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# Developing Officers With a Higher Degree of Brain Power

By Col. Todd Schmidt

The Army continues pursuing talent management initiatives to transform how future leaders are selected and promoted to senior ranks. In September, the service launched the Colonels Command Assessment Program. Modeled after similar assessment programs for special mission units, the program determines an officer's readiness for command and strategic leadership. Programs, policies and tools that improve how the Army assesses a leader's strategic potential require continued investment, development and expansion.

In alignment with the vision of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, these programs are critical to identifying "the cogni-

tive capacities of joint warfighters." The future strategic environment demands leaders who are "far better educated and more capable" of thinking globally, integrating joint capabilities and working confidently in a joint, interagency, intergovernmental, multinational environment. Accomplishing this objective "demands immediate changes to the identification, education, preparation and development" of leaders over the course of their careers, particularly at "the most senior ranks," according to the document "Developing Today's Joint Officers for Tomorrow's Ways of War: The Joint Chiefs of Staff Vision and Guidance for Professional Military Education & Talent Management."

The Colonels Command Assessment Program (CCAP) assesses future participants in areas of physical fitness, written and verbal communication skills, behavioral psychology and noncognitive attributes. Most importantly, the assessment evaluates a leader's intellect and cognitive attributes, a concept referred to in political psychology as "cognitive complexity." Such assessments have the potential to revolutionize Army talent management.

Why are military leaders' cognitive attributes or level of cognitive complexity most important?

## Stressful Decisions

In strategic crisis management, leaders are burdened with immense "cog-



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nitive load.” Stress intensifies. Information processing requirements expand. New information floods decision cycles with deadlines driven by factors that leaders do not control. Strategic crisis challenges a leader’s cognitive limitations and intellectual performance, significant factors to consider as the velocity of war increases with the corresponding speed of technological innovation and development.

Cognitive complexity influences perception in crisis, as well as the ability to confront complex, multidimensional threats and challenges. Leaders with high cognitive complexity exhibit corresponding intellectual curiosity and ability to absorb, understand and retain information and knowledge. They exercise good judgment. They maintain proactive initiative. They incorporate these attributes into the exercise of sound reasoning, decision-making and, in the case of senior executive leaders, strategic advice to civilian leadership.

Individuals with low cognitive complexity tend to suffer from “premature cognitive closure.” Their “intellectual bandwidth” is overloaded. They ignore new information, become incurious and unconcerned with details. They are increasingly reactive and risk averse. They succumb to stress and lack the mental acuity, stamina and attention span to cope with and understand complex challenges.

What does this mean in practical terms?

### Conformity or Complexity

Leaders with a high preference for conformity and narrow, service-specific, risk-averse career paths may possess low cognitive complexity but excel in tactical crisis management. They are great tactical problem-solvers and find refuge in military doctrine and doctrinal solutions to familiar problems. They tend to remain

tactically focused throughout their career. They discount opinions and perspectives that differ from their preexisting beliefs. However, they have the potential to be exceptional tactical leaders.

By contrast, leaders with high cognitive complexity may pursue unconventional broadening experiences and assignments. They may be more imaginative problem-solvers, less dogmatic and less doctrinaire. They may be viewed, at times, as nonconformists, risk-takers or mavericks. They are more comfortable with and accepting of uncertainty, criticism, and alternative or opposing opinions and perspectives. They understand complexity and nuance, and thrive in multidimensional environments.

How do we develop leaders with cognitive complexity?

These attributes are developed through opportunities and assignments with joint, interagency, intergovernmental and multinational partners; attending academically rigorous civilian academic institutions; and serving in fellowships with think tanks and industry. Despite significant resources invested in these unconventional opportunities, competitively selected participants are considered, in many cases, to have “taken a knee.” They are mistakenly perceived as taking a break while others bear the burden of a high operational tempo.

### Recognizing Performance

Indeed, within the Army’s professional military education system, academic excellence goes unrewarded. Selection for attendance at conventional schools, such as the U.S. Army Command

and General Staff College or a senior service college, is more important than how a student performs academically. Academic performance and the multiple individual assessments conducted at these institutions need to be given more weight in an Academic

Evaluation Report that is given critical consideration in promotion boards. These schools should no longer be considered merely a necessary “block check.”

Perhaps students should be required to apply to these academic institutions, take a GRE for graduate school entry, and be denied entry for poor academic performance. An argument could be made that if a Command and General Staff College or senior service college student cannot demonstrate the verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning, critical thinking and analytical writing skills to gain entry into a respected civilian academic institution, then they should not be given a pass to our most prestigious military institutions.

What does the development and outcome of a cognitively complex strategic leader look like?

Competitively selected leaders in prestigious, unconventional assignments and programs are intended to provide the Army with a stable of officers identified for future strategic positions. The broadening opportunities they have been selected to, above their peers, provide them with a greater grasp of the military enterprise, national security and defense policy process, legislative and executive branch operations, international relations and foreign policy, economics and political economy, geography and history. They come away with a more sophisticated understanding and comprehension of the nuances of national politics, bureaucratic politics and interagency process earlier in their career.

### Critical Attributes

Given the opportunity and experience to lead major commands in large-scale, global contingency and combat operations, cognitively complex strategic leaders are able to develop critical attributes sought after by senior elected officials and civilian elites. They better understand the needs of, and how to communicate with, National Command Authorities, Congress, foreign leaders and the public with credibility, candor

**‘We spend more time and money selecting a private for the Ranger Regiment’ than we do selecting future leaders.**

and discretion, particularly in times of crisis. They demonstrate willingness to disagree with a president and secretary of defense in private, while providing support and effective leadership of military forces once decisions are made. They understand and are gifted in navigating the nexus of national partisan politics and national security and defense policy. Finally, they possess a healthy respect for civilian control of the military, coupled with compatibility with the leadership of a defense secretary and president.

Challenges remain in developing future generations of leaders with the cognitive attributes required to lead in a future strategic environment.

Organizations develop leaders with leadership behaviors they most reward. Justifiably, at the tactical level, the Army expects and rewards conformity. We train to specific, measurable standards. We teach doctrine. We expect officers to matriculate through a prescribed, graduated professional military education system. This formula of professional development is rightfully founded on centuries of experience.

### Breaking Boundaries

This indoctrination process at the tactical level, however, creates an anti-intellectual bias, competing values and a conflicted culture wherein preferences for a romantic image of “muddy boots” warriors are systematically reinforced by the institution. As retired Lt. Col. Ralph Peters wrote in the July-August 2007 edition of *The American Interest*, “Too much formal education clouds a senior officer’s judgment, inhibits his instincts, and slows his decision-making.”

In fact, at the highest levels, it is the opposite. The Army needs strategic officers who possess the political sophistication and ability to think outside the boundaries of their profession and who intellectually engage civilian leaders in strategic political-military affairs.

Changing organizational culture, however, is challenging. In 2010, the Army’s Strategic Studies Institute



published a study analyzing Army culture and U.S. Army War College student cohorts from 2003 and 2004. A primary finding was that leaders “may be inadequately prepared to lead the profession” in a complex, future strategic environment. Leadership attributes valued at the tactical level are not necessarily leadership attributes required to lead at the strategic level.

Later, in a study of military elites conducted in 2018 by this author, a retired four-star general described how new Army generals have done exceptionally well in their career to a point. However, they are typically not intellectually equipped to make the transition to general officer ranks. He stated:

*They aren’t prepared for it. If you look at the one-star promotion board, we promote maybe 40 out of 4,000. In that group of 40, you’ll have maybe one or two that are capable and intellectually equipped to think and perform at the strategic level. You may not have any. ... They just don’t necessarily see the world strategically. ... We still promote [general officers] to four stars that are “frozen in time” as great brigade commanders.*

With no traditional professional development experiences to prepare strategic leaders for the strategic environment in which they must operate, general officers are ill-prepared, hampered by systemic shortcomings to transition and thrive in a joint,

interagency, intergovernmental and multinational environment.

Complicating the selection and promotion of brigadier generals is a conventional process that rewards conformity. A recent Rand Corp. study determined that in the selection and promotion of officers to the rank of brigadier general across all military services, “ducks pick ducks.” In considering who to select, promotion board members tend to select candidates who look like them.

Institutionalizing and expanding assessment programs, such as CCAP, is imperative to the military’s future.

### More Development Needed

Maj. Gen. J.P. McGee, director of the Army Talent Management Task Force, argues that the legacy system of selecting future commanders was good and fair. However, it was excessively subjective and focused on limited information. Chief of Staff of the Army Gen. James McConville described it bluntly at the 2019 Association of the U.S. Army Annual Meeting and Exposition, stating, “We spend more time and money selecting a private for the Ranger Regiment” than we do selecting future leaders.

The Army owes it to the nation to incorporate improved processes in identifying leaders who will train and

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Army Chief of Staff Gen. James McConville speaks at a news conference during the 2019 AUSA Annual Meeting and Exposition in Washington, D.C.

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lead American soldiers in future wars.

The future strategic environment will require leaders who have the cognitive complexity to understand, decide and act while leading large military organizations in complex, chaotic, multidimensional environments. Increasing this complexity will be the incorporation of future technologies that are exponentially increasing the velocity of war. The time and space available for national security decision-making, potentially existential in nature, will shrink.

Great-power competition and the race to lead development in advanced technologies will only make this decision dynamic a more acute challenge. We will face a simultaneity of

multidimensional contests against an expanding array of threats, continual involvement of international relationships, the consequences and implications of rapidly changing human geography, and persistent disorder and conflict.

So, while assessment programs such as CCAP may be in their infancy, they are imperative to the future of military command. Given the investment and commitment they deserve, they will transform how the U.S. military selects and promotes future strategic leaders and, just as importantly, how these leaders advise and guide their civilian counterparts. It is a much-needed and belated transformation, the scope of which should

be expanded to include the selection and promotion of general officers.

Improving and expanding how the Army selects its most-senior leaders will ensure we gain and maintain intellectual overmatch with our adversaries and cognitive dominance in a future cognitive domain. ★

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# History Shapes Future Leaders

By Lt. Col. Tomas Moore

When published in October 2017, Field Manual 3-0: Operations marked a shift in focus for the Army. Lessening the emphasis on counterinsurgency and stability missions that characterized the Army's operations in Afghanistan and Iraq for more than 15 years, Field Manual 3-0 considers the challenges associated with fighting large-scale combat operations.

Battlefields in large-scale combat operations, the doctrine declares, "have been more chaotic, intense, and highly destructive than those the Army has experienced in the past several decades." Even so, the doctrine expresses confidence that disciplined and creative training, combined with innovative leader development, can mold agile and adaptive Army leaders capable of prevailing under such intense, uncertain and potentially lethal conditions.

The Department of Military History at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, plays a critical role in the process of forging adaptive and agile field grade officers. The department does this by employing history

to give officers broader perspectives while developing their critical-thinking skills so they can operate more effectively in complex and uncertain environments.

The program of study also helps new field grade officers develop their problem-solving abilities as they gain better understanding of both change and continuity found throughout military history.

Additionally, instruction provides new field grade officers with historical context to help them better understand how the past has shaped today's operational environment as students sharpen their oral and written communication skills. Instruction plays a significant role in honing professional military judgment and skills of the Army's next generation of leaders.

## Agile, Innovative, Adaptive

The department's purpose clearly aligns with the central concepts of Field Manual 3-0. The department's stated mission is to educate field grade officers to be more agile, innovative and adaptive leaders who communicate effectively, think critically and use historical context to inform their professional military judgment.

The Department of Military History instruction consists of Common Core lessons, the Advanced Operations Course and an electives phase.

Spanning the period of 1600–1945, the 13 lessons of Common Core's H100: History, Theory, Doctrine, Practice examine relationships between the study of history, the development of theories that led to written doctrine and the ways doctrine was practiced in combat. Advanced Operations Course's H400: The American Way of War focuses on U.S. military experience since 1945 and applies Field Manual 3-0 as a guide for studying large-scale combat operations and notable changes in the character of warfare over the past 75 years.

The electives phase, consisting of two four-week terms, allows officers to pursue in-depth explorations on topics in history that align with their personal and/or professional interests. The many electives allow officers to study warfare across a range of historical eras from medieval times to the time of Napoleon up to the 20th century, to name a few.

As part of the integrated Command and General Staff School curriculum, officers incorporate what they have learned into their Department of