

Who Is a Member of the Military Profession?

By MATTHEW MOTEN

From time to time in the United States, a clearly defined word will find itself dragooned by popular culture to serve the common lexicon. Before long, that proud old word will get bandied about so much that it changes and morphs into something that is at once broader and less than its former self. The term *professional* is such a word. Today, everyone wants to be a professional. All sorts of trades, skilled and unskilled, bill themselves as professional. The sides of many 18 wheelers advertise that their firms are “the professionals.” Gargantuan human beings entertain us at sporting events, insisting that they are professional. The toilet paper dispenser in the latrine near my office proudly declares that it is a “Kimberly-Clark Professional.”



Naval officer renders salute during national anthem

U.S. Marine Corps (Andrea M. Olguin)

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We should applaud the efforts of the Armed Forces to commence a debate about the profession of arms. I will argue, however, that the effort is only worthwhile if we manage to establish some rigor in the terms *profession* and *professional*. We must have clear standards about what we mean by those terms. We need to understand what professions are and who professionals are before we try to define the profession of arms. Moreover, to be meaningful and useful, these definitions have to have some measure of historical consistency. We have to understand the history of the military profession if we are to attempt to guide its future. Making policy absent a thorough understanding of history is akin to planting cut flowers, and it will yield a similar result.

Some writers loosely use the term *professional* when describing the Armed Forces, meaning that the Services are a standing force or that its members serve for long periods of time. Such imprecision conflates “professional” with “regular” and a “professional military” with a “standing army.” Those terms are not synonymous, largely because they demand too little of military professionalism.

Over the past half-century, scholars have studied the nature of professions quite rigorously. Thus, we may stand on their shoulders as we attempt to define ourselves. Samuel P. Huntington started the debate with *The Soldier and the State*. His first chapter begins: “The modern officer corps is a professional body, and the modern military officer, a professional man. This is, perhaps, the most fundamental thesis of this book.” For Huntington, the military profession and officer corps are synonymous and exclusive. He then defines professionalism in terms of three attributes—responsibility, corporateness, and expertise—and locates military professionalism within those categories.

Responsibility: military forces are an obedient arm of the state strictly subordinate to civilian authority; professional officers use their expertise only for society’s benefit; and society is the profession’s client.

Corporateness: the profession restricts entrance and controls promotion; complex vocational institutions define an autonomous subculture; and journals, associations,

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schools, customs, traditions, uniforms, insignia of rank.

Expertise: attaining professional expertise requires a lengthy period of formal education; and professional knowledge is intellectual and capable of preservation in writing.¹

Sociologist James Burk has derived his own triad. He argues that a *profession* is:

*a relatively high status occupation whose members apply abstract knowledge to solve problems in a particular field of endeavor. . . My definition identifies three prescriptive factors that, when found together, mark an occupation as a profession. One is mastery of abstract knowledge, which occurs through a system of higher education. Another is control—almost always contested—over jurisdiction within which expert knowledge is applied. Finally is the match between the form of professional knowledge and the prevailing cultural belief or bias about the legitimacy of that form compared to others, which is the source of professional status. We can refer to these simply as expertise, jurisdiction, and legitimacy.*²

Burk’s profession is continuously competing to maintain its elite status in relation to society. His principal contribution is the idea that professions vie for control over a body of expert knowledge. To succeed, that is to continue as professions, they must win that competition for jurisdiction.

My preferred definition is one offered in the 1970s by military historian Allan Millett,

the most salient characteristic of professions has been the accumulation and systematic exploitation of specialized knowledge applied to specialized problems

who argues that professional attributes include the following. The occupation:

- is a full-time and stable job, serving continuing societal needs
- is regarded as a lifelong calling by the practitioners, who identify themselves personally with their job subculture
- is organized to control performance standards and recruitment
- requires formal, theoretical education
- has a service orientation in which loyalty to standards of competence and to clients’ needs is paramount
- is granted a great deal of collective autonomy by the society it serves, presumably because the practitioners have proven their high ethical standards and trustworthiness.

The most salient characteristic of professions has been the accumulation and systematic exploitation of specialized knowledge applied to specialized problems.³

The Huntington, Burk, and Millett definitions have historical consistency, which means that we can compare professions over

U.S. Army officer observes supply airdrop to Forward Operating Base Waza Kwah, Afghanistan



U.S. Air Force (Adrian Cadiz)



U.S. Air Force (Melanie Rodgers)

time. For example, historians can qualitatively measure expertise or autonomy or jurisdictional control from one period to another, and thereby trace professional development through history.

Historians debate when certain occupations became professions, but the late 19th century is generally accepted as the era of professionalization. Physicians formed the American Medical Association, and lawyers the American Bar Association. They aimed to govern professional standards, demanding formal and theoretical schooling beyond a liberal education afforded in the best colleges. Waning were the days when an ambitious young man might apprentice himself to an attorney, read the law, and quickly hang a shingle in front of an office across from the courthouse. Instead, to meet the new standards, he needed to attend law school and pass a bar exam. Associations set up licensing examinations and wrote codes of ethics to guide professional behavior and practice. Academics improved their standards of scholarship, codifying requirements to attain doctorates in various disciplines.

Huntington argues that the military officer corps professionalized in the late 19th century, and that it did so largely because

it was isolated from society. For the last 50 years, historians have been debating those conclusions, and historical consensus is that Huntington was wrong. Historians now generally agree that the Army officer corps began to professionalize as early as the 1820s and that the profession matured over the rest of the century. That maturation proceeded not in isolation from society, but in consonance with broader social trends, the same trends that fostered legal, medical, and academic professionalization. Likewise, the maritime officer corps began to specialize in the 1830s and 1840s and moved ahead of the Army in the 1880s and 1890s.

But by the beginning of the 20th century, the Army, Navy, and Marines were all on a professional par, with general staffs controlling expertise at the strategic and operational levels; separate and distinct professional jurisdictions over land power and sea power expertise; a system of hierarchical education, including war colleges, to instruct officers in those esoteric skills; strict standards of entry and promotion based upon both seniority and merit; Service ethics that valued military subordination to civilian authority; and clearly defined occupational cultures comprising uniforms,

after World War II, global responsibilities required an end to the traditional American bias against standing peacetime armed Services

language, behavior, and traditions that delineated their cultures from each other and the rest of society.

Twice in the 20th century, the American professional military and naval officer corps mobilized the Nation to man, equip, and train formidable forces of civilian-soldiers, -sailors, and -marines. Those armies and armadas won two world wars, and just as quickly demobilized when victory was complete.

After World War II, global responsibilities required an end to the traditional American bias against standing peacetime armed Services. Despite demobilization, the Army and Navy have never again been small forces. The U.S. Air Force gained its independence, grew prodigiously during the Cold War, and rapidly professionalized; it stood on the accomplishments of its parent Service, the U.S. Army, and it

Senior Service and civilian leaders attend Joint Flag Officer Course at Air Force Wargaming Institute, Maxwell Air Force Base



Marine officer briefs Secretary Gates in Afghanistan

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offered a new expertise: the delivery of nuclear weapons.

Large peacetime forces changed military culture. Enlisted persons could now see a path to viable, long careers, something that had never before been assured. Generous programs for Servicemember health care and retirement added to the attraction of military life. These advances caused the noncommissioned officer (NCO) corps in each Service to grow in size, responsibility, and stature, and NCOs began a long process of professionalization. Within 20 years after World War II, commanders at all levels had senior NCOs assisting them in leading a large, regular enlisted force. NCO training schools began to flourish in every branch of Service. Over time, NCOs have come to manifest several of the professional attributes that Huntington, Burk, and Millett define, but their professionalization is incomplete in the areas of formal and theoretical education, accumulation of specialized expertise, and autonomous jurisdiction over a body of professional knowledge. The NCO corps is professionalizing, but not yet professional.

As the term *professional* has metastasized in society, as more and more groups have claimed professional status, the same

has occurred in the armed Services. Various populations within and near the uniformed military have laid claim to professional status. The goal is laudable, and the fact that so many want to be part of the military profession is a novel and welcome phenomenon. Yet as we attempt to define what the military profession is and what it means to be a military professional, we must be mindful of the choices we make. We can embrace historic definitions or invent new ones to suit today's goals. We can choose between inclusivity and exclusivity, between populism and elitism. We can opt for strict standards of membership or loose ones. Obviously, we can also try to compromise between these poles. Whatever we decide, we must have a clear-eyed understanding that our choices have consequences for the future of the military profession.

Professions are not professions simply because they say they are. Their clients, society as a whole, have to accept their claims and trust the professions with jurisdiction over important areas of human endeavor. If we can define our profession in ways that society will accept and trust, we will remain viable and relevant. Doing so demands defining our professional expertise, contesting

control of it when required, and being clear about who exercises authority and responsibility delegated to us by society. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1957), 7–18. These descriptions of responsibility, corporateness, and expertise are my abbreviated versions of Huntington's discussion.

² James Burk, "Expertise, Jurisdiction, and the Legitimacy of the Military Profession," in *The Future of the Army Profession*, ed. Lloyd J. Matthews (Boston: McGraw-Hill Primis Custom Publishing, 2002), 21.

³ Allan R. Millett, *Military Professionalism and Officership in America* (Columbus: The Mershon Center of the Ohio State University, 1977), 2.