

Prodigal Soldiers of the 21st Century

By Col. Charles D. Allen, U.S. Army retired

Imagine the career experience of U.S. military company and field grade officers who joined the commissioned ranks after the 9/11 attacks. They answered the call to duty in the face of a very clear and present danger to U.S. citizens. These officers joined to carry the fight to the enemy, as amorphous and ill-defined as “they” were. In many deployments, our officers served in an environment that one-time Army Chief of Staff Gen. George Casey called an “era of persistent conflict,” journalist Dexter Filkins deemed in his book of the same title “the forever war,” and soldier-scholar Andrew Bacevich called “perpetual war.”

Regime changes in Afghanistan and Iraq were quickly achieved as the Afghan Taliban and Saddam’s Iraqi conventional forces were decimated. However, our American officers were soon aware that our military was struggling to figure out doctrine, structure and missions as they engaged in the “three-block war” of combat operations, peacekeeping and humanitarian aid. As journalist Rick Atkinson observed in a 1996 *Washington Post* article, during the early days of NATO force operations in Bosnia, Army senior leaders were not strategically prepared—mentally or physically—for conducting operations against insurgents who were intermingled among the general population. To succeed in such engagements in the 21st century, our Army had to rethink and relearn stability and counterinsurgency operations.

The U.S. armed forces had to relearn civil-military relations in the “unequal dialogue” that dismally failed to achieve political scientist Samuel P. Huntington’s ideal of “objective control,” where military and political leaders focus their efforts in distinct areas of expertise. Civilians decided policy; they chose to use military force to achieve their objectives. Civilian leaders also exercised “the right to be wrong.”

Predictably, retired Army senior leaders were not reluctant to express their dissent with civilian policy decisions and management of military operations. In 2004, then-Secretary of Defense Donald

Rumsfeld bluntly declared that “you go to war with the Army you have, not the Army you want.” Likewise, we could counter that “you go to war with the leaders you have, not the leaders you want.” We have now witnessed the sacking and shuffling of general officers serving as combatant commanders, commanders leading theaters of war and chiefs of service—Navy Adm. William J. Fallon, Air Force Gen. T. Michael Moseley, and Army Gens. David McKiernan, Stanley McChrystal, Eric Shinseki, David Petraeus and Casey.

The Army had to rediscover its professional ethic after too many incidents of personal, operational and institutional shortcomings. In fact, the entire Defense Department had to learn how to grow the appropriate force, develop new capabilities and provide sustained capacities for military operations.

Perhaps more daunting, despite well-documented civilian respect for service members, our military has become increasingly disconnected from American society. Less than 1 percent of the general population is currently serving in the armed forces. This disconnect has given military leaders the opportunity to blame civilian officials for policy decisions that have led to bad outcomes, especially no clear military victories. Similarly, military members have charged U.S. citizens with not being actively engaged in the debates regarding when and how our military would be employed.

In his book *Prodigal Soldiers: How the Generation of Officers Born of Vietnam Revolutionized the American Style of War*, James Kitfield explored the challenges faced by U.S. company and field grade officers during the Vietnam War. Such experiences shaped the careers of recent Army leaders including Gens. Gordon Sullivan, Colin Powell and Wesley Clark. They served as general officers more than two decades later during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, in Iraq; Operations Joint Endeavor, Joint Guard and Joint Forge, Bosnia; and Operation Allied Force, Kosovo. Kitfield concludes that lessons from Vietnam War begat the Powell

Doctrine of employing our military to achieve clear national objectives with overwhelming force. This doctrine directs our military leaders to maintain warfighting competency as a core capability. It also emphasizes their professional obligation to advise, influence and shape national policies that may be primarily supported by employment of military forces.

Forty years ago, the world witnessed the fall of Saigon in April 1975. How must our Vietnam-era officers have felt after more than a decade of combat with the attendant sacrifice of American blood and treasure? This past May witnessed the fall of Ramadi, Iraq, to the Islamic State group. For some, it was a portent of things to come in Iraq.

Kitfield’s 1995 prologue remains eerily relevant:

Almost without exception, each of those present had as a young man gone off to fight the same war, or different wars in the same place. They had lost friends and innocence early and in equal measure and they had been the keepers of those memories ever since. Usually the voices from the past were the merest whispers, but at times they could still speak loudly to convictions on how wars should be fought and what was worth dying for.

What lessons have this current generation of company and field grade officers learned that they will carry forward into the uncertain future? How will they as general officers lead the operational and institutional organizations of Joint Force 2025? Our recent history affirms that senior leaders must be prepared to face unimagined enemies and counter unanticipated threats. Their force will be comprised of a new generation that will answer the call to serve their nation and fellow citizens. □

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