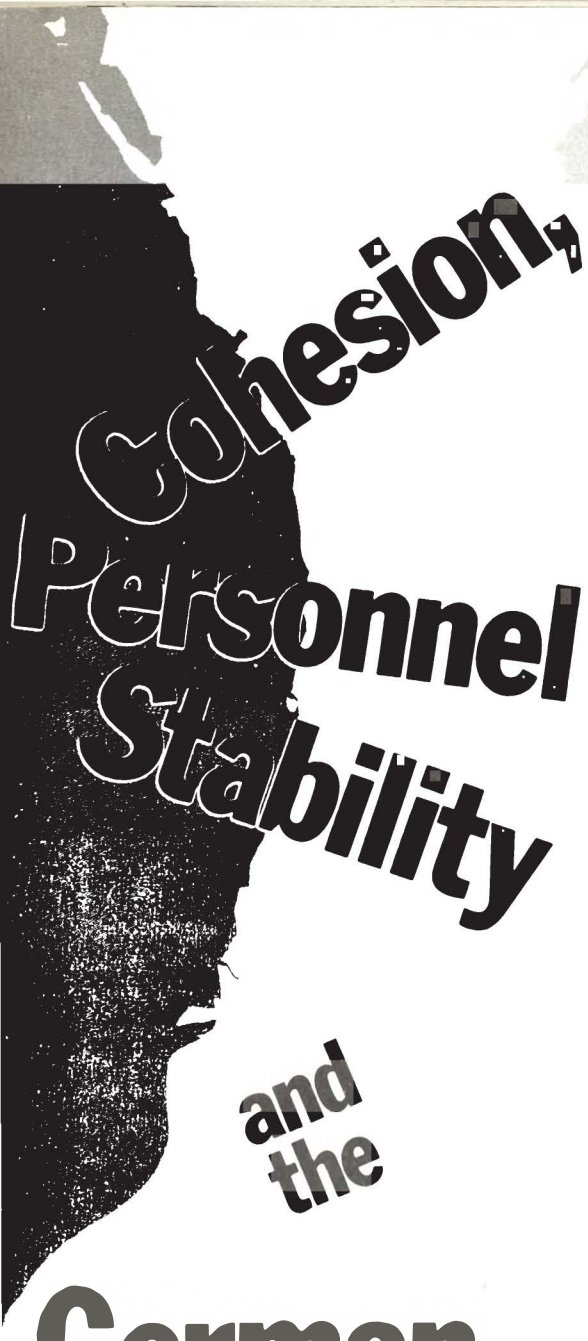

Cohesion, Personnel Stability and the German Model

Christopher Bassford

The study of the German army has gained a rather large following in our Army. One aspect that continues to draw attention is the high level of unit cohesion that buoyed the Wehrmacht throughout World War II. The author analyzes cultural and societal factors that make the German model less applicable to US Army efforts to enhance unit cohesion. He finds our internal evaluation and promotion systems to be a negative influence.

IN THE ongoing search for solutions to perceived weaknesses in the US military system, many concerned soldiers have turned—often uncritically—to the German experience for guidance. The German model is in the forefront in almost all key areas of the debate over military reform. The German General Staff is alternately role model or bogeyman in the battle over Joint Chiefs of Staff reform; the name of Carl von Clausewitz is invoked in every strategic or theoretical military debate, usually with equal reverence on both sides; the tactical and operational doctrines of the *Deutsche Heer* are cited everywhere in our current doctrinal arguments. Unfortunately, relatively few of the participants have both the linguistic and tactical skills needed to make sense of these discussions.[1]

This pervasive concern with the German military model is not always viewed favorably and is, in some quarters, regarded as a "dangerous fascination."[2] Objections usually fall into one of four categories. First, critics of the German model raise the point that the German army was an instrument or even an originator of aggressive policies, and that it participated in atrocities and immoral behavior so extreme that its ethos, its doctrine and its organizational methods are fatally tainted. They are, therefore, inherently inapplicable in a democratic society. Second, they argue that the Germans' social organization and historical pattern were so alien to our own that their experience has no practical relevance for us. Third, they say that military technology and warfare have altered so much in the last 40

years that the German model is obsolete. Fourth, they question the basic assumption that the German army was a particularly effective organization; some have gone so far as to say that

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the German army of World War II was a "second–rate" organization that achieved its supposedly impressive victories only because its opponents were even more inferior.[3] After all, they lost in the end, didn't they?

The fourth point has no merit, and its proponents are suffering either from an unrealistic idea of what actually can be expected of a military organization or from simple chauvinism.[4] While German cohesion and tactical mastery are exaggerated beyond the realm of realism by many writers, the defeat of the German army was the result of strategic factors over which it had no control. Germany's fundamental strategic errors in both world wars were the product of defective constitutional systems, not poor military leadership.

The other three arguments, however, have a great deal of merit. And yet, the problems that US forces have experienced over the past few generations are so profound, and the accomplishments of the German army so attractive in a purely professional sense, that the German model cannot be ignored. What is needed is a new synthesis, a basic agreement on the parameters within which the German model has applicability to the problems of US military organization.[5] If some workable consensus is not reached on that divisive issue, this critical aspect of the reform debate will sputter off into a futile historiographical side show, to which opponents of reform can point as an excuse for continued inertia.

Such an overall synthesis is, of course, beyond the scope of an article such as this one. By focusing on one aspect of the reform debate, however, perhaps we can develop an approach to the problem that can begin the process—or at least advance the debate to a new phase line.

The area in which this debate has been most fruitful, and where the German experience seems most relevant to US military problems is the question of how to produce cohesion in our fighting units. The answer that has achieved a measure of acceptance throughout the Army has been to strive for personnel stability. This idea has been translated into concrete programs in the form of COHORT (cohesion, operational readiness and training) and the regimental system. These programs, which grow out of bitter US experiences in World War II, Korea and Vietnam, are often justified by citing the Germans' experience with their wartime replacement system.

Ironically, COHORT is actually a peacetime–only system that cannot be maintained in periods of sustained combat, and the regimental system is based on a British model that has no practical relevance to US organizational structures. The regimental system has, in any case, been watered down into virtual irrelevance, and COHORT does not appear to be achieving its initial promise.[6] Although the failings of the regimental system can be traced in large part to bureaucratic opposition, the problems we are experiencing with COHORT run deeper; something is wrong with the theory.

COHORT has always faced certain inevitable criticisms. COHORT companies are often isolated and suspect organisms within their old–style battalions and brigades. The conflicts between COHORT priorities and those of the rest of the Army can spark serious friction. The whole concept has been subject to much

Soldiers of the 3d Parachute Division hitching a ride on a *Tiger II* during the opening stages of the Battle of the Bulge, 17 December 1944.

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bureaucratic resistance. The basic idea, however, seems so appealing—and such a matter of basic common sense to those of us who have suffered in units with flatly absurd personnel turnover rates—that such problems can be dismissed as the price of progress. Other complaints, such as claims that some COHORT units were ill disciplined and poorly trained, could also be dismissed as evidence of last-ditch resistance to this wave of the future.

Unfortunately, detailed studies of COHORT by the military psychologists of the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research (WRAIR) have shown that there truly are problems with the COHORT program. Although their study of COHORT in the 7th Infantry Division (Light) initially suggested that the program was succeeding, the fifth report showed that "the division could not sustain its early success *within the constraints* of its mission and conventional assumptions about leadership and leader/follower relationships." It concluded that the program had "failed in the human dimensions."[7] Cohesion, as we have understood the term, was achieved in only about 20 percent of the units studied. This problem was not unique to the 7th Infantry Division; these numbers are consistent with those found in studies throughout the Army.

The fundamental problem is probably in our concept of the meaning of "cohesion," and our illusion that it is synonymous with personnel sta-

bility. Simply keeping 100 (or 16,000) soldiers together for three (or 30) years will not bring battlefield cohesion. It is not enough simply that these people know each other intimately;

What we need to produce is not a military Woodstock, but small military communities in which individuals of all ranks, regardless of the inevitable tensions between them, have to cooperate out of a sense of self-interest strong enough to offset the many divisive pressures to which units are subjected.

this is romanticism. Familiarity is far more likely to breed contempt than it is to produce "tight, proud families."[8]

If we want to look for the deeper sources of cohesion within the German army, it may be useful to look outside the boundaries of strictly military history and delve into German social history and sociological theory.[9] It has long been traditional for social historians of Germany to discuss their subject in terms of the conceptual dichotomy between *Gesellschaft*—a word that corresponds fairly well to our own concept of formal, civil society—and the more alien *Gemeinschaft*—community. *Gemeinschaft* has gained some evil connotations from its place in Nazi ideology, especially its use in *Volksgemeinschaft*, the National Socialist ideal of a German "racial community." The concept has older and more benign roots, however, and correlates well with the illusive ideal of cohesion that US soldiers have been pursuing since the Vietnam debacle.

It is common for military historians to treat traditional German society as some kind of a medieval survival made up of noble officers and loyal peasants, with industrious townsfolk making shoes—and later, Tiger tanks—somewhere off in the distance. The pervasive German ideal of community, however, can probably be traced more easily to the isolated and almost classless small towns of the Holy Roman Empire than to the stratified society of the Junkers on their rural estates in Prussia. Mack Walker, in his classic book, *German Home Towns*, examined these communities in great detail.

These townsfolk did not necessarily love their neighbors—in fact, they may well have "abominated" one another—but their communities were incredibly tough, resilient entities, much like units of the German army. They survived for centuries through plague, war and famine, and for all of that time they resisted—successfully, for the most part—the relentless pressure of princes and bureaucrats to integrate them into the structure of the *Gesellschaft* state. Not even the great territorial consolidations and legal, social and political reforms enforced by the armies of the French Revolution and Napoleon could undermine their essential aloofness from the larger German society.

The source of this solidarity was not, as has been pointed out already, mere mutual esteem and affection, nor was it mindless conservatism. These communities were welded together by a seamless web of self-interest. The home town provided the *Bürger* with not only his personal identity but his legal and social status. The town guilds regulated and protected his business. His customers were his neighbors and potential in-laws. The various aspects of life which we—in our complex, impersonal society—separate into clear categories of legal, economic, political and social life, were all one undifferentiated whole. To be the head of the Shoemaker's Guild brought real political power and social prestige, true; but the man still had to sell his shoes, and political opponents or unhappy constituents could buy from someone else. A town leader could not rely upon manipulation of the party and the news media; his constituents knew everything about him that there was to know. He either met the needs of the community, or he lost office. This did not necessarily make him virtuous, but it did make him responsible.

As civilians, we would find life in such a community oppressive, and there is no good American parallel to the concept and ideals of *Ge-*

7th Division soldiers at a recent training exercise.

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meinschaft. The model is still useful for our purposes, because there are many parallels here to what we would expect to find in an ideal military unit, particularly one in combat. The ideal unit has a clear set of goals: survival and victory. Leaders hold their positions in accordance with the contribution they make to the unit's well–being and collective accomplishment. There is a sense of mutual responsibility that transcends rank and position.

To be effective as a unit, and to remain effective under stress, soldiers also must be welded together by such a web of continuing common interests, and not just a "touchy–feely," feel–good interest in "being all that they can be." What we need to produce is not a military Woodstock, but small military communities in which individuals of all ranks, regardless of the inevitable tensions between them, have to cooperate out of a sense of self–interest strong enough to offset the many divisive pressures to which units are subjected. This is not to ignore idealistic motives—clearly they are important—but they are not enough.

There are other important aspects of German social and political history that must be understood before the German military model can be applied to the US situation. Our own concept of social organization is derived from our Enlightenment and revolutionary traditions. Revolution came to England in the 17th century and to France in the 18th century because of the irresponsibility and failure of the classes that provided governmental and religious authority. The Enlightenment in the West was, therefore, highly suspicious of authority, whether it was social, religious or political. French and American societies, whose thought is largely rooted in the Enlightenment, adopted extremely formalistic methods of organization in which different areas of life were clearly separated from one another, and the limits of power were sharply delineated through "checks and balances." New centralized national institutions were created to break down the power of local elites. Armies reflect their societies, and our general attitude toward social and political organization has certainly had an impact on our military institutions; this is why we so consistently diffuse authority and responsibility away from unit level and up into vast, impersonal bureaucracies. This

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is the *Gesellschaft* approach with a vengeance.

Within the old (Holy Roman) German Empire, in contrast, authority had always been decentralized; they started out with "power down" and had trouble even in creating a unified structure that we would recognize as a state. Much of this decentralization carried over into the Second and Third Reichs. Social, political, economic and military power were held by the same hereditary classes, but church and government were generally responsible. Cameralist ideology stressed the role of the traditional leadership in bringing about positive change. Naked political power was restrained by the concept of the *Rechtsstaat*: not the *ancien régime*'s "*L'état, c'est moi*," but Frederick the Great's "I am the first servant of the state."

The German people were thus not merely helpless victims of tradition, and it is, in many respects, false to see them as a society of peasants who obeyed the aristocrats without thinking and petits bourgeois that worshipped and aped the behavior of the officer class; our views are distorted by our very different historical experiences.[10] The notorious German respect for authority was rooted in a justifiable belief that the traditional leadership classes had been both responsible and successful.

When the traditional leadership failed in 1918, there was revolution. The old belief in authority remained, however, even though the new leadership came from very different sources, and the remnants of the old were subjected to severe constraints. The Nazi movement was, in many respects, an attempt to recreate the old "home town" sense of community on a national scale. In this it was remarkably (and brutally) successful, until bombed out of existence due to its strategic errors.

The dominating ideal in traditional German society was thus this concept of community, *Gemeinschaft* as opposed to *Gesellschaft*. Comprehending it is central to any understanding of the crucial differences between American and German society, and thus to an understanding of the proper interpretation of the German military model in terms of its applicability to US problems. Because of our own historical experience, we interpret community in formalistic, legalistic, *Gesellschaft* terms. We compartmentalize our interpersonal relationships and seek always to preserve our individual freedom of movement. In broad social terms, this has been a very successful approach. It is not, however, the optimum basis for communities that need to survive and function on the battlefield. The German model of community is clearly more useful under those conditions; its defects in terms of American social ideals and its association with the malevolence of National Socialism are not necessarily a justification for rejecting it for our own narrowly military purposes.

Creating in our military units a sense of "community" in this German sense is not purely a matter of personnel stability, although we must acknowledge that personnel stability is the *sine qua non* for any further progress. We must face up to the fact that there are features in our military system beyond individual rotation that tend to split our units into fragments and, ultimately, into anomic individuals. Essentially, these features break down into three categories: the social predispositions of the US soldier (which are very different from those of the German); the system by which we evaluate units and translate that evaluation into individual retention and promotion; and the way we obtain, train, and use our unit–level leaders.

If Americans have any unique social trait, it is their readiness to abandon a community in which they experience problems and to wander

Strong, experienced unit leaders who focus on the combat mission may be able to overcome the divisive pressures of the Army's evaluation systems. Mature and personally prestigious individuals may be able to overcome the naturally fractious tendencies of US soldiers. Unfortunately, we complete the damage done to unit cohesion by personnel turbulence, the personnel themselves and the Army's evaluation systems, by regularly draining them of this type of leadership.

on into new relationships. This trait is rooted deeply in our historical experience, and it contradicts all of the otherwise valid current thinking about cohesion and personnel stability. Americans are simply not predisposed toward making the social adjustments necessary for creating stable, long-term relationships within a group of diverse personalities. When forced into such a group, we tend instead to form cliques and to harass and oppress each other. This is just as true of officers as it is of junior enlisted men. In civil society, this kind of activity is called "democracy."

In the Army, it can be suppressed during a short, intense period such as basic training, but the tendency reemerges under more normal circumstances. Army organizational methods do not provide any "democratic" means to reestablish harmony. Units thus have a natural tendency to destroy their own cohesion. This kind of internecine conflict is itself one of the pressures behind our rapid personnel turnover, for none of us really wants to be condemned to hanging out with the same crowd of randomly chosen strangers for any great length of time. Where stabilized units do not self-destruct outright, they often achieve internal peace only through a level of group-think that inhibits any creativity or progress toward a distant goal.[11]

We attempt to create such unit goals by means of our unit evaluation systems—the Annual General Inspection (AGI), the Army Training and Evaluation Program (ARTEP) and various other inspected events. Many times the inspection criteria are unrealistic and put undue strain on units already struggling to make COHORT and the light infantry concept work. Unquestionably, this factor causes added tension and family stress, but our evaluation and reward systems are *inherently* divisive. Evaluation methods based on "task, condition and standard" are designed to test adherence to bureaucratic-style procedures, not unit military achievement.[12] Thus, they reward people for keeping their own corners neat, not for the contribution they make to the unit's performance. Usually, there is a direct contradiction between the two; for example, when it becomes a choice between providing timely logistic support or keeping files, hand receipts and inventories straight.

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The officer evaluation report/enlisted evaluation report system ignores the question of unit achievement entirely; individuals can walk away from failing units with "max" OERs, while an "average" rating in a superb unit is still a career-killer. In our quest to provide "individual equity," we have destroyed the vital connection between collective and individual achievement.

career progress. Often, depending on internal unit politics, they are not reflected at all. The officer evaluation report/enlisted evaluation report (OER/EER) system ignores the question of unit achievement entirely; individuals can walk away from failing units with "max" OERs, while an "average" rating in a superb unit is still a career-killer. In our quest to provide "individual equity," we have destroyed the vital connection between collective and individual achievement. In this regard, the lessons of the German model are missing; I know of no study that has seriously addressed the mechanics by which the peacetime German army connected unit accomplishment with individual career progress.[13]

Strong, experienced unit leaders who focus on the combat mission may be able to overcome the divisive pressures of the Army's evaluation systems. Mature and personally prestigious individuals may be able to overcome the naturally fractious tendencies of US soldiers.[14] Unfortunately, we complete the damage done to unit cohesion by personnel turbulence, the personnel themselves and the Army's evaluation systems, by regularly draining them of this type of leadership. The promotion and assignment systems and the up-or-out policy systematically remove such leaders from field units.

They are replaced by a stream of young sergeants and lieutenants who—regardless of their inherent potential—simply cannot be expected to lead soldiers under the stress of ARTEPs and AGIs, much less combat. Certainly, there are among our junior sergeants and company grade officers many strong, natural leaders; but without giving the rest a great deal of personal experience and seasoning, it is impossible to achieve the *consistent* leadership quality that is vital. Treating the junior slots as mere steps in the on-the-job training of more senior leaders is a sure-fire recipe for fraggings and combat refusals.[15]

This is the message of the WRAIR Unit Manning System studies: "The problem lay not in the quality of soldiers or their leaders but in internally and externally generated pressures, and in basic cultural assumptions and leadership practices in the Army about how soldiers should behave toward one another."[16] Defective unit and individual evaluation methods force unit leaders to behave in ways that contradict any notion of collective interest, and the Army's unit-level leadership is unable—because of its origins, experience levels and its institutional culture—to stop the forces of internal disintegration.

Young sergeants and lieutenants (and many leaders who are more senior) tend to react to career pressures with unethical behavior, which destroys their moral standing and credibility, and to deal with internal unit turmoil through repression rather than through flexibility and moral leadership. The WRAIR study observed that leaders felt driven to such actions "[e]ven when they knew their behavior undermined the trust and initiative they required for success in combat."[17] As a result, we get COHORT units that cannot fulfill the promise of the COHORT concept and are not significantly more cohesive than old-style "blendamatic" units, in which people shift too rapidly to let grievances fester.

The answer is not, of course, to go back to high levels of personnel turbulence. We know from

our experience in Vietnam that grievances can fester with fatal speed in a combat environment. It would also be wrong to conclude simply that COHORT does not work. The COHORT concept remains valid; high levels of technical and tactical capability and of "horizontal" (soldier to soldier, as opposed to "vertical," soldier to leader) cohesion were consistently observed. The program's demonstrated weaknesses indicate, however, that the problem of personnel turbulence has masked deeper problems caused by the Army's defective evaluation and promotion systems. Many negative aspects of Army "culture" and distortions in our concepts of the leader–led relationship have resulted from these evaluation and reward systems.

The true relevance of the German model is that is shows us that cohesion is a function of a sense of community and shared practical interests, not merely of familiarity and personal relationships. The COHORT program must be retained and expanded, but the search for unit cohesion will remain a quixotic quest for the Holy Grail unless we cease destroying—through the individual evaluation and promotion process—what we are attempting to create through COHORT. We must find ways to satisfy our soldiers' need for "individual equity" within the larger framework of *unit* obligations and accomplishment.[18] ***MR***

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NOTES

1. Robert L. Goldich, "The Evolution of Congressional Attitudes Toward a General Staff in the Twentieth Century," in 99th Congress, *Defense Organization: The Need for Change* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1985), 244–74; Daniel J. Hughes, "Abuses of German Military History, *Military Review* (December 1986).
2. CPT Ralph Peters, "The Dangerous Romance: The U.S. y's Fascination with the Wehrmacht," *Military Intelligence* (October–December 1986).
3. See, for example, the remarks of Albert N. Garland, editor, *Infantry Magazine*, in "Letters to the Editor," *Field Artillery Journal* (May–June 1987):2. The argument is made more credibly if somewhat too broadly by Roger A. Beaumont in "On the *Wehrmacht* Mystique," *Military Review* (July 1986).
4. In part, this attitude stems from a confusion between the *Heer* and the *Wehrmacht*. No one with any sense would advocate that we copy the disastrous German pattern of multiservice organization, although it might be argued that we have inadvertently done so. The subject here is the army and its own internal organization.
5. Useful American models do not seem to have drawn much attention. One such model is provided in Joseph T. Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond: Sherman's Troops in the Savannah and Carolinas Campaigns* (New York: New York University Press, 1986).
6. Christopher C. Straub, *The Unit First: Keeping the Promise of Cohesion* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1988), 80–81. Straub makes many excellent points but generally does not go beyond the "cohesion equals personne stability" approach.
7. David H. Marlowe, in *Unit Manning System Field Evaluation, Technical Report No. 5*, (Washington, DC: Walter Reed Army Institute of Research [WRAIR], September 1987), Executive Summary, 1.
8. A phrase drawn from Straub, 136.
9. This discussion is based largely on Mack Walker, *German Home Towns: Community, State, and General Estate, 1648–1871* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971) and Ralf Dahrendorf, *Society and Democracy in Germany* (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1967).
10. The former view derives in large part from the works of Gordon A. Craig, particularly *The Politics of the Prussian Army, 1640–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955) and *Germany, 1866–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), and reflects his political analysis of the "German Question." For our purposes, a more useful view is provided by writers like Mack Walker and Gerhard Benecke. See especially Gerhard Benecke, *Society and Politics in Germany, 1500–1750* (Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1974).
11. One reform suggestion that is *not* going to correct this problem is going to a "peer–rating"–based promotion system. See MAJ Michael L. McGee and COL Dandridge Malone, "Peer Ratings," *ARMY* (September 1987). I would argue that the current OER system fosters a destructive level of group–think because it is, in large measure, already a peer–rating system. See Christopher Bassford, *The Spit–Shine Syndrome: Organizational Irrationality in the American Field Army* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1988), 84.
12. The task, condition and standard method makes sense for training, but not in unit testing. It originated in the requirement to create units from scratch in earlier years, but is is inappropriate in today's standing army, with its permanent combat formations.
13. Martin van Creveld, *Fighting Power: German and U. S. Army Performance, 1939–1945*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982) and David N. Spires, *Image and Reality: The Making of the German Officer, 1921–1933* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984) are good moves in this direction. Given native German social and military ideals, there may well have been no formal expression of this factor.
14. The Walter Reed Study found that, in about 20 percent of the COHORT units studied, strong leaders were, in fact, able to cope with external pressures and to maintain "vertical" cohesion; coupled with the "horizontal" cohesion that characterized almost all COHORT companies, this produced markedly superior units.
15. The Army has studiously avoided the issue of fragging and combat refusals in Vietnam, and the Center of Military History can provide little guidance as to the true extent of these phenomena. Useful statistical treatments can be found in Richard A. Gabriel and Paul Savage, *Crisis in Command* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 43–44, 183; Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 155–59; David Cortwright, *Soldiers in Revolt: The American Military Today* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975) 28–29 and 43–48.
16. Marlowe, 1.
17. Marlowe, 2.
18. This argument is, of course, a reformulation of the ideas behind my proposals in *The Spit–Shine Syndrome*.

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