Learning Under Fire: Progress and Dissent in the US Military

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On 8 December 2004, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld took part in a town-hall style meeting with US troops preparing to deploy from Kuwait to Iraq. One of the soldiers in attendance, Specialist Thomas Wilson, 'complained that he and his comrades were rooting through Kuwaiti junkyards to find improvised armor for their military vehicles to protect against bomb blasts and small-arms attacks':

> A lot of us are getting ready to move north relatively soon … Our vehicles are not armored. We're digging pieces of rusted scrap metal and compromised ballistic glass that's already been shot up … picking the best out of this scrap to put on our vehicles to take into combat. We do not have proper … vehicles to carry with us north.
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> Rumsfeld replied: 'As you know, you go to war with the Army you have. They're not the Army you might want or wish to have at a later time.'[1]

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Rumsfeld was correct in his assessment of the basics of building, training and fielding a combat force for war, but the exchange captures the fundamental dilemma of any military in an interwar period: are you preparing to fight the next war or the last war? It also raises the question of how, and how well, the US military adapted over the course of the war to become 'the Army [we] wish to have'.

After 11 September 2001, the United States went to war with exactly the military it wanted, and it planned to fight the war based on that military's strengths. The US forces that crossed the Kuwait–Iraq border in March 2003 were the product of three decades of evolution, validated and accelerated by the unprecedented success of *Operation Desert Storm*. It was a military that enjoyed all the strengths of high-tech, advanced-manoeuvre warfare that the US military establishment had mastered to an unprecedented degree. Equipment was state-of-the-art, training led the world, doctrine was more mature and integrated than ever, and US soldiers, airmen, marines and sailors were the most capable in US history. Less than two years after the rapid overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan, US forces marching to Baghdad conquered more ground faster than any other military in the history of military operations.[2]

US and Coalition forces quickly found themselves, however, in an unconventional war almost entirely unlike that for which they had been so well prepared. The world's most advanced battle tank was not designed, nor were its crews trained, to repel 'boarders' – Fedayeen irregular fighters who swarmed the armoured columns. The world's most advanced intelligence and surveillance systems could find a single enemy tank from hundreds or thousands of miles away, but could not determine if the ambulance racing up the street was filled with injured Iraqis or hundreds of pounds of explosives. Humvees that could cover hundreds of miles of open desert could not withstand even the most crudely designed roadside bombs. And almost without exception, the world's most capable infantrymen had almost no training or experience in administering a small town in the aftermath of the collapse of the local and national governments.

As the nature of the conflict in Iraq shifted away from conventional warfare, so too did America's understanding of the threat it faced and the

mission it was undertaking. Conditions now demanded that the US military mount significant and sustained counter-insurgency operations. In response, the US military undertook what was perhaps the most comprehensive retooling of a force in the midst of an active war since the reorganisation of the German Army in 1917.

This retooling 'on the fly' – a remarkable institutional accomplishment – was brought about by the convergence of two distinct but interconnected dynamics, each of which was driven by a particular group within the US military: a cadre of junior leaders who worked hard to solve immediate problems that the military establishment had failed to foresee or adequately address in a timely manner, and a cadre of senior institutional dissidents whose critique of the US military was drawn from their own observations and the substance of the junior cadre's complaints. While the efforts of both groups were necessary, neither group was sufficient in itself to force lasting institutional change at the most basic cultural levels; it took activism from both ends of the leadership spectrum to force the middle to change. The result was a fundamentally reshaped military – especially the ground forces of the Army and Marines – that is widely credited with making a critical contribution to the improvement of security in Iraq since 2007.

The result was a fundamentally reshaped military

The transformation of the US military during the Iraq War may hint at some key principles for any organisation striving to be self-learning during times of great internal and external stress. In this case, the two active ingredients required to overcome institutional inertia, an active and empowered junior cadre and a dissident senior cadre, emerged from the happy coincidence of an open and empowering institutional culture colliding with the dire requirements of war. That the military enjoyed this dual phenomenon at exactly the time and place it was needed was as much an accident as a deliberate result of its institutional design for leader development and organisational learning.

Given that the types of junior and senior cadres seen in the US military were both necessary but not sufficient in themselves for change to occur, the

question becomes whether an organisation can systemically nurture these cadres without causing dysfunctional disruptions. And since a degree of cultural and procedural consistency, inertia and measured change is critical for any large organisation to sustain itself over time, organisations seeking to learn from the US example face the challenge of creating processes to identify when the need for change is so great that it crosses the threshold for action.

For the military, organisational success does not rest on mastering the basics of a current war, but on doing so while preparing for the next war. And yet, no matter how well prepared a military is, the next war will always be different than imagined; change on the fly will always be necessary. This being the case, organisational success must also include the nurturing and protection of the critical ingredients for institutional change under duress.

A slow start

Before 11 September 2001, the US military's strengths and weaknesses, as well as the institutional constraints that would shape its ability to adapt in the years to come, were determined most importantly by two legacies: the institutional response to the Vietnam War and, more recently, the collective infatuation with technology that was sold as the 'Revolution in Military Affairs' (RMA). Together, these two dynamics locked the institution into a strategic paradigm that was fundamentally unable to deal with the reality of irregular warfare.

The US military's dominant institutional lesson from the Vietnam War was to never again engage in a prolonged war against irregular forces. Haunted by the memory of the gradual escalation of involvement in irregular warfare, a new generation of military leaders made it their first priority to limit the risk of sliding down that slippery slope. Unconventional warfare was seen as contrary to the 'American Way of War': 'aggressive, direct, and focused on achieving decisive victory'.[3] The Weinberger–Powell Doctrine and decisions by Army leaders not to create counter-insurgency doctrine and to provide almost no training or specialised equipment for counter-insurgency operations have their origin in these lessons.

Following the 1991 Iraq War, the Revolution in Military Affairs emerged from general awe at the power of technology combined with strong domes-

tic political demand for a 'peace dividend'. Instead of fielding large and costly ground forces that might incur significant casualties, RMA advocates argued that high-tech sensors, weapons and communication systems would allow US forces to 'find, fix, and destroy' the enemy at ranges and operational tempos never before seen in the history of warfare.[4] By reducing ground forces – numbers were cut by 34% between 1987 and 1999[5] – and instead investing in modern technology, the military optimised its combat power against a conventional force in open, uncluttered and unambiguous terrain – a logical extension of the *Desert Storm* experience.

Air and naval forces followed similar paths, focusing on improved sensors, long-range precision strike, ubiquitous communications, and command and control. While this so-called revolution did create a formidable toolbox that the military services would later draw on when called into combat during Operations *Enduring Freedom* and *Iraqi Freedom*, it failed in its ephemeral aim to change the character of warfare. Its basic flaw, as relatively low-tech terrorist and insurgent groups were about to prove, was the assumption that technological preponderance would give the United States exclusive choice over the terms of battle.

After the 11 September attacks, the military could no longer afford to treat its irregular-warfare capabilities as an afterthought. Starting with the decision to destroy al-Qaeda and seek regime change in Afghanistan, the US military found itself on an unconventional battlefield which required every element of the irregular-warfare toolbox: direct strikes against terrorist cells and their infrastructure by special-operations forces, building indigenous military forces from scratch, stabilisation operations, and when those failed, two protracted counter-insurgency campaigns. Despite these manifold challenges on the battlefield, the military as an institution remained caught in its conventional-warfare paradigm, as demonstrated by a procurement system in which priorities were locked in for a decade or more and an organisational culture and senior-officer promotion system designed to perpetuate the prevailing paradigm rather than encourage dissent and innovation.

As a result, the US military's capacity to learn and adapt at the operational and strategic levels proved to be severely limited for several years into the war. Organisational learning in large militaries requires a culture of independ-

ent thinking all the way down the chain of command, open communication across hierarchical barriers, a certain amount of space for questioning the institution's basic assumptions, and a process of drawing on decentralised and informally evolved tactics and rules in addition to centrally created concepts in doctrine development.[6] The US military's tradition of decision-making autonomy at the lower levels of command served it well in enabling rapid tactical adaptation and learning among small-unit leaders. But despite elaborate procedures for after-action reviews, lessons-learned studies and many other bureaucratic instruments to channel organisational learning under the aegis of a 'military learning bureaucracy', experience would show that the US military qualified only in part as a learning organisation.

Early failures

During the early months of the war in Afghanistan, the Afghan Northern Alliance enjoyed an unexpectedly quick and easy victory over Taliban forces. This rapid success strengthened the position of Secretary Rumsfeld, who had pushed for a lighter, more flexible doctrine than that advocated by many senior generals in the spirit of Weinberger–Powell. The invasion of Afghanistan in winter 2001 made Rumsfeld's vision a reality: the technological fruits of the RMA enabled an unprecedented level of situational awareness and the devastating use of airpower, which allowed a very small number of US forces on the ground to effectively support local allies who conducted the actual manoeuvre warfare.

Tora Bora was the first place where flaws in Rumsfeld's vision revealed themselves

From October to early December 2001, the Taliban were steadily driven out of key strongholds across the country. Still, the US military did not deploy conventional ground forces on the scale required to effectively support counter-terrorist operations against the al-Qaeda leadership. Instead, the Americans relied on tribal groups to support the capture of Osama bin Laden and other al-Qaeda leaders, tribes whose forces proved ineffective in this role.

Tora Bora was the first place the flaws in Rumsfeld's vision revealed themselves. The battle of Tora Bora in December 2001 turned out to be only

a 'half-victory' for the United States. US forces and their allies took control of the cave complex in the White Mountains of eastern Afghanistan, but failed to capture either Osama bin Laden or Mullah Omar, the leader of the Taliban. The main causes of the failure were an overreliance on tribal chiefs, too few special-operations troops on the ground in the early stages of the battle, failure to employ more conventional troops, and intelligence and communication failures that were easily avoidable. More conventional troops could have set up blocking positions that could have overwhelmed insurgents fleeing from the caves, potentially resulting in the capture of bin Laden and Omar.[7] In short, operations and doctrine were inadequate on numerous levels.

In this and other battles, the military attempted to apply the capabilities and counter-terrorism doctrine developed during the previous decade to what was evolving into a counter-insurgency fight. However, the heavy reliance on technology and air-power-enhanced small ground units proved insufficient to meet the unanticipated conditions of the war. Unlike the conventional operations carried out by the Northern Alliance against Taliban forces in the opening stage of the conflict, the effective support of counter-terrorism operations required a more sophisticated, balanced application of people and technology than the RMA-powered military had brought to bear so far. The military had not changed enough in the preceding years.

Eighteen months after the events of 11 September, another US-led coalition invaded Iraq and disposed of Saddam Hussein's regime, again with a surprisingly small conventional-forces footprint. As during the initial assault against the Taliban, the US military proved its unparalleled dominance in modern conventional warfare. But in the same way that the lack of effective, countrywide stabilisation efforts in Afghanistan provided a fertile ground for the resurgence of the Taliban after 2003, the US military failed to prepare adequately for follow-on stabilisation operations or counter-insurgency in Iraq. In summer 2003, after the US government's radical 'de-Ba'athification' of Iraqi society and the wholesale disbandment of the Iraqi Army created a massive power vacuum, the US military found itself unprepared in the midst of an irregular war fuelled by former regime loyalists, foreign terrorists and home-grown insurgents overlaid with elements of civil war and

organised crime. As early as May 2003, a young officer observed in a timely research paper for the Army's School of Advanced Military Studies that the US military '[did] not have a viable counterinsurgency doctrine, understood by all soldiers, or taught at service schools'.[8] Nor, for that matter, did it have the necessary human resources or equipment.

Learning under fire

Following 2003, the lessons of the first months in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as many additional instances of hard-won experience, fed into a gradual, painful process of adaptation and partial learning under the heavy strain of two ongoing wars. Success varied widely across military units depending on the individual initiative and flexibility of mid-level commanders. Early top-down adaptation originating at the Pentagon and the regional commands worked only where the problem and solution fit into the pre-existing doctrinal framework of the military as an institution. The most critical lessons, however, required the greatest flexibility and sometimes a radical break with the past, a break the top leadership was not prepared to make. As a result, the most important early changes came from the bottom up, from junior leaders who saw their conventional training and doctrine fail on the battlefield, and who were often more open to seeking and embracing counterintuitive solutions than their superiors.

Change from the bottom up

As the Iraqi insurgency became more and more entrenched and the initial stability in Afghanistan began to wane, the many shortcomings of doctrine, training and equipment for counter-insurgency became painfully obvious to the troops on the ground. At the tactical level, on-the-spot adaptation by junior leaders proved the most rapid and successful way to deal with straightforward challenges such as shoring up equipment and procedures to counter improvised explosive devices (IEDs), where solutions were often technically complex but did not require a fundamentally different operational paradigm. Through ad hoc task forces and emergency procurement procedures bypassing the regular rules, the military made huge improvements on these technical issues.

Similarly, the military had a much easier time making gradual improvements to its combat capability at the operational level than it did making the more fundamental changes required to adapt to the overall counter-insurgency challenge. A prime example is the cultural and organisational rapprochement between special-operations forces and conventional forces, particularly within the Army. The nature of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan tightened this working relationship because many missions required small groups of fast-moving infantry to conduct quick-strike operations against enemy positions. Increasingly, conventional Army infantry units seamlessly cooperated with special-operations forces for reconnaissance and attack missions, while assuming capabilities that were previously the sole purview of the Special Forces.

While modifying equipment or convoy procedures and expanding a proven and effective branch of the military is comparatively straightforward, accumulating a body of higher-level knowledge about operations is more complex, and consequently took more time. Above and beyond the work of the Center for Army Lessons Learned, which became involved very early in the identification and mainstreaming of 'best practices', enterprising young officers on the ground set up a network of private websites to share and discuss more complex tactical innovations. The value of these sites was soon recognised by the Army and Marine Corps, which incorporated some of them into their official information systems.[9] As an additional vehicle to support learning among junior officers in Iraq, an ad hoc 'Counterinsurgency Academy' was established in early 2005.[10]

Young officers on the ground set up a network of private websites

The effectiveness of these learning mechanisms remained limited, however, because they took place within the confines of the post-Vietnam paradigm of conventional warfare.[11] As long as this paradigm was not replaced on the operational and strategic levels, only bits and pieces of counter-insurgency theory and experience made their way into pre-deployment training and operations, and only via certain units, depending on the creativity of battalion- to brigade-level leaders.[12] In many cases, the most creative of these officers were those who had spent the 1990s serving

as peacekeepers in Somalia, Haiti or Bosnia, where they learned the importance of local governance and politics, among other things.

Open discussion and dissent by junior officers thus became a major force for change on the tactical level, even as these same officers debated vigorously about the merits of dissent at the highest political levels among military and civilian leaders. Young captains, lieutenants and non-commissioned officers, many of whom had more combat experience than their peacetime-trained military seniors, began to question tactics and operational methods for fighting the insurgency. Motivated by the grim realities on the ground, these junior leaders were often ready to try a new approach, even to adopt a fundamentally different set of principles, while more senior officers stuck to their conventional training and doctrine.

As the institutional military's reaction to the counter-insurgency challenge remained steadfastly inadequate in terms of doctrine and tactics, the frustration among junior and mid-level officers grew, eventually leading to open criticism through Service periodicals and online platforms. The most notable example was Lieutenant-Colonel Paul Yingling's widely circulated article in *Armed Forces Journal*, 'A Failure in Generalship', which was iconic of a whole wave of dissenting arguments. Yingling argued that the military had been failed by its generals, who had ignored professional knowledge and neglected to adapt rapidly to the challenges on the battlefield. Refusing to endorse the view that the role of the generals and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in particular, had been limited to providing military advice to a civilian leadership who had ignored it, Yingling pointed out that it was the responsibility of the generals to properly plan, organise and equip the force to fight in the hybrid wars then under way.[13] Continued dissent from junior officers began to surface in op-eds, and in some cases, conflicts with superiors. Some asserted that their 'colonels and generals keep holding on to flawed concepts'.[14] A 'trust gap' had opened between the junior and senior echelons of leadership in the military.[15]

While the extent to which such dissent was appropriate or dangerous for the military's cohesion at wartime remains a point of discussion among officers, no actions were taken against Yingling and the many other dissenters, and their critiques were essentially left to stand unchallenged.[16] As a result, blame

was no longer solely on the shoulders of the civilian leadership for an invasion plan referred to by some as the 'worst war plan in American history'.[17]

Dissent from above

While the military experienced many successes at both the tactical and operational levels, there was near-unanimous agreement that the military was strategically broken, largely a by-product of the dysfunctional relationship between senior civilians and uniformed personnel, and the differences in their vision of how warfare would be conducted. Dissatisfaction among serving officers emerged against the backdrop of an already-strained civil–military relationship. When Donald Rumsfeld returned to the Pentagon in 2001 with the 'desire to re-establish civilian control over a military that ran circles around the Clinton Administration',[18] his authoritarian management style and intolerance for dissent further strained relations between the civilian and military leaderships.

Implementing what appeared to be the foregone conclusion to go to war with Iraq, Rumsfeld requested that the Pentagon rather than the State Department take responsibility for the post-war reconstruction efforts in Iraq, yet subverted the military's planning efforts. When Rumsfeld's deputy, Paul Wolfowitz, openly dismissed during a Congressional hearing Army Chief of Staff General Eric Shinseki's views about troop numbers required for the stabilisation of Iraq, the incident severely undermined the military's trust in their civilian leadership.

A few years into the war, what became known as the 'revolt of the generals' saw several recently retired general officers speak out against almost every aspect of the war, with particular criticism directed towards Rumsfeld. Marine Lieutenant-General Gregory Newbold stated,

> I was a witness and therefore a party to the actions that led us to the invasion of Iraq – an unnecessary war … I have resisted speaking out in public. I've been silent long enough. I am driven to action now by the mistakes and misjudgments of the White House and the Pentagon, and by my many painful visits to our military hospitals … A leader's responsibility is to give voice to those who can't – or don't – have the opportunity to speak.[19]

Newbold was joined by several others, including Army Major-General John Riggs, who charged that civilian leaders 'only need the military advice when it satisfies their agenda'.[20]

As US Military Academy Professor Don Snider has pointed out, the revolt was essentially over policies that the generals themselves had helped to implement. Like many in the military, he argued that public dissent among the strategic leaders threatened the profession at large.[21] Having been overruled on the issue of troop estimates before the invasion of Iraq, many senior military leaders were effectively hiding behind this particular disagreement to avoid tough questions on the doctrine, equipment and force structure they would have deployed in Iraq.[22]

From summer 2003 until late 2006, the military clung to a flawed operational paradigm that misidentified the centre of gravity in what was a counter-insurgency environment. Several major operations, most notably the two battles of Falluja in April and November 2004, as well as the handling of detainee operations which led to the Abu Ghraib scandal, were not only extremely costly to coalition forces but also had a negative net effect on the overall war effort.[23] Although there were well-publicised examples of highly effective operations, such as those conducted by the 101st Airborne Division under then Major-General Petraeus in Mosul (2003), or the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment's *Operation Restoring Rights* in Tal Afar (2004), the military failed to systemically tap into these successes to learn more rapidly as an institution.

Against this background, a new generation of senior generals started to address the shortcomings in how the war was being fought. In the end, it took an intellectual surge of sorts caused by officers rotating off their second and third combat tours to right the operational ship. Officers such as Generals William Wallace and David Petraeus rotated back into the US Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), an institution dedicated to the self-learning function, bringing the lessons of their experiences with them. Equally importantly, they brought their trusted junior leaders with them as well, to capitalise on both their experience and proven talent. This was a very untypical pattern for the military; successful combat leaders had traditionally been assigned to high-profile operational positions and

the major regional commands. In these positions, they would bring their combat experience and leadership skills to bear on the crisis of the day, leaving hardly any time to reflect on their combat experience or address fundamental concerns systemically. It was rare for high-performing mid-grade officers to move into the more staid TRADOC or similar educational and research establishments, where assignments were not typically seen as 'career enhancing'. In the late 1990s, a policy decision had been made to pull uniformed personnel from TRADOC to bring the operationally stressed combat units up to full manning.[24] These officers were mainly replaced by contractors or retirees serving as civil servants, which effectively severed the link between the operationally current field Army and the institutional training base, thus limiting the overall Army capability to quickly adapt to changes on the battlefield.

An infusion of combat-experienced leaders turned the Army on its head

Beginning in 2005, however, an infusion of combat-experienced senior and mid-grade leaders reversed the impact of this policy and essentially turned the Army on its head. As lessons learned at the top diffused into Army training centres, progress was made on the battlefield. The Army and Marine Corps published their new counter-insurgency doctrine in 2006 and started implementing it in 2007. This marked the closure of the first turn in the institutional learning cycle at the operational level. What followed was a constant assessment and adaptation to the doctrine as it underwent 'field testing' in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Adaptation and acceptance

Beginning with the implementation of the new counter-insurgency strategy in Iraq and the changing of the guard at the Pentagon following Donald Rumsfeld's resignation in December 2006, civil–military relations improved markedly. Today, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates is seen as an open-minded pragmatist who maintains a better rapport with the military than did Rumsfeld, but who does not fail to exercise his authority, as illustrated by his quick dismissal of several senior leaders during his tenure. At the same time, Gates has encouraged criticism from young officers and

admitted that his mind has changed on several occasions due to constructive dissent.[25]

As a result of the less ideological climate at the Pentagon, combined with positive results from the implementation of the new counter-insurgency doctrine in Iraq, the military is beginning to adapt at the strategic level to the post-11 September environment. A series of fundamental pieces of doctrine were revised to reflect the requirement for irregular-warfare capabilities; military and political leaders appear to be in agreement on the need to further fund ground forces at the likely expense of air or sea power; and the Pentagon leadership is strongly supporting a more active and much-better-funded role for the State Department in civilian reconstruction efforts. Among other initiatives, the State Department is set to introduce a rapidly deployable corps of civilian experts for governance and nation-building tasks, something the previous senior defence leadership would probably have deemed irrelevant. These actions, spanning the executive branch and supported by Congress, mark a general acceptance of the dramatic changes made in response to the new security environment and the future likelihood of counter-insurgency and nation-building missions.

Looking forward

Prior to 11 September 2001, the US military's preparation for irregular warfare was grossly inadequate. When this was made clear by early setbacks in Afghanistan and Iraq, the military's response in terms of adaptation and learning was rapid at the tactical level, much slower on the operational level and almost non-existent on the strategic level. Through a process of tactical and operational learning, the military has become a more effective learning organisation by encouraging independent thinking on the part of field leaders, promoting open communication, making space for questioning basic assumptions, and pushing local and informal procedures to the centre to be mainstreamed.[26]

By doing this, the military has adapted to the mission handed to it and become increasingly effective, even at those functions that had been anathema to its predisposition and culture for decades. After several years of organisational learning at the expense of much blood and treasure,

the acceptance of counter-insurgency principles contributed to measurable successes in Iraq. Conducting a wholesale review and revision of the military's posture towards counter-insurgency in the middle of two wars was the single most important institutional change the military has undergone in many years. At least at the level of doctrine, the US military is now generally considered to be very well prepared for counter-insurgency operations. Whether or not it can succeed in practice will be seen in Afghanistan.

From the military's perspective, the tactical and operational turnaround in Iraq has served to validate the process that produced it. As a consequence, the institution increasingly encourages dissent and discussion among its officers as a necessary ingredient for a mentally flexible and creative organisation. The profession seems to be evolving as senior leaders recognise the necessity of harnessing the intellectual capital of its young officers.

Nonetheless, the question of whether the United States is preparing to re-fight the last war – this war – or getting ready to fight the next one remains unanswered. The one thing that can plausibly be assumed about the next war is that it will require changes, perhaps even changes more fundamental than those required by the current conflict. An openness toward organisational change catalysed by institutional dissidents at both ends of the hierarchy needs to become the military's standard operating procedure if it is to be ready to meet future challenges.

The military increasingly encourages dissent and discussion among its officers

How does the military as an institution protect this dynamic of top-down and bottom-up dissent that was so crucial to recent successes on the battlefield? While bottom-up change will almost always occur as long as a culture of junior-leader empowerment persists, it is a reluctant cadre of senior leaders who must embrace a readiness to turn the Army on its head. Ultimately, a relationship must exist between top-down and bottom-up thought, so that even if the military's structure and operational culture at any point turns out to be ill suited to a given challenge on the battlefield, it will be able to adapt and harness its own intellectual capital to make progress. This internal capacity must

transcend traditional doctrinal frameworks and be deeply embedded in the military's institutional culture.

One approach to creating such a culture might be to systemically draw the best and brightest experienced mid-grade and senior leaders back into the institutions of self-learning, such as TRADOC. To effectively institutionalise what Generals Wallace and Petraeus achieved in the current war, the Army can no longer denigrate TRADOC assignments in the context of career rewards and systematic incentives. In assigning 'high-profile' post-battalion command jobs, it needs to rebalance the requirement for further operational leadership experience and inter-service exchange in so-called 'joint' assignments with the opportunity to use the most promising mid-grade officers to shape the future of the institution in its training and doctrine centres. The military at large must do more than simply pay lip service to the notion of field-to-flagpole assignments and actually nurture a rotation between operational and school-house roles.

Today, personal career development is in direct conflict with Army leader development and institutional learning. Officers must jump through narrow hoops of Army and joint assignments to remain eligible for advancement. While good for the officer, this means there is precious little time to commit to reinvesting back into the Army. Many knowledge-based organisations such as global consulting firms have made it standard practice to rotate their top performers between client work and internal think tanks. In contrast, the Army typically wants to rotate officers between operational assignments. We must get the right senior leaders in the right jobs to trigger the top-down dynamic that is ultimately required to support, protect and embrace bottom-up solutions. The next war may not afford the luxury of long-term adaptation.

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Notes

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