A Good Answer to an Obsolete Question: The Army's Culture and Why It Needs to Change

by Casey Haskins

That proves to be a common theme throughout history. The values to which people cling most stubbornly under inappropriate conditions are those values that were previously the source of their greatest triumphs over adversity.

-Jared Diamond, Collapse[1]

The US Army has changed a great deal in the past few years as a result of its experience in Afghanistan and Iraq. Organization, tactics, doctrine, and equipment are all much different than they were before 9/11. Yet it is not enough. Most of the Army's culture—its key ideas, customs, and fundamental values—as well as many of its basic processes, remain deeply rooted in the post-Vietnam Cold War.

A lively debate has sprung up over what balance the Army should now strike between conventional warfighting and counterinsurgency.[2] But for the most part, this argument has sidestepped a critical point. Focusing almost completely on *what* the Army should do (how it should structure itself and what tasks it should focus training on), no attention is being paid to *the way* in which it will be done—whatever "it" ends up being. All sides seem to take as a given that today's Army is fundamentally sound and capable of steering its way to success, if only it can figure out the right direction. In other words, the culture of the Army remains largely unexamined.

That is a big mistake. While the Army's culture is quite well suited to win the Cold War, that same culture is in many ways hindering success in today's fights. A lot more must change if the Army is to succeed in its current fights and the fights it is likely to face in the foreseeable future, regardless whether those future fights look more conventional or more like counterinsurgencies.

Background—Context Always Matters

Any successful organization must mesh with its environment. The very meaning of 'successful' is that the organization competes and thrives within the jumble of opportunities, limitations, and requirements *peculiar to its specific place and time*. Success can only be judged in the context of that environment. There is little point in arguing, for instance, whether Napoleon's Grand Armée was better than Eisenhower's European Army; both were suited to their time and circumstances.[*]

This simple insight has profound implications. *To judge how successful an organization is likely to be—without the benefit of hindsight—requires both understanding its environment and assessing how well suited to that environment it is,*

[*] Successful organizations also help shape their environments in a sort of symbiotic way. The two are said to "coevolve". Both Napoleon's and Eisenhower's military successes helped reshape their times. However, for the purposes of this analysis it is enough to stipulate that all successful organizations are suited to their environments.

culturally and organizationally. In the case of an army, the part of the environment that matters most is the battlefield on which it must fight (bearing in mind also that no army can long succeed if, in its quest for battlefield dominance, it strays too far outside the bounds of what is acceptable to its parent society†).

Success does not require a perfect fit with the environment, merely a better fit than one's competitors. (In fact, no complex organization can ever fit perfectly—see appendix.)

The Cold War Environment

We begin by examining the characteristics of the late Cold War environment. It was, first of all, a time of comparative stability. While technology and tactics certainly changed throughout the Cold War, the rate of change was relatively steady and reasonably predictable. Near the end, certain technologies began to advance with astonishing rapidity—computers and communications, for example—but most weapons technologies and most tactics progressed at a more sedate pace, incrementally rather than disruptively. Overall, this comparatively stable environment would have tended to favor an efficient army. (See appendix for an explanation why.)

Both sides of the conflict—the US and its allies, and the Soviet Union and its allies—expected the main theater of war to be in Central Europe. Both militaries poised for the decisive fight there. Naval and air battles might circle the globe, and there would certainly be other theaters of war, but the main effort on both sides was focused squarely in Europe. So let us look at the nature of the fight expected there.

World War III in Central Europe was going to be a high-tempo, high-intensity fight consisting of single campaign, perhaps even a single major battle along each front. It would be over in a few weeks, a month at most. The battlefield would be incredibly lethal, its major challenge from the US and NATO point of view being the overwhelming numbers of enemy formations and weapons, especially artillery. Warsaw Pact formations would attack rapidly, in large numbers—wave upon wave—using sheer mass and firepower to penetrate NATO's defense at multiple points, destroying NATO armies as they drove to the Atlantic.

To counter superior enemy numbers, the US and NATO had to be able to "synchronize combat power" with little margin for error. Only by using every tool well could they hope to overcome the vast numbers of enemy formations and weapons. Synchronization was the key. Combining various weapons and systems could magnify the effects of each, in much the same way a doctor might combine various medicines with radiation and chemotherapy to defeat a cancer.

Doing this was complicated and difficult and required a high degree of sophisticated choreography. It also required a great deal of practice. Tanks alone would not be able to do the job; it required combining tank fire with artillery, helicopter-fired missiles, strikes from Air Force jets, minefields on the ground in

† The classic example of straying too far from what society considered acceptable is the French in Algeria. The army achieved military victory, but in so doing alienated the French people and thus lost the war.

precisely the right place, jamming radio signals, and a myriad of other things. Many different types of units all had to work together over large distances, with fairly precise timing, in incredibly hostile conditions to pull it off.

The focus was twofold: to destroy large numbers of enemy armored vehicles and artillery quickly, before they could inflict overwhelming damage; and to disrupt the enemy enough that he lost his nimbleness and his ability to adapt. Lethality was the aim, and while collateral damage was to be avoided where possible, killing and disrupting would take precedence.

US forces would have to act and move quickly, and would require enormous stamina and resilience. Discipline, rapid responsiveness, toughness, and the ability to sustain continuous operations were absolute requirements. A handful of top generals would make the big decisions, and everyone beneath them would work to execute those decisions well. Although mistakes were inevitable, the Army had to avoid any really big mistakes. A single significant failure could be catastrophic.

On the other hand, the enemy was predictable and was unlikely to evolve much once fighting began. The war would be over before either side had the chance to make substantial changes in its operational methods. While highly lethal, the battlefield would also be fairly straightforward. Everyone to the front could be considered enemy and must be either captured or killed. There would be no need to worry much about anyone to the rear. Soldiers on both sides would wear uniforms and be clearly identifiable, the only minor exceptions a few specialized units. Destruction and civilian deaths were expected to be vast, but for the most part that was a problem to be dealt with following the cessation of major combat operations. In essence, the war would look like a natural extension of the fighting that characterized World Wars I and II in Europe: highly lethal, conventional, and symmetrical, a desperate contest between well matched giants. The Army faced a titanic struggle, but win or lose, the hardest part would likely be over within a month. The imperative was to be prepared for that month.

The Cold War Army and How It Fit

How, then, did the Army's culture reflect the requirements of this battlefield? As was earlier pointed out, in a comparatively stable environment the advantage would go to the more efficient army, and the US Army clearly strove for efficiency. This drove tactics—the need to synchronize the various elements of combat power required efficient methods of planning and control—but it is perhaps even better seen in the way the Army trained.[‡]

Facing a predictable enemy, most battlefield problems could be foreseen and 'best solutions' worked out in advance. Everyone could then learn their roles and rehearse them again and again, so as to be ready when the time finally came.[3] Accordingly, leader training came to consist primarily of teaching leaders the doctrine that governed their type of unit (the approved solutions, so to speak, and how to apply

[‡] Training is what an army does most of the time when it is not actually fighting, and it is in training that the heart of an army's culture lies. Training is where ideas are instilled and refined, and it is the best place to analyze how an army *really* thinks about things and behaves.

them). While most leaders experimented and adjusted the doctrine to suit their preferences, these deviations remained generally within narrow limits.

Unit training at all levels consisted mainly of various repetitive exercises in which leaders practiced having their units apply these approved solutions in various situations. A burgeoning number of field manuals and, later, "mission training plans" steered unit training; individual manuals with their detailed explanations of each 'task, conditions, and standards' did the same for individual training. Leaders' decisions centered largely on how to apply doctrinal solutions to particular situations and on how to control and synchronize the various elements of combat power.

A widespread belief held that if a unit could see most of the battlefield better than the enemy, they were almost sure to triumph.[§] This belief drove not only tactics but also procurement and experimentation, in a quest for ever greater battlefield omniscience and efficiency.[4] The "what" of a situation was rarely at issue; once the tactical problem was understood, there was usually broad agreement on the solution. It was the "how" that consumed units' time and energy. Like a football team in a game, the answer generally consisted of combining a set of well-rehearsed basic doctrinal plays to best fit a particular situation. An unfortunate and little noticed side effect was that the "why" behind the doctrinal solutions began to fade away. Soldiers, including leaders, came to do things because they had always been done that way, rather than because they understood why it made sense to do so. Very few leaders, for instance, had ever thought about why soldiers should ever low crawl, or why a machinegun was unloaded and cleared in a particular way—that was just the approved solution, to be done automatically.[5]

Standardization had two main advantages. First, it made units more interoperable. Given that virtually the entire US Army could end up fighting alongside one another in the giant battle, that had obvious appeal. More important, it allowed for more efficient training in institutional settings like schools and training centers. If everyone were trained to respond similarly to situations and to execute tasks within certain parameters, training could much more easily be scaled up. In units, less time would need to be spent on figuring out what training to do and on organizing it, and more time could be spent on the training itself.

Zeroing a rifle (adjusting the rifle's sights to the individual, to make sure he can hit what he's aiming at) provides a good illustration of how this culture of efficiency shaped training. In earlier years, the Army had devoted a great deal of time to developing individual marksmanship, expecting soldiers to master their weapons in all conditions. From the early Vietnam period, however, the need for efficiency grew more important and the value placed on individual mastery diminished. By the late 1970s, efficiency in training had clearly become paramount.[6]

Firers all shot at the same time, controlled by commands from a tower. They fired three-shot groups, the theoretical minimum for triangulating errors. Targets

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[§] This would only hold true if the enemy continued to behave as predicted. Retired Marine Lieutenant General Paul Van Riper uses the analogy of a chessboard: everything is visible, but that does not mean a player can divine his opponent's intentions. Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink*. (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2005)

were placed 25 meters from the firing line rather than 300, the distance at which the line of aim and the path of the bullet's ballistic arc first intersect. This greatly reduced the time needed to walk downrange to examine targets and calculate adjustments (albeit at the cost of a less accurate zero, in reality if not in theory). Since this process was faster, fewer ranges were required to support a given population, and many of those ranges could now be smaller: both significant gains in efficiency.

The zero target itself eliminated the need for most thinking: it included a grid that corresponded to the number of "clicks" needed to move each adjusting knob, as well as diagrams showing precisely which sight to adjust and in what direction. The Army allocated enough ammunition for everyone to zero with 18 rounds. While the results might not be excellent (the minimum passing score for rifle qualification required hitting only 23 of 40 targets, or 57.5%), it was good enough. Things like tank crew gunnery were deemed more important (remember, the main threat was all those Soviet tanks and artillery pieces), so they received more time and resources, and the Army expected a higher level of proficiency. Henry Ford might have designed the entire process.

The advantages of this efficient approach to training were similar to those of a mass-production factory, able to outcompete an artisan struggling unsuccessfully to keep up by individually crafting objects. It might be true that the artisan achieved better results, but the factory approach was much more efficient, and its results were good enough.

Everywhere one looked, one could find a similar wholesale embracing of efficiency as a core underpinning of the Army culture. The processes used to assign and promote personnel, the standardized management of officers' and NCOs' career patterns, the way the Army procured and distributed supplies, the way units maintained their vehicles—in countless areas, a mass-production, one-size-fits-all approach prevailed.

Officers and NCOs tended to favor the tangible and measurable over the intangible. "Slant reports"[**] at the National Training Center (a giant training area in the Mojave Desert where units practiced fighting Soviet regiments) were extremely useful and efficient, but they took no notice of unit personalities, or differences in crew capabilities, or of the effects of shock and grief on surviving crews when one of the 'missing' vehicles turned out to contain a beloved leader or friend. It didn't matter. World War III in Central Europe would leave little room for such trifles—it required the best and most efficient methods. In this way, the Army unintentionally (and ultimately unsuccessfully) worked to engineer human differences out of what were still, in the end, human systems.

Proliferation of rules was the most obvious way to minimize human differences. Detailed rules and procedures compensated for varying levels of talent or differences between units. While good leaders and units would still clearly perform better than poor ones, no unit or individual would fail so long as they followed procedures and

[**] Reports of unit combat power, phrased in terms of major weapons systems remaining in the fight. For instance, a company with five remaining tanks and four remaining Bradley Fighting Vehicles would report 5/4, which phonetically was "five slant four".

met minimum standards.[7] "Standards" became the Army's watchword and meeting standards a kind of mantra. Even the concept of "discipline" was commonly equated to adherence to standards. Expertise in a job was not strictly required so long as one followed the standard operating procedures. Instructors were given scripts; operators checklists. While expertise remained clearly advantageous, soldiers did not necessarily need to understand *why* things were done a certain way, so long as they knew how to do them, especially if they did them with vigor and enthusiasm.

The nature of the battlefield—one large campaign with multiple units involved side by side along the front—made it absolutely essential to centralize and efficiently manage various elements of combat power. Subordinate units collected information to support senior commanders' decisions; never the reverse. Scarce intelligence assets were never enough to meet the need and the generals had to prioritize where to use them on the battlefield to best effect. Most collection assets[††] and most of the capability to analyze the information they gathered resided at division headquarters and higher. Similar arrangements governed artillery, aviation, transportation, and a host of other assets. A centralized battlefield required a centralized Army.

An early post-Vietnam doctrine called the "Active Defense" envisioned the US Army fighting mainly from the defense with lots of local counterattacks to disrupt enemy attacks and seize the initiative wherever possible.[8] However, Army leaders realized that it would not be enough to be good at defending; in order to win, NATO forces would have to seize the initiative, and that meant they had to be on the attack. Beginning in the early 1980s, the Army came again to prize more and more the spirit of the offense. Active Defense evolved into a more explicitly offensive doctrine called "AirLand Battle".[9] This new doctrine increasingly valued initiative and synchronization, and hence efficient management of battlefield assets. It envisioned rapid movements in sustained battles lasting weeks. An "offensive mindset"—the drive to seize and retain the initiative—including the willingness to take sensible risks, was seen as crucial to a commander's success and promotion.

One other imperative of the Cold War played a major role in shaping the culture: the ever-present need to avoid making a disastrous mistake. Remember, there was to be one short campaign, with all the chips on the table, winner take all. There would be no "do-overs". It was prudent to take a decade or more of design and testing, and to build in multiple, redundant layers of review before fielding, for instance, a new main battle tank. Expensive, ponderous, and costly, this system that would try the patience of Job made sense in the Cold War environment. Battlefield conditions were changing slowly, and the overwhelming need was to avoid getting it wrong. Discovering in combat that the tank was deficient in some critical way or that its support system didn't work would spell catastrophe. The entire war could be lost over that one mistake.

Like the drive for efficiency, this need to avoid critical mistakes also became deeply ingrained in the Army culture, doing much to offset the risk-taking ethos associated with an offensive mindset. Manuals stressed the need to take risks[10], but

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[††] Collection assets are the people and systems used to gather raw information, such as how many tanks are moving past a particular spot. Analysts then combine this information with other observations to create "intelligence": educated guesses about what the enemy is up to.

the Army's Chief of Staff said there should be no such thing as an accident and required that someone be held accountable every time there was.[11]

The rifle range again shows clearly how this aversion to risks permeated the Army's culture. Range procedures maximized control, requiring everyone to do the same thing at the same time in the same way. Rather than expecting soldiers to be responsible for their own actions, the procedures assumed they were dangerous and incapable of handling loaded weapons safely. Rifles remained oriented downrange at all times, regardless of the direction the soldier faced (resulting in some truly awkward moments, when a soldier with full hands and a rifle had to turn around), so that if someone accidentally fired, no one would be hurt. An official—usually an sergeant—stood at the range's entry and exit point and stuck a rod down every rifle barrel as soldiers filed onto and off the range, ensuring there were no obstructions before shooting, or remaining ammunition afterward. Soldiers were told when to disengage their weapons' safety, when to shoot, when to cease firing, and when to reengage their weapon's safety. At every stage of the process, someone else was responsible for the telling the individual soldier what to do. Intentionally or not, individuals were conditioned *not* to think or make decisions.

It worked. Depending on how one counts, the rate of accidental injuries and deaths of all types, including by gunshot, declined by half from 1980 to 2000.[12] But this gain, like many of the gains from efficiency, came at an unexamined cost. "Safety" was too often achieved by avoiding dangerous situations rather than by teaching soldiers to do difficult things correctly.[13] Unit leaders were encouraged to remove risk, rather than to balance risk with mission accomplishment. If something were to go wrong, the consequences would be severe. But what would happen when soldiers who had never learned to be responsible for their own weapon's safety were given live ammunition in a combat zone, with almost none of the controls they had experienced in training? The answer was as predictable as it was tragic: far too many poorly trained soldiers had 'negligent discharges' (firing their weapons when they were not supposed to, usually unintentionally) resulting in unnecessary injuries and deaths—a problem that has continued to pose serious challenges to US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.[14]

On a larger scale, after the Marines' barracks were bombed in Beirut, and especially after the bombing of Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, "force protection", or protecting the troops from harm, assumed overwhelming importance, sometimes overshadowing the very purpose for which the troops had ostensibly been deployed in the first place. A commanding general, on the eve of the Kosovo Air War, told his staff that it would be better to fail in the mission than to have a single American soldier killed.[15] This is absurd on its face, but in the context of the times he was behaving rationally. Leaders' careers might overcome mission failure, but they knew they were unlikely to overcome the penalties they would face if their soldiers were killed.

One tangible result of this risk-avoidance was the proliferation of bureaucratic institutions outside the chain of command, designed to prevent mistakes—especially mistakes by inexperienced junior leaders. Each post had a Safety office, a Range Control, an Equal Opportunity office (plus an Equal Employment Opportunity counterpart for civilian employees), budget auditors, contracting auditors, maintenance inspection teams, weapons inspection teams, Inspectors General, a

Quality Assurance office, and plenty more. Over time they seemed to grow not just in number but in importance. Empowered to propose regulations and to enforce standards and rules, they could effectively override junior leader decisions. Most had some degree of veto authority, and all could cause trouble for a subordinate leader who failed to comply. Long after the original problem for which they had been created was solved or ceased to be significant, these institutions remained in place, retaining their authority and continuing to inhibit initiative. They existed to prevent failure, and no one seemed to notice that in so doing they also prevented excellence.

Together, these two great imperatives, the quest for efficiency and the need to avoid potentially catastrophic mistakes, reinforced a natural tendency of all large and successful organizations to develop ever-more-elaborate centralized controls. (See appendix.) All of this greatly accelerated a trend that began in the early post-Vietnam era, when the "hollow Army" had to be rebuilt as a volunteer Army. Not only had Vietnam bled much of the experienced NCO corps, but the extensive combat experience that their replacements had gained came to be viewed in some ways as only partially relevant, given the decision to turn away from counterinsurgency warfare and refocus on preparing for World War III in Central Europe.[16]

The Army developed new centralized systems to train and equip its forces, systems explicitly designed to help compensate for the lack of experience by being more directive about how things were to be done, by simplifying the training process, and by standardizing it. At the same time, synchronizing every aspect of combat power meant restricting subordinates' latitude in favor of more centralized direction. So just as the Army was beginning to do more extensive and much more realistic training, it was also developing more and more elaborate checklists for what to do in every situation and how to do it, and planning came to include more and more synchronization and central direction.

Leaders who did all this best, whose units were most efficient and consistently achieved the best measurable results—and who avoided significant mistakes—earned rewards and promotion. Not surprisingly, they trained subordinates in their own image and rewarded them, and those subordinates in their turn rewarded and promoted those who did it best, a cycle that deeply ingrained both efficiency and avoidance of big mistakes into the Army's culture.

It would be easy to exaggerate this. The Army continued to develop some leaders with imagination and drive, as it always had. Many applied battlefield solutions with subtlety and sophistication, but it is fair to say that was not the norm. In important ways, those fairly rare officers and NCOs developed into exceptionally talented combat leaders despite the system, not because of it. In general, Army culture emphasized proficiency at collective tasks over individual mastery of skills, doctrinal solutions over originality and problem solving, specialization over generalization, and centralization over decentralization. Leaders accepted minor risks but tended to avoid major ones.

All this clearly succeeded. Though there were negative side effects, it is undeniable that this quest for efficiency and lethality, combined with caution, did what was intended. The Army achieved its aim of building large, capable, and fairly interoperable units and keeping them at a reasonably constant state of preparedness

(albeit some kept more ready than others), ready to fight the precise type of battle envisioned: conventional, offensive, fast, large, sustained, lethal, and highly centralized. While not necessarily imaginative, units were capable of synchronizing combat power, making rapid adjustments, and maintaining a high tempo with little respite for a period of weeks. They could do critical things well, and they could do other things well enough. Army leaders were cautious and managed to avoid any major mistakes from the end of the Vietnam War through the end of the Gulf War.

The Army succeeded in shaping its culture to suit the needs of the Cold War. It was neither perfect nor uniform, but there can be little doubt that the Army's culture and organization were a very good fit for its environment.

A Critical Change: Today's Environment

Rather abruptly though, that environment lurched into a new and unsettled state. The battlefields on which American soldiers fight today are very different from those anticipated during the Cold War. In many ways they are almost polar opposites.

Unlike the relatively stable and predictable environment of the late Cold War, today's battlefields evolve rapidly: they differ greatly from place to place and from one month to the next. The luxury of being able to predict problems that units will face is gone, and so is the ability to work out best solutions in advance. Far from leading change in the Army, much of its doctrine now lags years behind the realities of combat and is widely viewed as less relevant than it used to be.[17]

Rapidly evolving battlefields favor adaptability and nimbleness over efficiency. Since soldiers face problems that the Army has not been able to foresee and work out doctrinal solutions for, the ability to solve problems is now the key to success. This means that soldiers must routinely think through their actions, learning to rely on principles, an understanding of their situation, a real mastery of fundamentals, and a spirit of practical experimentation, rather than continuing to depend upon execution of well-drilled responses to specific situations.

Duration and tempo have changed too. These wars are not a few weeks long. Instead, they look more and more "long and inconclusive".[‡‡] At this writing, Afghanistan and Iraq have already lasted over seven and six years respectively, with no natural end in sight. While there may be a quick Grenada or Panama in the offing, the wars the US Army is apt to wage in the foreseeable future are likelier to last a decade than a month. Even future high-intensity, conventional conflicts seem more likely to result in long series of campaigns and long-term operations among the people, especially in cities. Such high-intensity fights will likely spawn insurgencies, as hurricanes spawn tornadoes. General George Casey, the current Army Chief of Staff, has dubbed this "an era of persistent conflict."[18]

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‡‡ The phrase is taken North Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, describing how the seemingly outclassed Vietnamese planned to defeat America: "The United States is the most powerful nation on earth. But Americans do not like long, inconclusive wars….We can outlast them and we can win in the end." J. Cameron, *Here is Your Enemy* (New York: Holt, Reinhart, Winston, 1966).

But the pace of a marathon is not the same as the pace of a sprint. Today's wars are not non-stop, high-intensity action the way World War III in Central Germany was going to be. While there are still battles that last for days or even weeks, the normal tempo is a somewhat slower and more sustainable pace that allows soldiers to sleep and even to take an occasional day off. Exhaustion in these wars comes from the need to maintain effort over months and years, not from a single Herculean push to the limits of individual endurance.

Because they are protracted wars, there is not the same urgency to avoid mistakes that there was in the Cold War. Even in the case of a big mistake, the Army may well correct it and recover. That seems to have been the case in Afghanistan, where early overreliance on Afghan forces allowed senior Al Qaida and Taliban leaders to escape from the caves of Tora Bora across the Pakistan border.[19] Although many of those who escaped remain free, American forces no longer make that mistake. It has also been true in Iraq, where the Army has regrouped and adjusted its methods, patiently working to learn from and overcome blunders even of the magnitude of Abu Ghraib or the early overuse of indiscriminate fire that resulted in unacceptably high casualties among civilian bystanders.

In fact, because the battlefield conditions are changing so fast, the old methods of making important decisions can be counterproductive. Taking lots of time and building in multiple reviews to ensure that a new weapon or doctrine or policy is absolutely right before fielding it will likely produce—at best—a good answer to an obsolete question. It also has the unfortunate effect of stifling initiative, precisely when the Army should be encouraging it. Far better to move quickly to implement reasonable ideas, even accepting that some will prove unworkable and need to be discarded. That is still more effective in a rapidly changing environment than taking a long time to avoid mistakes.

Even successful innovations may not last long: witness the push to replace recently fielded uparmored HMMWVs (humvees) with newer vehicles to better protect against an evolving threat from roadside bombs.[20] The rate at which changes are required is much faster now than in the Cold War, and old methods of deciding and implementing change may prevent units from keeping up.

The battlefield of today is also much more decentralized. Whereas before, most of the Army was going to fight side-by-side, now battalions are assigned long-term responsibility for geographical areas that include many neighborhoods or whole towns or cities. No two are alike. In parts of Baghdad, for instance, it is quite common for adjacent companies to face vastly different challenges and circumstances. Since their problems are different, so must their solutions be. This clearly calls for pushing not just decision-making authority, but also resources down to much lower levels than was appropriate in the Cold War. In a reversal of the previous situation, the best use of a high-level commander's intelligence apparatus may well be to collect and analyze information to answer his subordinate commanders' questions rather than requiring them to help answer his.

Today's battlefield is also much less simple and much more ambiguous than the fight against the Soviet Union was ever going to be. Confusing and ever-shifting combinations of insurgents, terrorists, criminal gangs, and ordinary people with

grievances interact, working among the population, emerging briefly, and then blending back into them. Like a kaleidoscope, the players shift allegiances or form into new groups, and the pattern is ever changing. Few wear uniforms or are full-time combatants.

Nor are all the problems military. Building institutions and making them work used to be seen as the work of nongovernmental organizations or other branches of the US government. They may still be, in theory, but all too often those other people are not there. Soldiers are and must get on with it. This means that whether they like it or not, soldiers are often involved in many aspects of government and society beyond security—clearly outside the Army's comfort zone. Governments at all levels, even if they are seen as legitimate, face overwhelming problems. The fact that their agencies are frequently incompetent and sometimes corrupt does not help. While many in the US Army would much prefer the straightforward challenges of defeating massive armored forces, making societies work is the key to victory in these conflicts.[21]

There can be no doubt that killing remains necessary. The Army must remain lethal, and on a large scale. But these wars cannot be won merely by killing. There is effectively an infinite supply of angry young men willing to fight and to die. If conditions look inviting or if American actions provoke enough outrage, they will come flooding in to participate. The hard, patient work of providing security for the population, of helping to build institutions, and of teaching local governments and security forces to provide essential services to their people is the only way to win these long, shadowy wars. Too great a fixation on any particular enemy group can backfire, causing it to splinter or leaving a vacuum in its place, into which newer and more effective groups will quickly move.

Winning these wars by killing insurgents is like trying to defeat malaria by swatting mosquitoes. Yes, of course, mosquitoes must be swatted. But it is far more important to give the people medicated bed nets to protect themselves, while doing something to drain the swamp.

On the other hand, today's battlefields are much less lethal than those the Army planned to face in World War III in Central Europe. Shocking and sudden violence and death are a daily part of life in much of Iraq and Afghanistan, but the level of casualties—even including civilians and the severely wounded—is small by historical standards. They do not come close to what was anticipated during the Cold War, when it was expected that entire brigades could suddenly become combat ineffective, half their members killed or wounded in a single afternoon.[22]

To summarize then, while the Cold War put a premium on efficiency, lethality, and avoidance of big mistakes, today's battlefields have different demands. Problem solving, adaptability, learning from mistakes, and using force with precision and restraint are all more important. Doctrinal solutions may not be of much help. Persistence and the ability to succeed in things long scorned as non-military "nation building" are every bit as critical as being able to synchronize combat power. A Cold War Army of disciplined, specialized experts, able to act with robot-like efficiency in executing doctrine while facing enormous adversity no longer suits the environment. Today's battlefields would seem to require an Army of less-specialized problem solvers

with a real mastery of fundamental skills. Most of all, they require an Army of thinking leaders leading thinking soldiers.

Does Today's Army Suit Today's Environment?

The Army has changed in important ways since 9/11, especially after General Pete Schoomaker was recalled from retirement to become the Chief of Staff. Those changes have been given huge impetus by the Army's prolonged experience of warfare in Afghanistan and Iraq. Leaders had been studying the problem of how to change for a dozen years, but the problem was too complex to be solved in its entirety, causing de facto paralysis. General Schoomaker decided to start changing anyway and deal with issues as they arose. Significant change would be disruptive and would create huge disconnects as it ripped apart old systems without having laid the groundwork for their replacements, but there was no other way.[23]

He inherited an Army that had already largely begun pulling back from overseas outposts (mainly in Germany) to the United States so that it could be deployed on expeditions anywhere around the world, and he accelerated that process. But the most significant changes he made (or, more accurately, that he led the Army's civilian and military leadership in making) were to restructure the Army, moving from a Cold War Army built around divisions to a more nimble one built around slimmed-down but already-integrated brigade combat teams. Instead of ten divisions, no two of which were quite alike (creating logistical nightmares), there would be three types of "modular" ground combat brigades, all interchangeable, and all capable of fighting under any division headquarters. They would combine elements of previously specialized units into smaller, general-purpose ones. Each would be reasonably self-sufficient. There would be a number of other types of brigades (aviation, engineer, support, etc.), but these too would be modular. It would, in effect, become a mix-and-match Army, with units tailored to the needs of a particular mission's requirements.

Without the pressing urgency of war, this "transformation" may not have occurred at all. When it did begin, the changes proceeded at a pace unthinkable during the Cold War, leaving many loose ends untied and many problems unrecognized until they were encountered. This was not the decade-long, repeatedly reviewed, completely synchronized process by which the Army acquired and fielded the M1 tank during the Cold War.

It was made even more difficult by the fact that units had to completely reorganize between combat tours, often with little or no extra time to do so. The whole process had more than a hint of improvisation to it. Brigades commonly found themselves expected to do things for which they were not yet equipped, or which they had not yet had the time to think through fully. The 3rd Infantry Division's brigades returned to Iraq after reorganizing, for instance, without having received or trained on some of their essential equipment. Only after arriving in Kuwait did they receive the rifles they were to use in combat.[24]

This was a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it was chaotic and stressful; on the other, it helped soldiers and leaders to jettison much of the Cold War culture. They could not apply pre-approved solutions; they were facing problems not previously encountered. New organizations and new equipment, combined with new and

changing missions and concepts for conducting operations, all required them to solve problems and think on their feet. This reinforced their combat experiences. In Iraq and Afghanistan they had learned to place a premium on innovation and resourcefulness, and they had learned the need to think carefully about the long-term consequences of their actions. A quick fix to today's problem that made tomorrow more difficult was a bad solution. All these considerations had caused them to reexamine the habits formed by their previous training and to overcome some of its limitations, and ironically, the chaos of reorganizing helped them make the leap.

Today's US Army is the most combat-experienced it has ever been. Stretched to a dangerous point by the strain of repeated combat tours, the Army is nevertheless brimming with experience and very capable. Tough, with a wealth of hard-won knowledge, including newfound expertise at tasks undreamed of a decade ago—tasks like building company-level intelligence networks, repairing water distribution systems, and searching houses without causing undue offense—officers and NCOs no longer think the same way they did before the wars.

Some of this new thinking is reflected in new procedures and doctrine. Rules of engagement (the rules governing the allowable use of deadly force) have been tightened to strongly discourage indiscriminate use of force. Commanders are much more willing to risk taking casualties than they used to be, if by doing so they can avoid tipping people into supporting insurgents. There is also greater willingness, especially among advisory teams and brigade and division commanders, to try to work within the Iraqi or Afghan culture, rather than trying to force them to do things the American way.

The concept of 'initiative', so important in Cold War thinking (remember the premium placed on offensive spirit), retains its place, but it has evolved into something more subtle and sophisticated. Commanders no longer see attacking as the only way of seizing and retaining initiative: their thinking now includes any actions that help achieve their commander's intent and prevent the enemy from achieving his, including many "non-kinetic" actions (meaning not involving use of force). Successful job programs and economic and political progress have joined cordon-and-search operations and raids as part of an offensive mindset.

Reflecting these changes, the new counterinsurgency manual (Field Manual 3-24) that then-Lieutenant General Petraeus helped author takes a much more nuanced view of this type of war, stressing patience, the need to secure the population, the need to accept greater risk in the short term, the difficult but necessary requirement to nurture institutions, and the law of unintended consequences. The Army's new capstone manual (Field Manual 3-0, simply titled "Operations") has for the first time recognized that "stability operations" (meaning operations focused mainly on the populace rather than the enemy) are equal in importance to offensive and defensive operations, and that they will occur not just in counterinsurgencies but in every war, alongside combat operations. This is a big leap, especially given the disdain in which many held "nation building" just six years ago.

Yet even in combat brigades, the change is only partial. Much of the old, Cold War culture remains: rules for their own sake, and a knee-jerk equating of independent thought with indiscipline. Some examples:[25]

- "Standards" are established for the most trivial things, usually in the name of "discipline"—never mind that arbitrary standards discourage thinking, especially when there is no obvious need for them. Soldiers in a combat outpost going to the toilet at 3:00a.m. after a 30-hour shift patrolling and guarding prisoners are required to put on "a complete military uniform" to walk outside—but not the helmet and body armor that might make sense if there were an enemy threat. The unit's leaders speak proudly of their "discipline".

- A command sergeant major at a forward operating base stops a departing convoy because the soldiers each have their individual equipment configured differently, in violation of the (heretofore unknown) policy. Explanations—a six-foot-four, left-handed machine gunner riding in a turret needs his magazines in a different place than a five-foot-two, right-handed soldier riding on the right side of a vehicle—fall on deaf ears. The standard is the standard.

- A unit policy prohibits units below battalion from establishing independent intelligence networks—too inefficient, messy, and difficult to control. As a result, platoons in combat send up false reports and purloin captured money in order to establish an informant network and pay informants—something their experience tells them they must do in order to stay alive, let alone make any progress against the enemy. This works, but there are no winners: the resulting intelligence is unavailable to others; uncorrelated with other sources, that intelligence is often faulty; and soldiers learn to disregard directives from higher headquarters (in addition to committing the technically criminal offense of stealing captured money)—all the exact opposite of what the leaders presumably seek.

- Soldiers recently redeployed from Iraq are enjoying themselves at a spontaneous barbecue outside their barracks. Noisy but well behaved, the Staff Duty NCO breaks it up and punishes them for "failing to get an exception to policy", in order to have a "public gathering". From that day on they drive off-post to relax, greatly increasing the likelihood they will drive inebriated and end up downtown in fights. Asked why he did this, the NCO incredulously talks of "discipline" and "standards", as though he can't believe anyone could question his actions. Judgment has no role in the problem.

Of course, any large organization is filled with contradictions, and it is simple to pick out examples of ridiculous decisions with perverse consequences. But these are not a few isolated examples in an otherwise intelligent organization. They are much more the norm than the exception.

Clearly, the culture in the Army's combat units, at least when they are not in direct contact with the enemy, is not yet one of thinking leaders leading thinking soldiers. Even sensible standards, when they shut off thought, often cost more than the benefits they confer. Having one acceptable "approved solution" makes it more difficult to adjust to changed conditions. The costs are much greater when the standards make no obvious sense.

A common refrain from NCOs when asked why they corrected a soldier is "I don't get to set the standards, sir. It's just my job to enforce them all!" Disregarding the fact that many of those 'standards' are mutually contradictory, this is troubling. Standards in training were meant to be flexible, to change when the conditions changed. (That's why the Army adopted "task, *conditions*, standards" rather than just "task, standards".) More than that, the assumption was always that those setting the standards understood the situation in which their soldiers would be placed and had already thought things through. This is plainly not the case in today's rapidly changing environment. Principles may be enduring; standards rarely are. Yet one never hears NCOs talking of enforcing principles.

Taken literally, the NCO's response means either that he is incapable of thinking or that he is not allowed to—either way, bad news. A top-level panel seemed to agree. Reviewing the state of the NCO Corps, the panel published its final report in April 2002. It stressed that the Cold War model of training, promotion, and education needed overhauling. It pointed out the need to shift some of the training emphasis from large units back to individuals and small-units. In many ways, the report rang true. All the same, it included this statement: "NCOs require well-defined tasks, conditions, standards, and performance measures to ensure soldiers and small units are prepared to function as effective unit and team members."[26] In other words, they must be told not just what to do but how to do it. The panel members never questioned whether that part of the old system still made sense, or indeed, was even still practical.

Discipline is still usually equated to adherence to standards, rather than to the self-discipline of always trying one's best to do the right thing. It is simpler that way. Adherence to standards removes most of the subjectivity. It means that someone else defines "the right thing", rather than having to expect the soldier to figure it out for himself and undoubtedly getting it wrong from time to time. But this path leads inexorably to thick books of often-arbitrary rules. Too many leaders—including senior leaders—still expect robotic privates who, like children of old, should be seen and not heard. They instinctively reject the need for soldiers to think. Often leaders—even in combat missions—penalize subordinates for asking questions, though it is very clear that a soldier pulling security at a busy intersection cannot do so effectively without understanding the situation around him as it unfolds.

This is visible in training too. While it varies by unit, most training still looks a lot like it used to. Too much is rote, one-size-fits-all, and not very enjoyable. It tends to be more process-oriented than focused on results:

- Soldiers and units are graded not so much on their success, but rather on how closely they adhere to doctrine.

- Too much training is still governed by "inputs" (hours spent, rounds fired, etc.) rather than outcomes or results.

- While there are now routinely civilians on the training battlefield, they often have to follow scripts and are unable to react realistically to events, or if they do

so, they behave as Americans would, dangerously oversimplifying the problem.

- "Observer-controllers" at the combat training centers still commonly prescribe to the leaders they are coaching how units should solve the tactical problems they face. They tend to enforce doctrine rather than encouraging units to experiment and solve problems for themselves.

- While most units now carry weapons more realistically on ranges, in many cases once they are on the range the training has changed little. Rarely are soldiers encouraged to think and solve problems, and control is almost always emphasized over teaching.

- Most importantly, *training still focuses almost exclusively on what to do and how to do it—and little or not at all on why.* Why do it at all? Why do it that way? Not understanding why, soldiers tend not to leave training better prepared to think and solve problems.

Field Manual 3-0: *Operations* stresses the need for "mission command"—in other words, to tell subordinates what needs to be done but not how to do it—to increase initiative and flexibility. This is a significant change from the centralized planning required to completely synchronize combat power—and we can presume it means that the Army's leadership has accepted that there will consequently be less synchronization. But there is no corresponding change in the doctrine that governs how the Army trains. That training doctrine has continued down the Cold War path with only slight deviations.

To be fair, the Army's most recent guidance on training does attempt to deal with some of the problems. There is some genuinely new thinking, especially on the importance of including realism—especially ambiguity and complexity—in training scenarios. It also attempts to address the tension between focusing training on high-intensity combat and focusing it on counterinsurgency. In its essence, though, the approach has changed little. The old centralized-management approach to training, and the old focus on standardization and efficient use of resources still reign. The publicity accompanying the new Field Manual 7-0: *Training for Full Spectrum Operations* promises bold change and a break with the past: "Change the Army mindset"; "No return to pre-9-11 focus"; "Stressing the need for Army leaders to think differently about training and leader development…."[27] But despite the rhetoric, the manual's approach is quite conservative, preserving the vast majority of the old training management systems and almost all of the old training methodology: it is the old system with a fresh coat of paint.

The Army continues to field increasingly sophisticated automated training management systems. A computer program will spit out the complete plan, including tasks, subtasks, resources required, time allotted, and the optimized sequence of training. Leaders have less and less need to think for themselves. This quest for ever more efficiency comes, of course, as the environment has changed to reward innovation and experimentation over efficiency. These systems are relics of a bygone age, obsolete before they are fielded.

Evidence of this mass-production, efficient, but unthinking approach is quite visible on the ground. It is, sadly, still common to see soldiers, including junior leaders, standing around waiting to be told what to do next, especially when something unexpected happens.[28] Training plans continue to emphasize collective training (training as larger groups, as opposed to individual training or training in small teams), advancing to the next level on schedule. In theory, before that happens, soldiers will have achieved at least some proficiency as individuals, but they are highly unlikely to have approached anything like mastery. Most will not be able to explain *why* tasks are done a certain way—not surprising, when many of their leaders cannot explain it either.

When synchronizing combat power to kill Soviet tanks and artillery was the most important requirement, this all made sense. When no one knows for sure what challenges the unit will face on its next combat tour, it does not. Without having truly mastered the skills, and not being immersed in an environment that encourages them to think and improvise, soldiers leave training less prepared than they might be to solve new problems and make smart adjustments based on the situation.

If the culture in operational units has only partially changed, the culture in the institutional portion of the Army has barely changed at all. High-level staffs, schools, assignment officers and NCOs, resource managers—all continue to operate much as before. There are three main reasons for this. First is what might be called inertia. Institutions are almost universally resistant to fundamental change; the larger they are and the longer they have been successful, the more pronounced the tendency.[29]

Second is the "civilianization" of many of the Army's institutions. Since the Army shrank following the Cold War, civilians have replaced soldiers in key positions in a number of these organizations. In many, they outnumber soldiers by a large margin. The fact that they are civilians is not, by itself, the problem. Many are retired officers or NCOs. They are bright, energetic, and intensely patriotic. It is more a function of two factors that arise because they are civilians. First, most have not been deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan and so have not experienced first-hand the problems caused by the Cold War culture. They do not think that the basic culture needs to change; they tend to think that shortcomings can be treated by slight modifications of the existing processes for training and equipping units.[§§]

The other factor is their longevity. The very stability that was a main selling point for replacing soldiers with civilians in a stable time now works against fundamental change. People newly assigned to their jobs tend to see it with fresh eyes; people who have held the position for years almost never do. This adds to the inertia.

A third dynamic inhibiting institutional change is, once again, characteristic of

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[§§] Those civilians who are combat veterans are overwhelmingly from the Vietnam era and its difficult aftermath. Sometimes they are the most reluctant to change. They do not have a deep, gut-level understanding, as Soldiers in combat today do, that the old ways are no longer working so well. On the contrary, having struggled to rebuild the "hollow" post-Vietnam Army from its ashes, the lessons of those days are seared into their souls, chief among them the critical importance of having standards and holding to them no matter what. There could be no better illustration of the phenomenon described in Jared Diamond's quotation at the introduction to this paper.

large organizations everywhere. It is one of the main reasons successful businesses fail when faced with disruptive change and the need to fundamentally reexamine what they do and how they do it. They fall back on their old processes and attempt to use them to do new things. Of course, this does not work; old processes can only do old things; doing new things requires new processes.[30]

One of the first units from the 101st Airborne Division to deploy to Afghanistan was brought back early because otherwise a battalion commander would not have a chance to complete a training "rotation" at a combat training center during his command tour.[31] This was a peacetime rule and applying it in wartime was putting the cart before the horse. The purpose of the combat training centers is to prepare commanders and units for combat; recalling one from combat to do preparatory training makes no sense. But that was the rule: commanders were carefully managed to ensure that each one got at least one training rotation during his command.

There are thousands of examples. Majors' assignments continue to center around their attendance at a school (Intermediate Level Education, formerly called the Command and General Staff Officers Course) that is arguably the least important thing they have to do as majors.[32] Managers of training facilities on most Army posts resist attempts to build training areas and ranges that resemble Iraq and Afghanistan, because steering committees have already locked in the five-year plan of standardized requirements, and because the regulations do not clearly allow it.[33] New equipment to help train more realistically is rejected because the costs to repair and replace it many years hence have not been fully funded—even though the study would cost more than the equipment itself. On and on it goes. Processes designed to be efficient cannot be used to encourage experimentation. Processes designed to be slow and deliberate in order to avoid mistakes cannot now become nimble.

General Casey points out another symptom of the Army's culture not fitting well with its current situation. While the Army does a good job of developing leaders who are proficient tacticians, he feels it does a poor job of developing strategists.[34] There is a pressing need for Army officers who can work well with other government officials at the national level to analyze strategic problems and design good, workable solutions for them. However, according to General Casey, too many in the Army officer corps seem unable to go beyond the simplistic and superficial. When analyzing problems, they have difficulty seeing things from other viewpoints. They focus a great deal on the processes for making decisions, often paying little attention to the quality of those decisions. They are also too ready to settle for processes as solutions—even if those processes clearly do not go to the heart of the matter. This is especially damaging when the processes in question (the "interagency process" for coordinating various government departments is the best example) are so obviously dysfunctional. Sometimes they will propose a bureaucratic reorganization as the solution—occasionally an enabler of solutions, but almost never a solution in itself. Many Army officers also find it difficult to work effectively with other government officials. One result of all this is that their analyses and solutions tend to be military-heavy, often superficial, and typically unsubtle.

This combination of not understanding the need for change, a reluctance to let go of deeply held values, an inability to see a better solution, and continued reliance on established processes that are less and less relevant have all added up to huge

institutional inertia. In almost every important way, the culture of the Institutional Army is little changed from the late Cold War.

Conclusion

The old organization was built on control, but the world has changed. The world is moving at such a pace that control has become a limitation. It slows you down. You've got to balance freedom with some control, but you've got to have more freedom than you ever dreamed of.

- Jack Welch[35]

The Army's culture is no longer a good fit for its environment. Operational units have only partially made the necessary cultural changes, and the Army's institutions almost not at all. If not reversed, it is virtually certain that the Army will face competitors better adapted to today's environment, and it is a simple matter to predict that it will have difficulty winning the wars in which it is engaged now and for the foreseeable future. Turning this around will be no easy task. It will require the Army to do many things:

- Change the purpose of leader training to developing disciplined but flexible problem solvers. Shift the emphasis from learning to apply doctrinal solutions to teaching leaders how to frame and solve problems.
- Encourage experimentation. Do not penalize honest attempts that fail. Reward successes. Do not try to centrally control all experiments.
- Standardize training by outcomes rather than by the process used to achieve them, or by how closely units adhered to doctrinal standards. Accept that different leaders may arrive at different solutions—fine, so long as they work and achieve the desired results (outcomes).
- Shift some of the emphasis in training—along with the resources—from large-unit collective tasks to individual and small team training. Move away from standardized, highly efficient training management systems that discourage leader thinking and initiative. (There is no need to throw out the baby with the bathwater, just to find a better balance.)
- Expect individual mastery of selected fundamental tasks (individual weapons, first aid, navigation, etc.)—not just meeting minimum standards. Resource the training well above meeting minimum standards.
- Require leaders and soldiers to be able to explain *why* tasks are done a certain way, and to explain the principles that guide their actions.
- Require soldiers routinely to figure things out for themselves. Build into all training the need to solve problems and overcome unexpected challenges.
- Build stability operations into most collective training events by routinely including civilian considerations. Make civilian actions realistically complex and ambiguous, and force soldiers to reflect on the long-term implications of their actions. Wherever possible, tie events together so they have to live with those consequences.
- Show leaders ways to make training more fun and challenging. Soldiers who put more into training will get more out of it—and retain it much longer.
- Remove most vetoes over the chain of command by outside agencies. Building

a high-performing organization requires allowing leaders to lead and holding them accountable. That means that authority and responsibility must be vested in the same people—not separated as they commonly are today in the name of "control".

- Replace the majority of rules with leader judgment, guided by principles and commander's intent. Work nonstop to develop leaders' judgment, and be willing to dismiss those leaders incapable of developing satisfactory judgment.
- Replace most standards with fewer principles.
- Replace ponderous processes with quicker ones. Accept that the error rate will increase, but that this will still be cheaper and more effective.
- Reward and promote people who develop flexible, high-performing organizations, rather than those who achieve the best statistics or play it safe. Stop selecting leaders to command battalions, brigades, or higher organizations, who have succeeded by doing the same old things better than their peers (in other words, those who are most efficient). Instead, select those who have demonstrated insight, the willingness to try new things, who have experimented and who have underwritten initiative and experimentation in their subordinates, and who have earned a good but not perfect track record of success. One rigid commander can stifle all necessary cultural change in his or her entire organization, but in an encouraging environment most junior leaders quickly begin to thrive in the new culture.

None of this is simple or quick. None of it is easy. All of it will be frustrating and will meet huge resistance. It goes against many people's fundamental beliefs. Progress will advance by fits and starts. Nevertheless, this is what must happen if the US Army's culture is to meet the needs of its present environment. The alternative is to face the likely fate of all organizations that do not change to fit their environment: defeat by nimbler competitors more suited to today's battlefields.

Appendix: How Organizations Fit Their Environment and How Much Is Enough?

There are three main reasons that no organization can ever achieve a perfect fit with its environment.

Most obviously, the environment is constantly changing. The rate of change is sometimes slow and steady, and sometimes rapid and even chaotic, a phenomenon that paleontologists and evolutionary biologists refer to as 'punctuated equilibrium'.[36] But whether slow or rapid, the environment is constantly changing and never really standing still. The history of warfare suggests that periods of prolonged conflict coincide with periods of rapid change, while interludes of peace tend to coincide with slower and steadier changes to the nature and imperatives of the battlefield.[37] We are in a period of rapid change now. This is an important point on which much of the paper's thesis hinges, since in such periods of rapid change, flexible problem-solvers tend to be able to adapt, while the efficient but more rigid often fail. In times of relative stability, on the other hand, the reverse is true: the efficient win out (their inflexibility is unimportant, since they are suited to their stable environment). In those stable periods, the flexible tend to lose, because their flexibility makes them less efficient, while adaptability is not an advantage in stable times.

Less obvious perhaps, but just as important, every organization is woven of the remnants of previous choices and historical accidents too numerous to count. Many of these are trivial (in the case of the Army, the origin of customs like saluting, or the particulars of ceremonies, or the names of units), but others are not. If historical contingency had not given us a Marine Corps, would anyone today invent one, with all the complications attendant from having two land forces? Or, another example: the historical circumstances surrounding the spinoff of the Army Air Corps into the US Air Force left the Army without its own organic close air support—it must rely upon the Air Force for that function. But since at the time of the split helicopters were not yet practical, they were not forbidden to the Army. The Army has therefore acquired many and has become heavily dependent upon them.[38] Spinning off the Air Force ten years later would likely have resulted in a very different Army.

Of course, no organization is stuck forever with historical baggage that cannot be left behind. The Army no longer has coast artillery or horse cavalry—or company mess sergeants, for that matter. But in a thousand ways, soldiers are surrounded every day by artifacts of the past that are much more difficult to get rid of than they first appear. No matter how logical and well designed a new system may seem, it is quite common to discover that it doesn't really fit well with other, existing systems. Furthermore, the old, jettisoned system it replaced often turns out to have performed other useful functions that no one appreciated until they disappeared. For example, the basic organization of a general staff remains much the same as it has for over a century. In the past two decades, several significant attempts have been made to test new arrangements, to better align staff functions to the way the Army fights. Most of these attempts have been unsuccessful because they failed to account for numerous small functions. As a result, people who previously knew how to make things happen found themselves unable to do so in the new organization.[39]

Tied to the past like this, organizations are not infinitely flexible. They cannot reshape themselves at will, and even clearly beneficial restructuring comes at a cost.[40]

Finally, no complex organization is wholly consistent. Each contains inner contradictions and forces that pull in different directions. The people inside the organization differ in ideas and interests. Kept within manageable limits, these internal tensions may actually confer a competitive advantage. They are often the source of innovation and constructive self-criticism. Internal differences provide a way of hedging bets—a source of checks and balances—and debate sharpens new ideas. But it can go too far: the greater the tensions, the greater the confusion. When internal tensions grow too powerful, they can paralyze an organization or even cause it to collapse.

Times of relative stability tend to favor organizations with fewer internal tensions. More of the organization's energy is used efficiently and, as with individuals, being more efficient confers an advantage over less efficient competitors. But in times of rapid change—especially disruptive change—efficient organizations, like efficient but inflexible individuals, tend to lose out to more nimble and adaptive competitors, despite those competitors' lower efficiency. Members of efficient groups cooperate smoothly but can discover too late that, in the new environment, their formerly successful ways now lead to disaster.

Members of less efficient groups are often more able to make the transition. They may stumble, but they are less likely to collapse. This is true in nature, it is true in businesses (as we are witnessing now—things that made sense when oil was reliably cheap and credit plentiful are now self-destructive), and it is true of armies. Adaptiveness comes, in large part, at the expense of efficiency. It stems from the organization's internal tensions: from competing ideas, and experimentation, and investments in possible futures.[41] Someone who was trying out a new idea that seemed unnecessary or even wasteful at the time, and which would not have been tolerated in a more efficient organization, may now be able to provide exactly what is needed to succeed in the new environment. Thus, any organization's long-term success depends in part on finding the right balance between absolute efficiency on the one hand, and anarchy on the other. The quest is for an appropriate level of "churn". Maintaining that fragile balance is difficult and success or failure can only be judged in retrospect.

For all these reasons—the environment's rate of change, the legacy of the past, and an organization's inherent internal tensions—no organization can ever achieve a perfect fit with its environment. But bearing all that in mind, when trying to predict success we must still ask how good the fit is.

The Cost of Prolonged Success

One more dynamic bears mention. Any organization (or any society, for that matter) that succeeds for a long time tends to develop increasingly elaborate central controls, designed to fix problems and prevent failures. This works; the controls prevent failure. However, over time as they accumulate they exert a deadening effect, stifling innovation and often preventing any chance of real excellence.[42] Some control is good, but as so often in life, more is not better. At first it looks like real improvement. But by the time anyone notices that the organization's vitality has been sapped, it is usually too late: the barbarians are already at the gates; more nimble

competitors have overtaken them. The cycle then repeats: once-agile giant-slayers grow more powerful and have to develop their own centralized processes and controls in order to remain efficient and deal with all the complexity. In so doing, they become more bureaucratic and hidebound. Over time they become the giant likely to be toppled by yet more nimble competitors.

As we have seen, this phenomenon has been strongly reinforced by the imperatives of the Cold War. It would almost certainly have happened anyway, though, if not to the same extent; it seems a universal tendency. (Think of the tax system.) Anyone familiar with the Army can see countless instances of this phenomenon. To illustrate, one example should suffice, and in this case a picture really is worth a thousand words.

General B.B. Bell, then-Commanding General of US Army Europe, had an idea. Too many soldiers were dying in off-duty automobile accidents. One way to prevent this, he reasoned, was to increase leader involvement. If a soldier's immediate leader were to review his holiday travel ideas with him in an informal setting, it would help to avoid risky, poorly thought-through plans and might lead to smart adjustments. He urged his subordinate leaders to make this a practice, to meet and counsel their soldiers "under the oak tree" before they traveled, to help them develop smart plans.

This simple idea would seem to need no clarification. Predictably though, the central-control reflex kicked in. Some months later the safety policy was expanded to include two jargon-filled pages detailing roles and responsibilities, plus the following diagram.[43] It is hard to see the circumstances in which it could possibly add value.

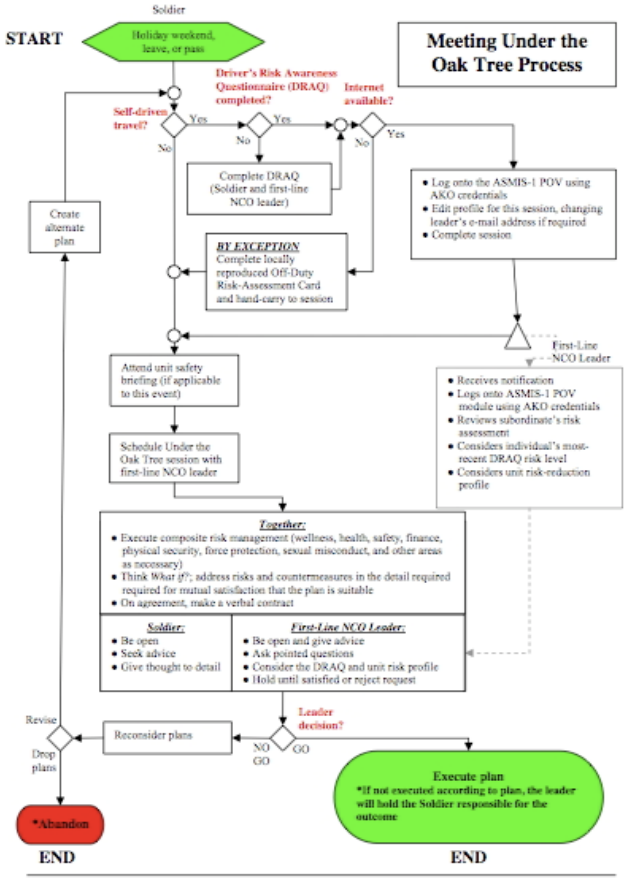

Figure 1. Meeting Under the Oak Tree

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[1] Jared M. Diamond, *Collapse*. (New York: Penguin, 2005), 275.

[2] See, for instance, Sean MacFarland, Michael Shields, and Jeffrey Snow, "The King and I: The Impending Crisis in Field Artillery's ability to provide Fire Support to Manuever Commanders", White Paper for the Chief of Staff of the Army, May 2008, downloaded 15 December 2008 from http://www.npr.org/documents/2008/may/artillerywhitepaper.pdf. See also Gian P. Gentile, "Misreading the Surge Threatens U.S. Army's Conventional Capabilities," World Politics Review, 4 March 2008, http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/article.aspx?id=1715, accessed 12 August 2008.

[3] Unit commanders were supposed to rehearse mission-essential tasks often enough to remain within a "band of excellence." Headquarters, Department of the Army, *Field Manual 25-100: Training the Force* (15 November 1988), 1-4. Hereafter cited as *FM 25-100* (1988).

[4] H.R. McMaster, "On War: Lessons to be Learned," Survival (2008) 50:1,19 — 30

[5] In the past three years, I have asked approximately 200 experienced officers and NCOs why they would ever low crawl in combat. They all know how to do it—it is one of the earliest tasks taught in basic training—but only a minority can explain why it would ever make sense to do so, and in virtually every case, it was quite noticeably the first time they had ever considered the question.

[6] Morgan Darwin, "The Fire of a Rifleman," 22 August 2007. Unpublished article.

[7] *FM 25-100* (1988), 1-6.
[8] Headquarters, Department of the Army, *Field Manual 100-5: Operations* (1976).
[9] Headquarters, Department of the Army, *Field Manual 100-5: Operations* (1982).
[10] ibid, 2-2.
[11] John Wickham, Army Chief of Staff, 1983-1987. In 1984 all officers were required to watch a film in which General Wickham outlined his safety policy, including the requirement that someone be held accountable for every single accident.
[12] "U.S. Active Duty Military Deaths—1980 through 2007 (as of April 22, 2008)" http://siadapp.dmdc.osd.mil/personnel/CASUALTY/Death_Rates1.pdf, accessed 9 July 2008.
[13] This trend also reflected the broader American society, which was becoming much more risk-averse and litigious.
[14] Abel Trevino, "Proper Weapons Practices Key to Ending Negligent Discharge Incidents in Iraq," http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2007/03/mil-070301-arnews01.htm, accessed 9 July 2008.
[15] The author was present in the briefing room when this commanding general—in many ways an exceptional officer—made the statement. He later went on to achieve four-star rank.
[16] Brian McAllister Linn, *The Echo of Battle: The Army's Way of War*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) 193-218.
[17] Email correspondence between the author and the Director of the Combined Arms Doctrine Division, Ft. Leavenworth, KS, September 2005 – March 2006.
[18] Headquarters, Department of the Army, *Field Manual 3-0: Operations* (2008), 1-1 through 1-3.
[19] Sean Naylor, "The Lessons of Anaconda," New York Times, March 2, 2003, http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9A0CE0DB103CF931A35750C0A9659C8B63, accessed 19 August 2008.
[20] High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicles (HMMWVs) had little or no armored protection in the early stages of the Iraq War. Growing casualties from Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) led to an urgent push to replace the soft-skinned HMMWVs with a more robust version that provided some protection, the so-called uparmored HMMWVs. But increasing sophistication and lethality of IED attacks—now widely copied in Afghanistan—has led to a drive to replace most uparmored HMMWVs with Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles (MRAPs), which offer still greater protection to the crew. All this has occurred in the space of about three years—a rate undreamed of in the Cold War.
[21] David Kilcullen, "Counterinsurgency Redux," Small Wars Journal (2006). http://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/kilcullen1.pdf, accessed 19 June 2008.
[22] George W.S. Kuhn, "Ground Force Battle Casualty Rate Patterns: Suggested Planning Considerations," Logistics Management Institute, January 1991. http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA304910&Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf, accessed 10 December 2008.
[23] General Schoomaker talk to Initial Entry Training leaders, Fort Lee, VA, 24 August 2006.
[24] They trained with an older model, the M16A2, and then received M4 Carbines in Kuwait. This is more than a trivial change, since the sights, lasers, and other equipment with which they expected to conduct combat operations could not be mounted on their older rifles.
[25] All these examples are taken from the author's experience, and the experience of one junior enlisted soldier, recently returned from Iraq.
[26] The Army Training and Leader Development Panel Report (NCO), Final Report, 2 April 2002, p. 2. http://www.scribd.com/doc/1824864/US-Army-NCO-STUDY-REPORT, accessed 24 June 2008.
[27] Information Paper "FM 7-0: Training for Full Spectrum Operations", 16 December 2008. http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/Repository/FM70/BigDifferencesNewIdeas.pdf. Downloaded 20 December 2008.
[28] Scott Flanagan, "Waiting To Be Told What To Do." Unpublished report on training observations in the 1st Cavalry Division, 2003.
[29] Daniel Chirot, *How Societies Change*. (Pine Forge Press: Thousand Oaks, CA, 1994)
[30] Clayton M. Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 197.
[31] The brigade was the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), the famed Rakkasan Brigade.
[32] Guidance is dispersed and contradictory, but in the past few years, selection boards have favored officers who, as majors, performed well for at least two years in "key developmental" positions, and who served as majors in combat. Those who had a vaguely-defined "broadening experience" (meaning, usually, working in a place outside Army tactical units, whether a civilian university, an embassy, or a joint staff) also seemed to do better than their counterparts. The final requirement for majors is to attend the "Intermediate Level Education" course. But when it became clear that some majors had not been able to attend the course because of repeated deployments, and that some of them were succeeding anyway—

selected early for promotion and battalion command—the Army reinstituted the nonresident course and made it mandatory, claiming that "non-attendance at ILE threatens readiness," though clearly the evidence would seem to point the other way. See "ILE Attendance for Senior Captains and Majors," February 4, 2008, http://www4.army.mil/news/standto.php?dte=2008-02-04, accessed 10 December 2008.

[33] Email exchanges between the author and Fort Benning's range and training area managers, October 2006 – March 2007.

[34] General Casey talk to Fort Benning leaders, 16 April 2007.

[35] Quoted in *Control Your Destiny or Someone Else Will: How Jack Welch Is Turning GE Into The World's Most Competitive Corporation*, by Noel M. Tichy and Stratford Sherman (NY: Doubleday, 1993), 229.

[36] Stephen Jay Gould, "Punctuated Equilibrium and the Fossil Record," Science: 4 February 1983. 219: 439-440.

[37] John Keegan (Ed.), *The Book of War: 25 Centuries of Great War Writing*. (New York: Penguin, 1999), ix – xix.

[38] The Key West Agreement of 1947, among other things, specified the air roles of both the Army and the newly independent Air Force. Key points included that the Army would retain aviation assets only for reconnaissance and medical evacuation, while the Air Force would control all strategic air assets, and most tactical and logistical air assets. http://cgsc.cdmhost.com/cgi-bin/showfile.exe?CISOROOT=/p4013coll11&CISOPTR=729&filename=730.pdf, accessed 10 December 2008.

[39] Linn, op cit., 225.

[40] Chirot, op cit. 125-126.

[41] Alberto Acerbi & Domenico Parisi (2006). "Cultural Transmission Between and Within Generations," *Journal of Artificial Societies & Social Simulation, 9*(1). Retrieved 1 May 2006 from SocINDEX with Full Text database. In this fascinating study, a computer model of independent agents having to distinguish between edible and poisonous mushrooms showed clearly that the agents who were most efficient at distinguishing between them prevailed: they had more offspring and became the more popular teachers. However, once the environment changed—edible mushrooms became poisonous and formerly poisonous mushrooms became nutritious—those agents who were most flexible (and who previously had lived a somewhat marginal existence in the shadow of their more efficient brethren) quickly adapted and won out over their formerly successful competitors. This is a very simple illustration of a critical process at work in the Army's culture now.

[42] Chirot, op cit. 44-45.

[43] "Meeting Under the Oak Tree," http://www.vcorps.army.mil/safety/counseling-oaktree.pdf, accessed 4 February 2007.