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# STUDENT ESSAY

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CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND PROMOTION POLICIES IN THE RESERVES  
ARE THE BEST OFFICERS GETTING TO THE TOP?

BY

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CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND PROMOTION POLICIES IN THE RESERVES

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by

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## SUMMARY

In the Reserves the "fast" unit vacancy promotion track develops an officer corps with repetitive rather than diversified experience, is incompatible with civilian transfers and required schooling, and drives competent officers from the service. General officers are not selected by open competition. The Marine Reserve policies are preferable. In the Army Reserve time limits should be placed upon troop unit service, and the unit vacancy track should be abolished. Competition for unit and general officer vacancies should be opened up. Interchangeability between the Reserve and the Guard should be improved, and the Guard should be encouraged to adopt similar reforms.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND PROMOTION POLICIES IN THE RESERVES

Career development and promotion policies in the Active Army, the Army Reserve, and the Army National Guard are not the same. The differences between the Active Army and the two Reserve services have a significant impact upon the motivation, actual career development, and actual advancement of Reserve and National Guard officers. Most studies of the Reserves consider missions, tables of organization, equipment, logistical support, and sources of manpower and its motivation. They give, however, almost no attention to the two power structures of senior leadership, to the process by which the officers who man these structures get there, and to the motivations of these officers and of those who are following them.<sup>1</sup> This essay will attempt to bridge that gap.

"Why the Reserves, with all the time, inconvenience, bureaucracy, and economic and physical risk? Why not something closer to home, more meaningful, where your talents can be more effectively applied?" Every career Reserve and Guard officer has been asked these questions by his family, employer, and friends several thousand times. The more competent and committed the individual, the more pressing are the questions. As used in this essay, the term career development includes not only the concept of "the optimum development of the the total leadership talent

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<sup>1</sup>A notable exception to this statement is Martha Derthick's The National Guard in Politics (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965). This book should be required reading for anyone who wishes to understand the modus operandi of the Reserves.



of the Reserve Officer Corps,"<sup>2</sup> but also a negative process of "selecting out." It includes those factors, both controllable by the military and outside of its scope, which affect the officer's decision on whether to stay in the Reserves.

While the Army is vitally concerned about the development of talent, competence, and leadership, the final judgment as to the presence or absence of these qualities is a subjective judgment, the result of each officer's long training, experience, and observation. The writer is conscious of the fact that such subjective judgment is frequently evoked in this essay, and that other officers may well disagree with the observations made.

#### CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND PROMOTION POLICIES OF THE ACTIVE ARMY

The career development and promotion policies of the Active Army are well-known. The Army prescribes a series of troop duty, staff, schooling, and instructing assignments, with troop duty in the officer's basic branch (or a combat arm) required in the early years, and progressively more generalized staff assignments in later years. Advanced military schooling, a battalion command, and preferably a group or brigade command are almost necessary ingredients for rapid advancement and selection as a general officer.

Promotions, at least through the grade of Brigadier General, are on an Army-wide basis. There is little doubt that efficiency reports count. Although positions previously held are important, no one is promoted to a

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<sup>2</sup>US Department of the Army, Pamphlet No. 140-1: Career Planning for United States Army Reserve Officers (Washington: 21 October 1969), p. 10.

given grade because he happens to be serving in a position which calls for that grade. Higher promotions are controlled to an increasing extent by assignments. Although candidates still go before promotion boards, the Establishment can certainly make its wishes known.

The Active Army maintains a generally centralized control over personnel assignments and thus makes a major contribution toward achieving a diversified pattern of duty.

#### CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND PROMOTION POLICIES OF THE ARMY RESERVE

DA Pamphlet 140-1 makes clear that the Army expects the optimum career development pattern of the Reserve officer to be similar to that of his Active Army counterpart. It states that service should include "rotation of assignments in varied types of duty,"<sup>3</sup> including troop duty and command, and formal schooling between tours. It points out, however, that there is no centralized career planning for Reserve officers and that the Reserve officer himself must do his own career planning.

#### IMPACT OF UNIT VACANCY PROMOTION TRACK

Most officers enter the Army Reserve from service in the Active Army, generally as lieutenants but occasionally as captains. Immediately they are put essentially on their own to select a unit, find other assignments, take schooling -- or often to do nothing. Fairly early in their careers they come across the information on promotion requirements set forth in Annex A. The justification for these two sets of requirements is that the organized units of the Ready Reserve cannot be

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<sup>3</sup>ibid., p. 4.



adequately officered without the unit vacancy track.

The conclusions to be reached from this table by the individual officer are inescapable. The quick road to the top is via the unit vacancy track; anyone who wants a chance at a star must be in that track. The mandatory track is so slow that, for the talented citizen-soldier, it is probably not worth the commitment.

The ramifications of this common conclusion are pervading and widespread. First, one must get in a unit and stay there. There is a premium upon knowing and producing for that one commander, and no one else; for he is the man who will assign you to unit vacancies and then shortly thereafter recommend you for promotion.

In this situation efficiency reports written by subordinate officers are of little value. They are not available to the commander when he makes the decision, and he operates on his own judgment anyway. When a commander recommends an officer for promotion, he is required to submit to the promotion board the files of all other qualified officers in the unit. Only in very rare instances will the board, on the basis of either very poor or very outstanding efficiency reports, select another officer. In one instance known to the writer where another officer was selected, that officer was thereafter required to leave the unit.

A corollary of this concept is that it is preferable to select the most senior unit possible and then stay there. Outstanding candidates would be a FASCOM, commanded by a Major General, or a Civil Affairs Area A, commanded by a Brigadier General -- both units having a large complement of full Colonels. Under the present system these commanders last a long time -- years longer than their Active Army counterparts. Not only does an officer "have it made" with only one good contact, but

over the years the work and time required in these major headquarters is much less than that required of officers who work their way up through battalion, group, and brigade positions.

The reverse of the primary concept must also be stated. About the worst move that a Reserve officer can make is to put time and effort into a unit and then leave the unit because of a civilian transfer. Obviously the worst time to leave is just before your commander is about to recommend you for promotion. Normally you will have difficulty finding another vacancy, even in your current grade. A commander almost always prefers to promote a loyal subordinate into the vacant slot (and in the process he incidentally maintains the fiction that the unit vacancy approach is necessary). Interviewing commanders will never have the benefit of seeing your efficiency reports as they make their decision on whether to accept you. If successful, you must spend several years proving yourself to the new commander.

The application of these concepts causes officers and commanders to go to great lengths to comply with the regulations. The writer knows of one instance in which an officer was carried on the unit roster for a year after he had left the area in order to protect an impending promotion to Lieutenant Colonel. In another instance an officer who moved to Michigan traveled for two years by commercial aircraft between Michigan and New York to attend drills, preserve a relationship, and be promoted to Colonel within a year of his return.

#### MILITARY SCHOOLING AND THE IMPACT OF TIME

Over the last twenty years there has been an ever-increasing schooling requirement in order to qualify for promotion. In addition to

the branch career course and the Command and General Staff College, the Army War College is now being considered as a requirement. These courses, in non-resident form, will cover a considerable period of a Reserve officer's career. Certainly the requirements for additional schooling are commendable. The significant point here is that, if the reservist is to make maximum progress, he must maintain both his regular civilian employment and his unit assignment at the same time that he is undertaking Army schooling. (Let's forget about further civilian schooling!) The Active Army would never expect its officers to hold down two other major assignments while they are also seriously committed to military schooling. For many busy and fully committed executives, this developing situation is the last straw.

#### SELECTION OF GENERAL OFFICERS

Selection of general officers is via the unit vacancy track only, including selection for specific mobilization designee positions. Thus the crucial decision is not the promotion selection itself, but rather assignment to the position in the first place. Regulations require that the next higher commander submit for review the names of at least three officers who are qualified and geographically available, with an appropriate recommendation. On paper the procedure sounds fine. In actual practice, however, the policy leaves much to be desired. The selector rarely knows who is really available. There is no system of notification to those who might be interested. An officer intimately involved in this selection processing has commented, "The selector has already picked his man, one of his current subordinates. He is honoring the regulations

in form but not in substance. He merely wants the files of two other dead horses."

A specific problem of recent origin is that the bulk of troop unit Reserve Colonels are in senior Civil Affairs units, which report directly to the Armies, while most of the general officer vacancies exist in the Army Command chains of command. Most of these colonels are in Civil Affairs because that is where the unit vacancy slots are; most of them have had extensive experience in other branches of the service, and many are only detailed to Civil Affairs. Although they may be qualified and geographically available, to expect that they would receive serious consideration on their merits is wishful thinking.

#### WHAT KIND OF OFFICERS DO THE PRESENT POLICIES DEVELOP?

First, the present policies develop one strain of Reserve officers who have had long periods -- often whole careers -- of troop unit assignments. Among this group are to be found the most competent officers in the Reserve. This group has also arranged its civilian commitments over a long span of time so as to spend by far the greatest amount of time in the program. They have had no experience, however, in senior Active Army headquarters, and schooling for them is an increasingly difficult problem.

Included in this group, however, are a significant number who have considerably more time than talent. These officers have ample time to pursue the schooling; and to push the routine paperwork upon which the Reserve thrives. Many, however, could not compete when mobilized with their more heavily committed brethren from the private sector. Neither could they meet the Active Army standards for senior positions, to which the system often promotes them. Turning briefly to morale and the image

of the Army, the disparity between the civilian and military accomplishments of these officers is certainly not lost upon the average enlisted reservist.

Next there is a group who have had long careers in Mobilization Designee assignments. Many have had no troop duty experience since World War II or Korea. They have chosen this route in some cases because civilian commitments allow them less time or because they are really geographically unavailable for troop units. In many cases, however, they have merely elected to spend less time and are not as highly motivated. They are willing to take slower promotion track and to skip the money that comes with paid drills.

The third strain of Reserve officers, somewhat similar to the second, are those who are perennial course-takers. The required courses alone will keep them busy for many years, and there are many other courses available. Many of this category have not been rated on an efficiency report for years.

These results are far from those considered optimum for the Regular Establishment and also far from the "rotation of assignments in varied types of duty"<sup>4</sup> set by the Army as its goal for the Reserves.

#### THE NATIONAL GUARD

The situation in the National Guard is similar to that in the Army Reserve, only more extreme. The Guard has only the unit vacancy form of promotion. Although Guard officers receive mandatory reviews and promotions as do Reserve officers, such promotions may move them out of the

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<sup>4</sup>ibid., p. 4



units (as in the Reserve) and thus usually out of the Guard. For this reason Guard officers are more inclined to turn down mandatory promotions than are Reserve officers.

A civilian transfer out of the state normally would require that the officer leave the Guard of the State he is in -- and thus attempt to develop a whole new set of relationships either in a new State Guard or in the Reserve. This situation, plus the well-known image of the need for political connections in the senior echelons of the Guard, keeps a large portion of officers -- particularly those associated with the private sector and with major businesses which require frequent moves -- from ever seriously considering affiliation with the Guard. The percentage of ROTC graduates who will touch the Guard is small for the same reasons. In spite, therefore, of the tremendous effort of the Federal government to train college graduates in the ROTC program for roles as citizen-officers, the Guard has had to resort to State Officer Candidate schools in order to provide junior officers for its units.

To this situation must be added the fact that many senior Guard positions require a full-time commitment, often for many years in the same position. Very few competent executives from the private sector are prepared to make that decision. They will opt for the Reserve, where the chance for a star does not involve that commitment.

These circumstances leave the leadership of the Guard to officers with local interests -- merchants, small business men, and civil servants. The main stream of American management passes it by.

The Guard has no provision for service as a Mobilization Designee in senior Active Army headquarters, except as a full-time Guard



representative in Washington, where the primary mission is to defend the independence of the Guard.<sup>5</sup>

#### THE COMPLICATION OF TWO RESERVE ARMIES

Obviously the concept of considering the best qualified officer geographically available for an opening in one Reserve service, including officers available from the other service, simply does not exist. In discussing career planning in the Reserves, as opposed to conditions in the Active Army, the "geographically available" requirement is always raised as a reason why things must be done as they are. However difficult the geographical situation may be, two non-interchangeable Reserve Armies make it much worse.

#### MAINTENANCE OF THE STATUS QUO

There are those who will argue that the present career development and promotion policies are required and are satisfactory. Their most important argument will be the need for long-term integrity in the units. They will also state that the prerogatives of command entitle commanders to a very strong influence in selecting their subordinates and in engineering their promotions. Yet the Active Army operates without these concepts; thus they are certainly not sacrosanct.

Senior Guard officers will also stress the separate state mission (now hardly distinguishable from the Reserve mission), the concepts of state control and state appointment of officers guaranteed by the Constitution, the tremendous investment now existing in state-owned armories,

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<sup>5</sup>Derthick, pp. 52-58.

and the advantages, via control of funds, which the Guard has in furthering its own interests and image.

In both services the officers have been working for advancement along the existing tracks. They perceive that their advancement depends upon the maintenance of those tracks and the contacts associated with them. They also conceive it as their duty to keep these tracks open behind them for their loyal subordinates.

#### THE EXPERIENCE OF THE OTHER SERVICES

Both the Marine Corps and the Navy have organized units in the Reserve, but neither has a unit vacancy promotion system. All promotions are on a service-wide basis for all grades. In both services (and also in the Air Force) promotions to general and flag rank are unassociated with geography or position held (although perhaps associated with politics!). In the Marines after two years in a pay (troop unit) billet an officer must step aside for at least a year. Vacancies are advertised and all interested officers may apply. During "off" periods officers may attend schools and take extension courses. In the Navy a similar three year limitation applies to all command billets.

In the judgment of officers with whom the writer has conferred the Marine system allows for changes in assignments, develops more rounded officers, allows time for schooling, and automatically eliminates weak officers from the units. The overall effect of the system has been salutary; it has strengthened, not weakened the units.

Except for a service-wide, non-unit vacancy approach to the selection

of general officers,<sup>6</sup> the Air Force has the same system and problems as the Army, including the two-Reserve concept of the Air Force Reserve and Air National Guard.

#### WHAT CAN BE DONE? -- RECOMMENDATIONS

Many aspects of the present system indicate that the best men do not get to the top and that the career development pattern is not optimum. What should be done to improve the situation must be tempered by what possibly could be accomplished in the current power-structure environment. The problem of two Reserve armies has been with us all this century. Recent attempts to merge the Guard into the Reserve and the Reserve into the Guard have strengthened both groups in Congress; both groups are likely to remain indefinitely.

The unit vacancy promotion track could be removed in the Army Reserve. Assignments to senior positions could be limited to two or three years, and assignments to units could also be limited to three or four years. Promotion policy should, of course, emphasize diversified service. As soon as the officer corps realized that the Army meant what it said about career planning, the officers would go to the same lengths to meet those requirements as they now do to follow the unit vacancy promotion track. This writer is of the opinion that, contrary to the concept that the organized units would be understaffed, there would be an actual increase in applications for vacancies; for the officers would learn that

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<sup>6</sup>US Congress, Promotion of Reserve Officers to General and Flag Ranks (Washington: Report of the Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee of the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, 1959), p. 6.

MOB DES assignments and schooling are not enough, that some troop duty in your record is required.

This system would also allow much more flexibility and would thus encourage the more competent and committed officers to stay in. Many additional officers would gain troop duty experience, and the Reserve as a whole would be better prepared for mobilization. Many officers who could not commit themselves to long careers of time-consuming troop duty could limit other commitments for several years -- just as they do when taking over the United Fund -- and should thus be worthy of promotion with their peers. In schooling the reservist would also be allowed periods of reflection, similar to the Active Army. Transfers in civilian assignments throughout the country would no longer be detrimental but would actually be beneficial in terms of diversified experience and ratings. This action would make the Reserve much more compatible with big business.

The Active Army has long operated with the concept that officers may often serve in a position that would normally call for a higher grade. Within the reasonable limits which the writer thinks would occur, the Reserve could operate likewise.

Attractive senior assignments in troop units could be opened up to all qualified and geographically available officers. As in the Marines and the Navy, regulations should require that all such vacancies be published. All qualified officers should be granted interviews, and efficiency reports should be on hand and should be reviewed. Although commanders deserve some prerogatives in making selections, these selections should be monitored by boards reviewing the records of all officers applying.

The increasing emphasis upon schooling requirements for promotion

should continue. Since more nearly adequate time for courses would be allotted, the policy would encourage more competent officers to stay in.

Since the Army rightly expects all of its Reserve generals to play an active role, their assignment to unit or MOB DES positions is correct, and the unit vacancy approach to these positions should continue. However, the selection process for these positions should be effectively opened to all qualified and (for unit positions) geographically available officers. To settle for anything less is to negate the ultimate purpose of career development.

Steps could be taken to demand greater interchangeability between the two Reserve armies in the lower field grades. The Federal Government controls the Army Reserve to a much greater degree than the Guard; thus these changes could be effected more quickly in the Reserve. Guard officers could be given equal treatment in applying for Reserve troop assignments. Some Guard officers, who perceive that their final one or two promotions on a mandatory basis may be based upon the diversified service criteria of the Army Reserve, will be inclined to develop that career pattern of diversified service, including MOB DES assignments and schooling, and will rely less on the unit vacancy approach and the political contacts of the Guard.

The Federal Government should encourage the Guard to reciprocate with regard to the open consideration of Reserve officers for vacancies in the Guard.

Unit vacancy promotions probably cannot be eliminated in the Guard. The strength of the Establishment and the presence of a number of full-time positions probably require that the system survive. A long-range



goal, however, should be the elimination of unit vacancy promotions except for the full-time positions.

The implementation of these recommendations would make career development in the Reserves more nearly what the Army says it ought to be. It would materially improve the chances that the best men will get to the top, and would thus improve the quality of leadership which the Reserves can supply in any kind of a mobilization.

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# ANNEX A

## TIME IN GRADE REQUIREMENTS FOR PROMOTION<sup>a</sup>

To the Grade of	Required years of promotion service	
	Promotion to fill Unit vacancies	Promotion upon service-wide mandatory review
Captain	2	4 in grade of 1st Lt.
Major	4	7 in grade of Captain
Lt. Col.	4	7 in grade of Major
Colonel	<u>3</u>	<u>7<sup>b</sup></u> in grade of Lt. Col.
Total years from 1st Lt. to Colonel	13	25

<sup>a</sup>Adapted from US Department of the Army, Pamphlet No. 140-1: Career Planning for United States Army Reserve Officers (Washington: 21 October 1969), p. 8.

<sup>b</sup>Time in grade as a Lieutenant Colonel for mandatory review and promotion to Colonel is determined by Department of the Army. In recent years it has dropped from eleven years to seven.