to Senator John Stennis of the Senate Armed Services Committee, combat refusals had increased from 68 spread among the seven divisions in Vietnam in 1968 to 35 in the First Cavalry Division alone by 1971. Though it is quite possible that many incidents of combat refusal went unreported, the evidence available is enough to show the progressive growth of a willingness among enlisted men to openly flout their leaders' authority in combat situations. Given that the nature of combat in Vietnam allowed many men to limit their exposure to danger without confronting their superiors (a phenomenon described by author George Walton as "search and evade" tactics), the fact that some individuals and occasionally whole units were willing to openly defy their leaders' orders in order to avoid putting themselves at risk was a significant development.²⁶

Combat refusal (and reluctance) was clearly a product of the larger breakdown of discipline, but once again these phenomena also reflected the failure of leadership in more specific respects, particularly with regard to professional competence of commanders. In 1971, Gen. Creighton Abrams, just returned from commanding MACV in Vietnam and in line to be chief of staff of the Army, addressed the causes of several of the more celebrated incidents of unit combat refusals. Referring to the 1969 refusal by a 1st Cavalry infantry platoon on the Cambodian border, the first publicized instance of a unit refusing combat, Abrams argued that the unit's commanding officer was at fault rather than the men. He explained that the commander was an artillery officer and did not have an adequate understanding of infantry tactics; he had given confusing and unnecessarily dangerous orders, which the experienced infantrymen of his unit had wisely questioned. Citing another incident in the Lam Son 719 operation where a company refused to return to the

²⁶ "Nomination of Robert R. Froehlke," pp.9-11; Walton, *The Tarnished Shield*, p.237. Walton illustrated the phenomenon by referring to an Associated Press story in which a soldier told a correspondent that when ordered out on patrol, "we go down to the water point, swim a little, puff a few numbers [marijuana joints] and radio in: 'Real fine, sir, no dinks moving in the wire.'"

scene of an earlier engagement to recover codebooks from an abandoned armored vehicle, Abrams once again exonerated the enlisted men involved. In this case, the commanding officer had ordered the soldiers of his armored unit to perform an infantry mission at night, a mission for which his troops were untrained. Abrams stressed the point that combat refusal was a situational event, as both units later performed satisfactorily under different leadership, but his argument had a disturbing corollary--Abrams admitted that the level of officer competence could be so low that he was willing to acknowledge the superior military judgment of enlisted men over their officers in some situations.²⁷

While combat refusal was in some respects a reflection of the ageless reluctance of soldiers to put themselves at risk, "fragging" was a phenomenon essentially unique to Vietnam. The rising incidence of what the Army came to officially term "assaults on leadership elements with explosive devices," was naturally alarming to officers and NCO's. Officers had been assaulted before by other armies in other wars, but the level of assault and intimidation in Vietnam was unprecedented in the American experience. During 1969, there were 126 fragging incidents reported, 271 in 1970, and 238 in the first seven months of 1971. Between 1969 and mid-1971, fragging produced eighty-two fatalities and 651 injuries. Fragging usually stemmed from three motives: drug users attempting revenge upon a CO who cracked down on drug use; racially motivated incidents, usually initiated by blacks against superiors perceived to be racist; and attacks in combat units on officers or noncoms who were thought to be too aggressive in committing their men to danger.²⁸ Fragging and combat refusal were sometimes closely related, as fragging was often intended as a warning rather than an attempted murder. Questioned in 1972 regarding the incidence

²⁷ "Nomination of John D. Lavelle, General Creighton Abrams, and Admiral John S. McCain: Hearings before the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, 92nd Congress, Second Session," Washington, D.C. (United States Government Printing Office, 1972), p.137

²⁸ Statistics cited by Gen. Bruce Palmer in "Department of Defense Appropriations for 1972: Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives, Ninety-second Congress, First session," Washington, D.C. (United States Government Printing Office, 1971) p.583; Hauser, *America's Army in Crisis*, pp.101-102. Gabriel and Savage, *Crisis in Command*, p.44; see Charles Moskos, "The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam," *Journal of Social Issues* 31, no.4 (1975) pp.25-37.

of fragging and combat refusal, General Abrams claimed that both were on the decline but admitted that it was possible that part of the decline was due to some officers getting the message from their men and limiting aggressive operations that provoked fragging and combat refusal.²⁹

Flawed Professionalism:

Clearly, the Army had a host of problems in 1970-1971, many of which related directly to the shortcomings of the officer corps. The obvious conclusion was that the officer corps was flawed; the question remained as to what was wrong with the officer corps and how to go about fixing it. In the wake of My Lai and General Peers' alarming memo, General Westmoreland at the Pentagon sought answers to these questions by commissioning the Army War College to produce a report on the state of professionalism in the Army officer corps. The result was the groundbreaking 1970 *Study on Military Professionalism*, which so alarmed Westmoreland and other senior generals when they were briefed on its contents that they restricted its distribution to general officers despite the original intention of pushing the development of a broad dialogue on professionalism within the officer corps as a whole.

Military professionalism was a concept much debated but little understood in the Army or elsewhere. Most debate over military professionalism centered on the decade-old works of two civilian academics, Samuel Huntington and Morris Janowitz. While the two authors disagreed on the direction which military professionalism should take, both argued that cultivating a professional outlook was essential to preserving the military's obedience to civilian authority and to ensuring its ability to accomplish its mission. The fundamental basis of the military officer was cultivation of technical expertise in military affairs

²⁹ "Nomination of John D. Lavelle, General Creighton Abrams, and Admiral John S. McCain...", pp.136-137 While fragging has come to be defined more or less exclusively as attacks on officers with fragmentation grenades with intent to kill, fragging had a somewhat more expansive definition in Vietnam. The name did come from the increasingly common practice of attempted murder using fragmentation grenades, but some "fraggings" in Vietnam were acts of intimidation--often progressing from smoke grenades to tear gas and then finally to fragmentation grenades if the victim failed to get the hint (Gabriel and Savage, *Crisis in Command*, p.44).

combined with an ethic of service that subordinated self-interest to the needs of the state. The situation in Vietnam suggested that Army officers were failing in both respects.³⁰

The *Study on Military Professionalism* was so worrisome to senior officers because it confronted them with hard evidence of a widespread perception of professional failure within the officer corps. The study's principal authors, Lieutenant Colonels Walt Ulmer and Mike Malone, had surveyed a sample of 450 officers, focusing on captains, majors, and lieutenant colonels. Their questionnaires and subsequent group discussions conducted by War College teams revealed a perception among most officers questioned that the Army was failing to live up to its professional and ethical ideals, and that its failure to do so was hindering its military performance. Though "Duty-Honor-Country" remained the professional ideal of the officer corps, the authors reported that, "Officers of all grades perceive a significant difference between the ideal values and the actual or operative values of the Officer Corps."³¹

Among the revelations in the *Study on Military Professionalism* which were most unsettling to senior generals was its conclusion that the Army's own internal policies, rather than external influences, were largely responsible for its problems. Contrary to the opinion popular among many senior officers, the study maintained that, "There is no direct evidence that external fiscal, political, sociological, or managerial influences are the primary causative factors of this less than optimum climate. Neither does the public reaction to the Vietnam war, the rapid expansion of the Army, or the current anti-military syndrome stand out as a significant reason for deviations from the level of professional behavior the Army acknowledges as its attainable ideal."³² The Army's problems were created by its internal

³⁰ See Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*, Cambridge, Massachusetts (Harvard University Press, 1957) and Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait*, New York (The Free Press, 1960) for the two authors' major representative works.

³¹ USAWC, *Study on Military Professionalism*, pp.iii-iv

³² *Ibid.* p.v

culture, which placed undue emphasis on uninterrupted success and rapid career advancement.³³

The Army's perfectionist worldview was a dangerous one from the standpoint of officer professionalism. The Army officer corps had long claimed professional status based on its special knowledge of military affairs and its selfless, consuming devotion to "Duty-Honor-Country." The War College study noted that Duty-Honor-Country remained the Army's ideal, but it was apparent that many officers mouthed the words while practicing a different set of ethics. "Careerism," or devotion to one's own personal advancement even at the expense of the Army's collective mission, had overcome the ethical standards of the military profession. The prevailing climate in 1970 was one in which "cover your ass" and "me, my ass, and my career" were better summations of the Army's functioning ethics than "Duty-Honor-Country." The rise of careerism was intermeshed in cause and effect relationships with a complex web of interdependent factors, but the Army's officer personnel system was central.³⁴

The Army went into Vietnam with an officer system still shaped by the model of the Second World War. The system was designed to produce "generalist" officers who had experience in a variety of different positions; the assumption, borne out in the Second World War, was that regular Army officers would serve as the cadre for a much larger mobilized Army, so they would need to be adaptable. During the Cold War, the Army never again mobilized to the degree it had during World War II, but the system had become entrenched in tradition and in the self-interest of officers who had made their way up through it.

The generalist model of officer development demanded that every officer must be prepared to serve in combat and staff positions, in addition to any technical specialty he might have. In practice, the system required officers to move from one assignment to another in rapid succession. As then-Lieutenant Colonel Zeb Bradford, who eventually

³³ Ibid.p.12

³⁴ Ibid. pp.21-24

gained his general's stars, told author Stuart Loory, "If you want to get ahead in the Army, there are certain stations of the cross you must attain...." The "stations of the cross" Bradford referred to included company command, civilian graduate education, combat experience, Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, battalion command, and Department of the Army staff work or another high Pentagon position. The most successful officers would ultimately be selected for attendance at the Army War College, a virtual necessity for promotion to general officer. The career management system demanded that the officer who wanted to be successful enter a position, busy himself with creating a good impression in a short amount of time, then quickly move on to a new billet, a phenomenon that became known as "ticket-punching." While a system that promoted adaptability at the expense of specialization may have made sense in the mass mobilization of the Second World War, in Vietnam ticket-punching produced a crop of officers who were the proverbial jacks-of-all-trades but masters of none. Rapid rotation and lack of specialization hindered the development of professional knowledge as well as contributing to an environment of unhealthy competition.³⁵

Combat command was a critical ticket to punch for advancement in the field-grade level in the generalist system, a requirement which had profound consequences for Army policy in Vietnam. The Army relied upon promotion as the engine to motivate officers. With promotion tied into combat command the Army felt compelled to expose as many men to command as possible. The importance placed on putting a large number of officers in combat command led to the adoption of six-month command tours in Vietnam. As noted before, officers would fulfill their year tours in Vietnam by serving for six months in command and then spending six months in staff positions. The result was that units already wracked by massive enlisted personnel turnover also underwent constant changes in command, further hindering unit bonding. At the same time, officers barely had time to learn the basics of handling a unit and thus often failed to obtain a high level of technical

³⁵ Loory, *Defeated*, pp.47-49

competence. While rapid officer turnover provided the Army with a large body of men who had some exposure to combat command, the questionable value of this limited experience must be weighed against the problems the system created in unit morale and professional knowledge.³⁶

In addition to complicating the task of instilling unit cohesion and training officers, rapid officer turnover could pressure officers to handle their units unprofessionally. Merely getting a command was the object of intense competition. The vast majority of the 3,300 or so lieutenant colonels in the Army sought battalion command because commanding a battalion was one of the unofficial prerequisites for promotion to general; for these 3,300 men, the Army had 250 commands. The Army tried to alleviate the shortage of commands by instituting the six-month command tour, but this created problems of its own. An officer lucky enough to be assigned to battalion command held his future in his hands: the performance of the unit in his six months of command could make or break the remainder of his career. In these circumstances, many officers sought to produce quantifiable short-term *results* rather than working to improve the unit's long-term performance—after all, any improvements that took more than six months to show results would only aid the unit's next commanding officer, the current leader's competitor for promotion.³⁷

Fostering intense competition between officers was intended to raise the standard of performance in the Army, but in practice it resulted in the raising of standards of evaluation to a level that was so unrealistically high that it motivated officers to evade full and honest evaluation of their performance. The phrase "zero defects" had made its way into the Army jargon as a slogan for positive improvement but by the early Seventies, many officers used it derisively to indicate the Army's unrealistic intolerance for mistakes. The competition for promotion had contributed to a culture which no longer allowed room for learning from

³⁶ Anne W. Chapman, "The Army's Training Revolution 1973-1990: An Overview," Fort Monroe, Va. (Office of the Command Historian, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, 1991) p.3

³⁷ Loory, *Defeated*, pp.60-61

one's mistakes--making a mistake came to be seen as a personal failure likely to end an officer's career.

The "zero defects" mentality had profound effects on the officer evaluation system. The Officer Efficiency Report (OER) submitted by an officer's immediate superior--the basis of the system--had lost all relationship with reality. In the heat of competition for choice assignments and promotion, any shortcoming in an officer's record could be used against him. Raters recognized this and gave their subordinates progressively higher ratings. The process spiraled out of control because raters were aware that other raters were also inflating OER's, leading them to increase their ratings still more. Eventually, the rating system became so inflated that to rate a young lieutenant or captain in the top 25 percent of the officer corps was liable to end his career. Most raters came to acclaim every officer who served under them as absolutely exceptional, justifying this falsehood with the knowledge that their colleagues were doubtless inflating their men's ratings so not doing so for one's own subordinates would only hurt the rater's own men. By encouraging exaggeratedly high ratings, the system became next to worthless for its designed purpose of identifying and promoting the Army's best officers. Moreover, this perfectionist worldview was a dangerous one from the standpoint of officer professionalism, as it gave the individual rater undue influence over an officer's entire career. Officers often preferred to stifle possibly valid criticisms rather than risk their whole career by disagreeing with a superior officer. Learning and innovation suffered in a system which discouraged honest internal appraisal and communication.³⁸

With only six months in command to prove themselves and an unreachable standard of perfection to achieve, the Army's career management system pressured officers to focus on easily quantifiable achievements rather than achieving a high standard of military performance. Often, CO's focused heavily on improving statistical measures of performance such as maintenance records and inspection results to the detriment of training

³⁸ Ibid. p.54

and combat readiness. Maj. C. Powell Hutton, an armored battalion commander in Germany, related that many Seventh Army armored units attempted to cover up manpower shortages by putting staff officers and support personnel into tanks for combat qualification tests; while more tanks could be qualified, the ultimate effect was to produce a false picture of units' combat readiness. A similar state of affairs prevailed regarding AWOL's. Superior officers, ignorant of the drastic personnel problems in line units, would declare the presence of AWOL's unacceptable; junior officers responded by placing AWOL soldiers on leave or otherwise falsifying their reports. As a result, superiors remained happy and ignorant, and junior officers preserved their career prospects at the expense of their unit's combat capability.³⁹

The demand for "results" was even more pronounced in combat situations in Vietnam. Some officers handled their units with extreme caution in an effort to avoid casualties that would constitute a black mark on their records. Others pushed their units over-aggressively in order to build up a reputation as a "gung-ho" combat leader, although the rise of fragging may have discouraged such behavior, particularly after 1970. The problems surrounding the "body count" serve as a good example of ethical failure and its implications in combat situations. One officer complained that, "Nobody out there believes the body count. They couldn't possibly believe it. This is probably the most damning thing the Army has used recently...."⁴⁰ The body count's importance to senior officers led subordinates to concentrate on producing enemy corpses and claiming credit for them, even at the risk of their own men. More ominously, the focus on enemy casualties created a casual attitude towards Vietnamese lives that contributed to the My Lai slaughter and countless other less dramatic incidents of civilian casualties. In addition to wrangling over real bodies, numerous officers found themselves pressured to create phantom bodies to pad the count. Since the body count came to be the major indicator of combat success, commanders sometimes falsified the count in order to create the illusion of progress or to

³⁹ Ibid. pp.43-44, 57; USAWC, *Study on Military Professionalism*, p.B-1-10

⁴⁰ USAWC, *Study on Military Professionalism*, p.B-1-10

justify their own losses. In one instance following a costly firefight in August of 1966, a superior officer ordered Major Jack Galvin to add forty-five to the tally of enemy dead; heavy American losses in the engagement demanded an impressive collection of enemy dead lest it appear that the unit had been improperly led. While abuses of the body count destroyed whatever usefulness the body count it may have had as a measure of the progress of the war, the Army's continued focus on short term results reinforced the perception within the officer corps that ethical behavior was not productive from the standpoint of an individual's career goals.⁴¹

The problem with the Army's practice of fostering competition among its officers was that the system failed to emphasize the importance of playing by the ethical rules. There was little focus on ethical issues at any point in the education and training of military officers, as repeated intonation of "Duty-Honor-Country" was thought to be sufficient moral grounding for the officer corps. The reality was that the system encouraged, and ultimately came close to demanding, that officers flout the spirit of the rules in order to get ahead. The potentially fatal consequences of poor performance, instead of leading officers to excel, induced them to avoid difficult situations or falsify reports. Moreover, the pressure of the "ticket-punching" rotation system meant that the officer who wanted to advance his career would rarely become truly expert in any position to which he was assigned. The result was disillusionment among junior officers, who recognized the system's inadequacies and respected the service's ideals, but nonetheless felt compelled to play along in order to preserve their careers. The War College study revealed that a large portion of the Army's junior officers perceived the service's ethical shortcomings but felt powerless to do anything about the situation because the system itself produced the problems.

THE TROUBLED NEXT GENERATION:

In March of 1970, an anonymous officer using the pseudonym "Captain Regular" wrote an article in *Army Times* which decried the actions of the United States in Vietnam

⁴¹ James Kitfield, *Prodigal Soldiers: How the Generation of Officers Born of Vietnam Revolutionized the American Style of War*, New York (Simon and Schuster, 1995) p.75

and the resulting exodus of officers. The government was at fault for refusing to take the steps necessary to win the war, but the Army itself was to blame for tolerating and even promoting the "demise of the 'old Army' and the rise of the 'New Army,'" exchanging the traditional army of long service professionals with deeply-held standards and ethics for the "era of the two year captain, the instant NCO, the immature young majors, the entire ridiculous rapid promotion system, the total lack of discipline."⁴² The sense of betrayal expressed by "Captain Regular" was emblematic of a widespread disillusionment with the Army felt by a broad swath of the junior officer corps. The frustration and dismay of the junior officer corps at the climate within the Army in the early Seventies was the end product of the service's problems and in the long run its greatest concern.

The Army's ultimate problem in 1971 was that the service faced new leadership challenges while it was simultaneously losing many potentially strong officers. The breakdown of discipline reflected in the pattern of drug use, racial incidents, AWOL, fragging, and combat refusal was largely the result of unsatisfactory leadership at the small unit level. The War College study noted that the situation was not self-correcting but self-perpetuating, however. The breakdown of discipline was the product of poor leadership, but by complicating the task of leaders the Army's new problems contributed to the decline in the quality of leadership by inducing many frustrated officers to leave the service. While the Army could not combat the societal influences that contributed to its disciplinary problems, it had designed its personnel policies itself and thus was largely responsible for the ill effects the system produced. Ineffective leadership was the product of the Army's rotation policies for officers and enlisted men, exacerbated by the negative incentives to quality leadership provided by the officer personnel system and its attendant culture.

The fact that the Army leadership was so startled by the extent of junior officer dissatisfaction revealed in the War College study was symbolic of a general breakdown of communication between junior and senior officers which had deep negative effects on the

⁴² 'Captain Regular,' "Leaving 'Lost' War," *Army Times* 30, no.32E (March 18, 1970)

officer corps. Junior officers came to feel that their superiors had little interest in their opinions or their welfare. Senior officers demanded loyalty from their subordinates to the point of subservience but paid them little respect in return. Consumed with impressing their own superiors in order to get their tickets punched and move on up the promotion ladder, officers focused on their own careers to the detriment of their subordinates. Frequently superior officers treated their subordinates as tools to be used to assist the superior officer in assembling an impressive six month record of accomplishment during his command tour, then discarded. Colonel David Hackworth, one of the Army's most outspoken critics within the ranks but also a highly decorated infantry officer often cited as being on the short list for general, argued that many highly capable "young tigers" who he had spoken with were fed up with senior officers' habit of pulling rank on their subordinates. "The indictment that is suggested," Hackworth concluded, "is that we in the senior grades have forgotten that these young leaders are people.... I believe that we managers have forgotten the man." Within a year, Hackworth resigned his commission in order to avoid punishment for making public his views of the Army's shortcomings. The message to many frustrated officers was clear: the Army would not respond to constructive criticism so they had a choice between either adapting to the present system or leaving the service.⁴³

The Army's leadership problems contributed to decreasing retention of junior officers, a phenomenon discouraging in both the short term and the long term. In the short term the shortage of quality junior officers led to the commissioning of men who would not ordinarily have met the Army's standards for officers, with some unfortunate results. William Calley, a junior-college dropout and oft-unemployed wanderer before enlisting in the Army and completing Officer Candidate School, constituted in his central role in the My Lai massacre the most dramatic and tragic case of a man placed beyond his ability.⁴⁴ In the long term, the situation was perhaps even more disturbing. The retention rate of West Point

⁴³ Col. David H. Hackworth, "Bluster and Insensitivity Cost Army Good Men," *Army* 20, no.11 (November 1970), pp.56-58

⁴⁴ Gabriel and Savage, *Crisis in Command*, p.9

graduates, who traditionally were most committed to a military career, dropped from percentages in the high nineties in the late Sixties to 72 percent by 1971. Coupled with the fact that participation in the Reserve Officer Training Corps program had dropped substantially, particularly at the elite schools most likely to produce outstanding officers, the declining retention rate of West Pointers threatened to produce a marked decline in the quality of the officer corps.⁴⁵

Looking back in 1974, Lucian K. Truscott IV, a West Point graduate and the product of a distinguished military family, reflected on the reasons that he and other young officers had left the Army. Truscott perceived, "a sickness of the spirit as an officer in the United States Army, and I have always asked myself, was the sickness my own, or was it the Army's?" Truscott concluded that the disease was ultimately the Army's, the product of a failure of high level leadership that was steadily driving out the best men in the service. In dismay, Truscott declared, "We have broken a promise, those of us who left an Army in disrepair.... Ours was the promise of leadership.... of discipline... of command with the understanding of a sense of responsibility and purpose." Truscott and other ex-officers concluded that the Army of the early Seventies lacked the moral core that it needed in order to retain and motivate good officers.⁴⁶

Retreat:

General Westmoreland and other senior officers hoped that the withdrawal of American combat units from Vietnam would ease the pressure on the Army, and to an extent it did. While the level of racial tension remained high and drug abuse remained a significant problem, the crisis atmosphere of 1971 relented after the Army began to disengage from combat. The problem in the wake of the retreat from Vietnam was that the respite provided was the product of reduced responsibilities rather than solved problems, however. As the War College study's authors had noted in 1970, the Army's problems were not the product of the Vietnam War or the social upheavals of the Sixties; the decline of leadership and

⁴⁵ Ibid. p.194

⁴⁶ Lucian K. Truscott IV, "Notes on a Broken Promise," *Harpers* 249, no.1490 (July 1974), pp.20, 28

discipline that characterized the Army in 1969-1971 was the result of fundamental flaws in the Army's ethics and handling of personnel. Unfortunately, however, not all of these problems were addressed in the aftermath of the war.

The Army's most aggressive attempt to address its professional crisis was the Officer Personnel Management System (OPMS), an effort to redesign the career management system to reduce ticket-punching and other careerist practices. The system was designed to reduce competition for command jobs and allow officers to master the knowledge required by his areas of specialization. When the OPMS plan was submitted to senior officers for review, however, it met with implacable resistance from traditionalist officers who thought that the system that had resulted in their promotion to high rank was fundamentally sound. While a watered-down version of OPMS was eventually instituted, the sweeping changes envisioned by the authors did not come to pass.⁴⁷

While the impact of OPMS was limited, the Army's radical redesign of its training system in the post-Vietnam period did constitute a major improvement. Recognizing that lack of experience and professional knowledge had been a major problem for many officers in Vietnam, the Army formed the Training and Doctrine Command in 1973. TRADOC, as it came to be known, redefined the Army's doctrine and revolutionized the training procedures accompanying it to allow for greater unit training in realistic situations. The new training program was an important step in addressing the lack of technical competence that had plagued the Army during the Vietnam War.⁴⁸

As the Seventies continued, other issues pulled the Army's attention away from officer corps reform, however. The reduction in force mandated by Congress in the Vietnam drawdown allowed the Army to quietly prune some of the dead wood from the officer corps, but it also left many officers more worried than ever about their job security in an even more competitive environment. After the elimination of the draft in 1973, the Army had to concentrate on recruiting, training, and retaining volunteers to fill the enlisted ranks,

⁴⁷ Loory, *Defeated*, pp.91-94

⁴⁸ See Chapman, *The Army's Training Revolution*, pp.1-11, 47.

without whom there would be no Army; dealing with the new demands of the All Volunteer Force at times occupied much of the Army's intellectual and financial resources. Finally, the Army's need to fight for procurement of new weapons and other equipment in the spartan defense budgets of the mid-Seventies distracted Army leaders from worrying about the state of the officer corps.

In the end, the Army dealt with some elements of the Vietnam breakdown without addressing the fundamental issue of creating a career management system which encouraged officers to act professionally. The failure of leadership in Vietnam had resulted from officers who were too busy worrying about their own career advancement to concentrate on the unmeasurable but critical intangibles necessary to maintain discipline. The watered-down version of OPMS and the training reforms instituted by TRADOC were important steps in the right direction, but they did not address the ethical dilemma of balancing competition among officers with the necessity of instituting a corporate ethic of self-sacrifice. While the Army's most dramatic discipline problems relented somewhat when the stress of the war was removed, the roots of the crisis remained. In the event of a future crisis that would place significant strain on the Army again, it appeared quite possible that the breakdown of leadership which had taken place in Vietnam would recur. While the Army emerged more or less institutionally intact from the challenges of the Vietnam War, the limited reforms which the service instituted after the war ensured that it would continue to have major unaddressed potential leadership problems as the Seventies wore on..