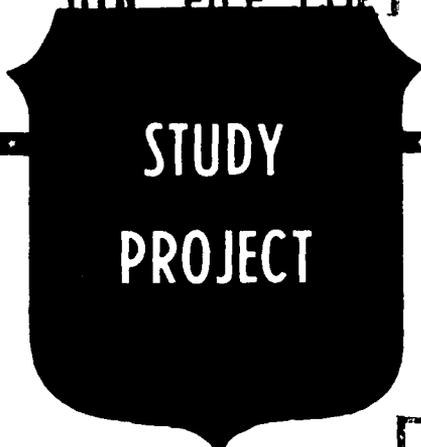


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REGULAR COMMISSIONS FOR OFFICER ACCESSIONS

BY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL ROGER F. BROWN

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This paper concludes that there is a need to take a new approach in the commissioning of newly accessed officers. The regular/reserve commission mix for active-duty officers could very well be a thing of the past. In fact, a radical redesigning of the entire commissioning system is needed; one that provides equal status for all officers initially entering active duty. Such a break from traditional ties could result in total alignment of the active-duty officer force that would be equitably managed on a demonstrated-performance basis. The Defense Officer Personnel Management Act was passed in 1981, in part to create an all-career force at the field-grade level. Upon promotion to major, active-duty reserve officers are offered career status, and from that point until retirement, no distinction is made between reserve and regular commissioned officers. This portion of DOPMA was fully intended to eliminate inequities and disparate management of career officers based on type of commission. Unfortunately, DOPMA did not extend the same safeguard for junior officers. Officers are still accessed onto active duty with about a 50/50 mix of regular and reserve commissions. At the company-grade level, this continues to proliferate the inequities that DOPMA eliminated for field-grade levels. Information was gathered from a review of the DOPMA and the Congressional Committee background report, as well as from volumes of the 1986 ROTC Study. Informal conversations were held with former Professors of Military Science, and with action officers from The Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff, Personnel, and The Total Army Personnel Agency.

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REGULAR COMMISSIONS FOR OFFICER ACCESSIONS

An Individual Study Project
Intended for Publication

by

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This paper concludes that there is a need to take a new approach in the commissioning of newly accessed officers. The regular/reserve commission mix for active-duty officers could very well be a thing of the past. In fact, a radical redesigning of the entire commissioning system is needed; one that provides equal status for all officers initially entering active duty. Such a break from traditional ties could result in total alignment of the active-duty officer force that would be equitably managed on a demonstrated-performance basis. The Defense Officer Personnel Management Act was passed in 1981, in part to create an all-career force at the field-grade level. Upon promotion to major, active-duty reserve officers are offered career status, and from that point until retirement, no distinction is made between reserve and regular commissioned officers. This portion of DOPMA was fully intended to eliminate inequities and disparate management of career officers based on type of commission. Unfortunately, DOPMA did not extend the same safeguard for junior officers. Officers are still accessed onto active duty with about a 50/50 mix of regular and reserve commissions. At the company-grade level, this continues to proliferate the inequities that DOPMA eliminated for field-grade levels. Information was gathered from a review of the DOPMA and the Congressional Committee background report, as well as from volumes of the 1986 ROTC Study. Informal conversations were held with former Professors of Military Science, and with action officers from The Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff, Personnel, and The Total Army Personnel Agency.

Regular Commissions for Officer Accessions

Although the precedent has been set for revamping our present system of commissioning new officer accessions, there has not yet been any movement in that direction. Among other things, the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA) of 1981, created an all-regular career officer force at the field-grade level to eliminate inequities and inconsistent management of reserve versus regular commissioned officers.¹ With this action complete, the same logic should be extended to include the company-grade officers, which comprise the remainder, and the largest portion, of the officer corps. Newly accessed lieutenants should be afforded the opportunity to compete on an equal footing, regardless of source or type of commission, just as the field-grade officers do now.

For the sake of argument, let us assume that all newly accessed officers enter active duty with the same type of commission, say a company-grade commission, under revised retention and career integration rules. Theoretically, the more thoroughly prepared officers, United States Military Academy (USMA) and Distinguished Military Graduate (DMG) cadets for example, should continue to attain the highest levels of achievement, and thus successful career progression, while allowing the remainder of the officers to compete with them based solely on active-duty performance. That is, all officers compete without prejudice of not having been afforded a regular commission prior to entry onto active duty, as is now the case for reserve commissioned officers.

Typically, this really is representative of the American way. Each officer would have the opportunity, or the chance, to prove himself or herself in the real environment for which he or she was trained (whatever the source), and let the chips fall where they may. It is the equal chance that is most important.

We don't do that today. We still identify junior active-duty officers as belonging to one of two groups: regular commissioned officers, or reserve commissioned officers. Do we need to continue to do that to active-duty officers? Does it serve a constructive purpose, or a potentially destructive one? Do we grow a mindset of "second-class citizens" or "underdogs"? Are we simply continuing to pursue a system because that is the way it has been? Does excellent active-duty performance and a regular commission necessarily parallel outstanding demonstrated college performance? Is it necessary to make a type-of-commission decision before active-duty performance has been evaluated?

Let's take a look at these issues in a systems context. We may even conclude, as this paper does, that a new approach is needed for the commissioning of newly accessed officers. That the connotation affixed to the terms regular/reserve commission for active-duty officers may be a thing of the past. That in fact, a radical redesigning of the entire commissioning system is in order to develop one that provides equal status for all officers entering active duty. Such a break from traditional ties could result in total alignment of the active-duty officer force - a force that would be equitably managed on a demonstrated-performance basis.

Since the implementation of the Officer Personnel Act in 1947, there have been refinements and adjustments made to the methods used throughout the years to recruit, train, commission, and retain the officers required to compose a balanced and professional Army officer corps. Management methodologies have been developed to provide flexibility in managing the size of the officer corps, both prior to, and beyond the all-important twenty-year mark of active-duty service. Tailoring the corps as needed, maintaining desired promotion and "pin-on" points, and internally realigning branch strengths have been basic tasks necessary to ensure a viable officer personnel management system.² Possibly most important element, and certainly the most difficult one to attain, has been the establishment of a bond of credibility within the officer corps. The credibility bond compliments the career management system, and is essential if it is to be stable and effective. It should almost go without saying, the system must also be equitable to all those who are serviced by it.

Prior to 1981, the officer personnel management system had been effective in accomplishing the standards of quality and quantity, but not without irritation and in some cases, downright pain in various segments of the active-duty officer corps. It was a system enduring quiet internal strain. This strain had been particularly intense following periods of military conflict when manning levels were at a peak, and officer reductions had to be implemented to meet diminished manpower authorizations. Internal friction was created by the familiar dual-status, or two-track, officer personnel management system having a central core of regular commissioned officers, augmented with a number of active-duty reserve officers needed to

match desired officer corps manning levels. Fluctuating officer end strengths demanded a flexible system capable of adjusting manning levels, normally in annual cycles. To accomplish this, a class of "bill-payers" emerged...the active-duty reserve officers.

Subdued consternation existed for years over the perceived "second-class citizen" status of active-duty reserve officers. Sometimes the reserve officers were irresponsibly referred to as "summer hires" or "temporary help", as opposed to the professional, or career status enjoyed by regular commissioned officers. Over time, casual remarks such as these caused segments of the reserve officer population to form a distorted picture of the equity of the system. Certainly these "labels" were the result of insensitive individual remarks and were not officially condoned at any level. The damage had already been done, and it affected a sizeable portion of the active-duty officer force.

Technical differences in the rules for the career management of these two groups were distinct. Regular commissioned officers could continue active-duty service past twenty years, as long as promotion and performance standards were met. Essentially, regular commissioned officers could not be released involuntarily from active duty without specific cause, or as a result of an overall reduction-in-force. Reserve officers, on the other hand, could not continue on active duty past the twenty-year mark, and were subject to release from active duty at any time based on the needs of the service. There were administrative checks and balances in the system to prevent abuse, but these technical differences were causes for concern by active-duty reserve officers, especially during times of austere or reduced

manning levels when reductions tended to target them for consideration for release from service.

Regular commissioned status was thought to be an effective competitive edge when it came time for selection for command, promotion, and assignment. Although usually discounted in official channels, perceptions of preferential treatment for regular officers was permanently ingrained.

Not only did the distinction between regular and reserve officers cause a natural internal rift, it became a self-perpetuating mechanism that subtly influenced the management of officers at many levels, and really affected the outlook, and subsequently, the personal career planning of the active-duty reserve officer. It unwittingly encouraged them to plan early for second careers, and in many cases to mentally accept "second-class citizen" status, which negatively affected their competitive edge. Lastly, it reinforced notions of internal disharmony. These observations are not intended to imply that reserve officers were deficient in performance by any measure, because they were not. This was a sensitive issue that most officers preferred not to address because it was in the "too-tough-to-handle" category. It was a problem not readily accepted by many of influence because it was not a palatable subject, and was more easily rationalized away than dealt with. Further complicating the issue, was that most reserve officers also chose not to address it either, because it could have been superficially interpreted as lending credibility to the aspersion already cast upon the active-duty reserve officers. The problem was real, and maybe to a limited degree, destructive to the Army. It most certainly was a source of

irritation to those affected. Rationally speaking, there would have been no difference between regular and active-duty reserve officers had there been no categories developed for management purposes in the first place. Intuitively, and realistically, performance should have been the only discriminate measure of evaluation, not category of commission.

There are studies that show retention rates for regular commissioned officers exceed those of reserve officers on active duty.³ This does not appear to be unusual, given the aforementioned discussion. It must be reemphasized that these issues should not be construed to necessarily be the root causes for lower reserve officer retention levels, only contributing factors in the decision process for the reserve officer. Additionally, it would seem reasonable to assume that a greater percentage of reserve officers come into the service with an agenda to pursue that may have included a tour in the service, wholly or in part, as a functional means of building a financial nestegg upon completion of college as first step toward a life-long career goal, or even as a patriotic duty to fulfill their obligation to their country. In any event, it is not surprising that a study of this nature would reveal a larger departure rate from the service for reserve officers than regular officers. Total retention rates probably would not differ if the dual-status environment had not existed; that is, altered to a purely competitive system evaluated solely on active-duty performance. It must be remembered that a significant number of regular officers, to include USMA graduates, leave the service every year for personal reasons akin to those of reserve officers.

For many of you this sounds like a familiar story, doesn't it? It should. Prior to the implementation of the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA) in 1981, this was the situation in the officer corps. A management system that oriented in large part on a specific officer population as the "bill-payer" for reductions and periodic adjustments. To some degree the regular/reserve mix still exists today, but only because the management system under DOPMA still allows a reserve field-grade officer (who entered active duty on or before 30 September 1981)⁴ to retain reserve status if he or she prefers to do so at the career conversion point. The point is, that the number of officers currently declining career status under the provisions of DOPMA is extremely small. So small, in fact, that the career distinction at the field-grade level has been effectively dampened into virtual nonexistence, and will eventually completely phase out. At the field-grade level, the major objective of DOPMA to establish an equitable and consistent career management status for all officers on the active duty list is being attained.

In December 1980, DOPMA was passed to become effective 15 September 1981. It incorporated sweeping changes, to include an increased ceiling of 63,000 active-duty regular officers.⁵ In conjunction with that ceiling, a uniform management system was incorporated for both regular and active-duty reserve officers, effectively discontinuing the old dual-status system which was laden with the many internal flaws previously discussed. Almost doing away with it that is. As vast a change as DOPMA implemented, it did not change the dual-status problem at the company-grade level. Officers are still accessed with a mix of regular and reserve commissions. Administrative avenues are available for selected reserve officers to

integrate into career status, from the two-year mark through the nine-year mark, with the intention of having a nearly pure career force under the same management rules by the eleventh year of service. Final career status is offered upon promotion to major. But with the awarding of a mix of regular and reserve commissions for newly accessed junior officers, a microcosm of the old dual-status system still lives.

The visible regular and active-duty reserve officer distinction continues to exist throughout the formative years for our young officers. The feeling of being on the outside, and having to struggle for career status is still a reality for our fledgling reserve officers. Why? The Committee on Armed Services specifically stated "...after a certain number of years of commissioned service all career-force active-duty officers could become regular officers."⁶ This was based, among other lesser considerations, on the fact that previous law permitted "...different treatment of regulars and reservists and results in treatment that is often perceived as inequitable by reserve officers."⁷ Further, the original bill "would eliminate these inequitable situations by permitting an all-regular career force."⁸ The clearly stated intention was to " -Provide career opportunity that will attract and retain the number of high-caliber officers needed."⁹

Astonishingly enough, after all this concentration of professional good intention, the committee went on to say that the statutory grade limits would be restricted to the field grades because company-grade levels are subject to substantial annual changes.¹⁰ They went on to say that the law would impose a competitive-based

system...even though the career management system would not be extended to company grade officers except to allow certain integration points for career status. If DOPMA creates an equality-based performance system, why is that not applicable to our junior officers? It should be, simply because of the turbulence experienced at that level, as acknowledged by the committee when they did not extend grade limits to them. They learn from the system in which they operate. A dual-based environment is not desirable for all the reasons we already know from our unhappy experiences prior to 1981.

It is imperative at this point to make a statement of the obvious. Certainly the issue of regular and reserve commissioned status is not the all-inclusive cause for the discontent and management woes of the officer personnel system. The internal and external pressures that stress any personnel system are multifaceted, especially when dealing with a large, educated, diverse, and mobile population such as the officer corps. Many considerations impact the system, most of which were properly brought into perspective and corrected by DOPMA, but there are some still remaining which are in need of attention. This paper focuses only on the aspects of commissioning officers, and the immediate outgrowths attendant to the related shortcomings of DOPMA. Failure to address peripheral issues within the officer management system is not intended to imply unimportance or irrelevance - but is better suited as a subject separately studied.

Currently, Army officers are commissioned from three primary sources: United States Military Academy (USMA), Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC), and Officer Candidate Course (OCS). A small

number of direct commissions are awarded, but they are statistically insignificant for basic branch officers. ROTC accounts for 70 percent of annual officer accessions (including both regular and reserve commissioned officers for active duty). USMA provides about 18 percent, and OCS produces about 13 percent. The accession plan for Fiscal Year 87 projected that 46% of ROTC accessions, 100% of USMA graduates, and 9% of OCS graduates would receive RA commissions.¹¹ Based on these percentages, over 50% of the lieutenants entering active duty in FY 87 had regular commissions.

ODCSPER, Department of the Army, in conjunction with technical input from the Total Army Personnel Agency, determines on an annual basis, through an iterative process, the number of officers to be assessed and the number of RA commissions available for those assessments. Both figures are derived as a result of many dynamic and interrelated factors, of which the budget and end strength constraints are most influential. The process of determining the number of RA commissions to be made available is not an exact science. Actually, it could be described as flexible and generally based on broad management issues ideally required to sustain a stable officer force for that particular year group. Upon reviewing the process for determining RA requirements, one could draw the conclusion that annual regular commission allocations are more soundly rooted in opinion rather than based on specifically developed requirements.

The number of RA commissions available in any given year can be the topic of much debate. As previously mentioned, it tends to be a subjective issue rather than a finely-tuned mathematical percentage of the total annual accessions. By law, all USMA graduates must be

commissioned as Regular Army officers. Additionally, 80% of the USMA graduates must receive commissions in combat arms branches. ROTC graduates have no specific ceiling or floor for RA commissions, other than the annual figures provided by DA. OCS graduates round out the figure with a norm of around 10 RA commissions a year. Clearly, the largest pool from which to draw officer accessions is ROTC.

It is in this context that TAPA officials calculate and recommend a numerically acceptable band of regular commissions that can be awarded each FY, above those required for USMA graduates. The upper limit of this band represents the level above which management flexibility would be deteriorated to the degree that year group adjustments could not be reasonably executed. Theoretically, the lower limit is the minimal number of regular officers needed to assure retention of a viable career force for that year group. With the company-level career gates afforded by DOPMA, strict regulation of regular career integration must be maintained to retain force management flexibility. Under a revised entry system, such limits based on projected officer attrition rates would not be necessary. Management flexibility would become a direct function of adjusted retention based on active-duty performance.

The Regular Army commission carries with it stability and career guarantees, but it is certainly no substitute for solid duty performance. Promotion gates must still be met, as two promotion passovers are justification for release from service. The RA commission is a symbol of career status granted early-on in most cases, whereas the active-duty reserve officer must seek opportunities to attain a regular commission while on active duty if afforded him or

her.

There is yet one more perceived difference within the officer corps related to commissions, and that is source. Specifically, the USMA graduate as compared to non-USMA graduates. Both non-USMA regular officers and active-duty reserve officers generally have the view that USMA officers receive preferential assignments and treatment, thereby enhancing their promotion success and career potential. DOPMA has attenuated this at the field-grade level and it is not the issue now as it was in years past...but a distinctive commission-related class separation, USMA - non-USMA - regular - reserve, long held as real, still exists, and that perception at least, superficially affects individual thoughts, expectations, and feelings. This is borne out by the fact that a regular army accession distribution plan exists that is designed to ensure that initial assignments for RA lieutenants are allocated on a fair-share basis to the MACOMs. "The MACOM allocation by branch reflects a proportionate share of USMA and ROTC RA graduates to ensure source of commission equity."¹² The distribution within the MACOM is then determined by the MACOM itself. This can be interpreted as a developed method of preferential treatment for regular commissioned officers, and although well intentioned, can be very detrimental to the perceived self-esteem of the reserve commissioned officer.

In fact, ROTC Cadet Command as recently as last year, requested and had approved a plan known as the "50/100" plan. This plan requested that 50% of all ROTC active-duty accessions receive RA commissions, and be given 100% parity with USMA for RA commissions in combat arms branches. Since the USMA graduating class normally is

fixed at about 1000 cadets, at least 800 receive RA commissions in combat arms branches. Under the 50/100 plan, ROTC should get at least 800 RA commissions in combat arms branches as well. This did in fact occur: ROTC received 818, and USMA had 820 RA officer accessions in combat arms branches for YG 87.¹³ ROTC Cadet Command argues that ROTC produces the same quality cadet as USMA, with equal ability and potential to perform as second lieutenants.¹⁴ Therefore, parity is necessary to ensure that officers produced through ROTC do not perceive themselves having less potential to succeed than the USMA officers. This is a strong indication that the ROTC Cadet Command is having to deal with the equality perception problem in the ROTC program.

The total number of ROTC cadets to be accessed varies each year as previously mentioned, as does the percentage of RA commissions available. The percentage of RA commissions for the past several years has hovered around 50% of total accessions, and has been influenced to some degree by a voiced need by ROTC Cadet Command to support the enhancement of ROTC recruiting and retention.

The request to have 50% ROTC accessions with RA commissions appears to be aimed toward motivating ROTC cadets to excel in order to earn initial recognition as "career" officers upon entry onto active duty. In this manner, the notion is again reinforced, as with the initial assignments distribution, that a distinction between regular and active-duty reserve commissioned officers does exist, even as early-on as in college. Once ingrained in those formative stages, those differences are not forgotten. Those cadets accessed for active duty and given a reserve commission, have the feeling of an uphill

climb from the very day they receive the news that they were not selected to receive regular commissions. This does not appear to be the best method to incentivize outstanding active duty performance. Actually, it could run counter to the long-term objective of retaining quality officers.

While serving as an incentive for young officers to commit themselves early for a career in the service, the granting of RA commissions upon entry to active duty may actually serve to unintentionally remove a timely decision of choice for the Army to retain or release an officer based on active duty performance. Flexibility in force management is reduced with every RA commission awarded, and an increased burden is placed upon the smaller "bill-payer" reserve officer population as adjustments are needed. Ultimately, this means the majority of adjustments must come from the junior officer ranks, since the field-grade population has been integrated into a regular career status. However, equitable methods have been emplaced to make field-grade reductions as necessary.

Informal conversations with several former Professors of Military Science (PMS) indicate that there is a general feeling that the number of RA commissions received by the cadets in their ROTC unit is clearly seen as a measure of success of the ROTC unit. A continual push is on to challenge cadets to pursue efforts to be competitive for RA commissions. This can backfire if those competing cadets are not selected for regular commissions. The procedure for selecting cadets for RA commissions has changed several times in just the past four years. Although actual accessions are determined by a centralized DA board, the branch selection was completed prior to RA selection in

some years, while the order was reversed last year. This small change can result in a significant outcome as far as the branch selection for those cadets chosen for RA commissions. The net result is, more confusion at the ROTC unit level.

Conversations with prior PMS's revealed a general confirmation of the feeling of success being judged on the basis of cadet selection for RA commissions. On the other hand, they agreed that much time is spent explaining the RA program, emphasizing it, and then clarifying it as changes occurred. It can lose its value as a clearly achievable goal for some cadets, and as a selling point. In fact, once the results of the accessions boards are released, it can become a source of frustration for those cadets not selected, and in some cases for those selected, but not in a branch of their choice. Now may be the time to look at an alternate method of accessions that could avoid that situation all together, and provide all cadets accessed for active duty an equal chance to compete for career status based solely on active duty performance.

The ability to seize upon that opportunity is now possible. Since DOPMA has laid the groundwork for innovative change mostly at the field grade level for reserve officers, a move to revamp officer accessions and company grade management appears to be a prudent path, albeit a difficult one. Historically, system adjustments have been brought about by the recognition and acceptance of the need for change. Now fortitude is required to make that change in good faith to institutionalize needed improvements for more consistent officer management.

During peacetime, the overall ceiling of 63,000 regular officers is more than adequate, as the field grade proportion of officers serving on active duty is limited to approximately 33 percent for an officer force of 100,000 (general officers excluded).¹⁵ For an all-regular career force, this translates to 33,000 field-grade officers, well below the 63,000 figure. With the large integration point at the field grade mark, this ceiling provides the flexibility for 30,000 officers to be integrated at company level before the overall ceiling is met. Even more latitude can be achieved if RA status is not permitted until the final DOPMA integration point. The important issue is that active-duty reserve officers now have a fixed and open opportunity to integrate into the regular force if their performance has supported promotion to major. These opportunities minimize the barrier of being segregated into an "other-than-career officer" group, but does not completely remove it.

DOPMA does not fully rectify the perceived inequities during the most important and formative years of an officer's service - in the grades of lieutenant and captain. It is during this period of service that an officer usually makes his or her decision to stay in the service. DOPMA has provided a first step toward the development of a competitive system that could allow all officers to compete for career status upon promotion to major. This improvement will enhance cohesiveness, dedication, and retention.

The biases that currently reinforce the enhancement of RA status for company grade officers would have to be overcome. This will require the jumping of many political, as well as legal hurdles, but

it could be the most equitable and positive move made in officer personnel management since DOPMA... upon entry on active duty all second lieutenants serve in a "company-grade status" completely without reference to, or associated with, regular or reserve commission status. Promotion and retention would be based solely on active duty performance. Then, at the appropriate integration points, officers can choose to be integrated into the regular force if they desire, until required to do so at the final integration point. Most advantageous to the Army would be that selections for retention and separation would consider the entire force of company-grade officers, not just the reserve commissioned officer group. Additional separation procedures could be added for those officers already integrated into the regular force.

It may very well be that the utility of awarding regular commissions to newly accessed officers has been lost. A performance-based system would ensure equal competition for all officers regardless of commission source, and could result in a higher quality force with a greater degree of career satisfaction. Of course this proposal would require a change in the law regarding regular commissions for USMA cadets. That would most surely be a hotly contested political issue. If ROTC produces young officers as well prepared as USMA officers, and active-duty performance supports that, then it seems appropriate that an equal footing should be established to nurture the opportunity for them to succeed in their individual career objectives.

With pressure intensifying on force reductions, additional procedures to manage the officer force are needed. The size of the

regular force at the junior officer level is indeed a significant part of the problem since they represent the majority of the active-duty officer force. A relook of our system is required with a view toward enhancing flexibility for management. Certainly, accession and retention of company grade officers are integral ingredients of that formula. We must start at the beginning. Why not here...with the awarding of standard commissions for newly accessed officers?

The ability exists to break historical ties on this issue, thereby allowing innovative thinking and development of a new approach to junior officer accession and management. This approach must be free of distracting classifications that may have little bearing on the career potential of newly accessed officers. A restructuring of the commissioning system would dovetail nicely with the guidelines laid out in DOPMA for integration into the all-regular career force, and would create a clear and understandable competitive career progression from accession to retirement for all active-duty officers. Other incentives and enticements can be developed to convince quality young men and women to choose a truly open and equitable service career. The camouflaged pitfalls of the dual-status system of officer management can be totally eliminated without long-term ill effects. Innovative long-term thinking can bring about the development and implementation of a program of equal treatment and opportunity for our junior officers.

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