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CYNICISM: A BRIEF LOOK AT A TROUBLING TOPIC

Articles

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CYNICISM

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A brief look at a troubling topic

"Corrosion, you see, whether on iron or any other material, is something that never stops. We can fix it when it happens, and we can try to prevent it, but all we can ever really do is slow it down. That's why we call it the pervasive menace."[1]

Dan Dumire, Corrosion Prevention and Contol, DoD

Are today's career officers more cynical than officers of previous eras, and how much more corrosive is their cynicism? It turns out these are impossible questions to answer. They are also irrelevant. No cynic cares whether things were equally or even more screwed up in the past. Cynics live in the present. What matters to them is what is problematic now – and today's post-command and command-select career officers *are* cynical.

While some causes of cynicism are as old as soldiering, others are new and are intensifying. Consequently, we should worry about what it means when officers on the command track in Special Operations Forces (SOF) openly acknowledge that their faith in Higher Command is eroding, or has eroded; when they consider the prospect of military success to be dim; and/or when they see little to no prospect of increased professional satisfaction lying ahead. We should worry about what this will do to retention and recruitment. We should also worry about cynicism's long-term impacts on decision-making by those who do choose to stay in and are on the path to becoming senior leaders themselves, especially if internally generated, never mind societal, sources of cynicism worsen.

In what follows I draw on 20 years of observation and discussions with hundreds of SOF officers in and out of the classroom, as well as lengthy one-on-one conversations with a number of command-select individuals. These conversations began in late 2018, and by 'command-select' I refer to officers who have had tactical battalion command or its equivalent, and thus are among those who the military *should* want to listen to.

I embarked on this project because I had never heard SOF O3s and O4s express as much open cynicism as I was hearing in my classes by late 2018.[2] After 20 years of teaching SOF O3s and O4s at the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS), what struck me hardest was that students weren't just willing to openly acknowledge that they were cynical, but their cynicism didn't seem to faze them. Instead, they were quite accepting of it.

Our graduates – who now include general officers – were also cynical. But given their numerous deployments, I thought, this stood to reason. However, O3s – what was going on?

Of course, when I first started teaching at NPS in 1999, the U.S. was not at war. But – it turns out that being *at* war is the crux of the problem: the military typically reverts to a zero-defect mentality *between* wars; a compliance culture is not supposed to plague the Services when they are *at* war. Or, to put this somewhat differently, being *at war* is supposed to have a cleansing effect. It is not supposed to lead to more of the same, let alone a worsening of features that have always bothered rising officers: too much risk aversion on the part of senior leaders compounded by a CYA (cover your ass) mentality and a hang-you-out-to-dry attitude toward subordinates, and too much sensitivity training and the like.

If, meanwhile, you were to ask defense intellectuals and others familiar with the military for their take on what has stoked cynicism recently, most would likely cite: the 'forever' nature of today's wars; the lack of consistent policy; the lack of an overall strategy; the ground hog day nature of deployments; and/or time away from family. I do not want to minimize any of these, since they have been among officers' concerns, too, but I would now say that what overarches everything else is loss of faith in senior leaders. Senior leaders' inability to change – or to seem to want to change – how (and for whom) **systems *internal to the military*** work is corrosively demoralizing.

It is the **systems *internal to the military*** that dominate discussion while officers are in. Career officers seem to now accept that the U.S. is not going to achieve a 'win' in any of the places they have been sent over the past two decades.

Living with this depressing realization is the price they pay to be able to continue to partake in at least some of the things they do still find motivating.

Unfortunately, the problem this creates for the military, and for SOF in particular, is that once officers begin to believe that there is little that they as individuals can do *except* accept the status quo, their acceptance of this doesn't just erode, but inverts traditional notions of service. Already, 'what's in it for me?' is a prevalent American social norm. What will happen to SOF when this becomes the defining attitude of most of its professionals? – particularly since transactional attitudes are already more common than they once were.[3]

Without question, too, if DoD persists with what many regard as totally extraneous social (re)engineering, as well as overly politically correct compliance training, cynicism is bound to intensify. Endless wars in the same hopeless places won't help. Perhaps the prospect of Great Power competition will stave off (or delay) the worst of cynicism's corrosive effects. But to prevail at the sophisticated types of irregular warfare that Great Power competition calls for means that officers and operators will have to be allowed to stretch themselves *and* SOF, something that does not seem to be in the cards right now.

Caveat: In what follows I purposely avoid hot button issues like gender and transgender politics, intersectionality, and other diversity/inclusivity matters. I do so not because these are unimportant, but because they attract so much heat and attention already. Many would say they attract too much attention – and that the politicization of all of these issues makes them debilitating distractions from what should be SOF's (and the military's) main focus: training for conflict. Actually, I would submit that it is the **prominence of these issues** that underscores what numerous officers find so dispiriting: senior leaders routinely let them – and let SOF – down by seeming to be incapable of figuring out how to effectively push back against wrong-headed, under-informed, and/or ill-advised policy decisions, and by not fighting for war-oriented changes and policies instead.[4]

Overview – cynicism described

Military cynicism surfaces in plenty of movies and books from World War I onward, but academically it is a surprisingly understudied topic. Academics who study civilian workplace environments have written plenty on cynicism. According to them, people turn cynical when too few things are done right; when leadership is bad, blind, or both; and/or when employees feel disaffected from the larger organization even if they still like their jobs. Read enough of what specialists in organizational behavior have to say, and we could (cynically) conclude that being anywhere but at the top of a hierarchy sets conditions that give rise to cynicism.[5]

Cynicism is not wholly bad. In fact, a degree of cynicism serves an important purpose, especially in the military. For instance, 'expect the worst and you will always be pleasantly surprised' represents self-protective cynicism. When voiced aloud, it also acts as an ideal social lubricant. Not only does gallows (or 'black') humor help release tension, but it helps bind those within hearing, helps immunize them against fear, and/or provides an important mechanism by which to speak

truth *sarcastically* to (or at least about) power. Maybe this is why it is only when someone's carping turns persistently hopeless and relentlessly negative that peers consider that individual to be *problematically* cynical.

Interestingly, none of the officers I sat down with asked for a definition of cynicism, though I had several handy:

> 1. An attitude of scornful or jaded negativity, especially a general distrust of the integrity or professed motives of others: the public cynicism aroused by governmental scandals. 2. A scornfully or jadedly negative comment or act: "She arrived at a philosophy of her own, all made up of her private notations and cynicisms" (Henry James).[6]

> In common usage, "cynicism" means a disposition to disbelieve in the sincerity or goodness of human motives and actions, and a tendency to express this by sneers and sarcasm.[7]

> Cynicism... can be defined best as both a general and specific attitude, characterized by frustration and disillusionment as well as negative feelings toward and distrust of a person, group, ideology, social convention, or institution.[8]

Instead, they usually launched right in:

> "Isn't cynicism being a realist?"

> "Cynics have a closed mind: nothing can be done."

> A cynic: "not only can *I* not do anything more, no one can."

> "It's an AVF (all volunteer force): cynics are those who see a problem and aren't willing to fix it."

As individual after individual also pointed out, daily life is full of irritants. One group filled an entire whiteboard with gripes, and then organized them into buckets:

> PowerPoint (PPT) presentations – "A single PPT is like a cancer cell."

The 5 'Ws'[9] – "We now have 30-60 page long CONOPs (concept of the operation)."

Metrics – "There is no measure of accuracy for what is reported." To which someone added, "maybe that's why it is called a *story*board."

VTCs (video teleconferences) – "[There is] the illusion an actual discussion is taking place when [in reality] it's impossible to get down to the nitty-gritty because too many people who lack the right reference points are included on the VTC."

Daily SITREPs (situation reports), RFIs (requests for information), and what some refer to as 'staff overmatch' – "The battlespace owner and everyone above him crushes us."

When pushed, the group agreed: it is only really when irritants multiply or are pushed by toxic leaders that they become truly debilitating. Of course, the kinds of things that O3s and O4s find endlessly annoying would probably strike most senior leaders as just that: annoyances. However, from younger officers' perspective, having to check boxes – or *stay in boxes* – is symptomatic of senior leaders' aversion to risk and senior leaders' distrust of *them*. Nor would O5s and O6s disagree that risk aversion and distrust are pervasive.

In fact, as one widely revered (now retired) O6 and former CJSOTF commander put it: "As COs we're allowed to push just beyond the bounds, but we're not given the trust to push those bounds and reconfigure the strategy on the ground."[10] Yet, he wondered, who was better positioned to understand what was required *on* the ground than someone who was on his fifth or sixth deployment, someone who has been interacting with the same local, regional, and now national leaders for years?

While officers at every level chafe at what they are *not* allowed to do, younger officers also bridle at the hypocrisy in being told how much they are being entrusted with, only to then be second-guessed and micro-managed – "the fact that a one-star is approving a CONOP: how is that mission command?" It is the system overall that they find hypocritical. As a consequence, it is inanities and inconsistencies in the system that they complain about.

Take compliance training, uniformly required of all individuals regardless of how many times they might have sat through the same training previously. Not only are most compliance requirements considered a waste of time, but worse, they take time away from more important things. As Leonard Wong and Stephen Gerras have noted, endless check-the-block requirements force officers to have to be creatively dishonest; there is not enough time in the day or the calendar year to be anything but.[11] Though more disturbing still are the presumed CYA reasons that the training is required in the first

place. Clearly, most of it could be thrown out if only senior leaders trusted their men (and women).

As officers rise through the ranks – and see and hear more – their ire shifts. They still rail about 'the system,' but with specific names and faces attached. They can list by name those above and around them who they consider to be short-sighted, under-informed, self-interested, and/or cynically-motivated – near-peers and superiors who then become the proximate causes of their own cynicism.

I will come back to personnel and personalities, but intertwined with who is where, able to do what to (or for) whom, lurks hypocrisy, one of cynicism's three horsemen (the other two being betrayal and loss).

As one retired O6 described what embittered him, it wasn't just that he had seen too much sausage-making, or had had a hand in it himself. Instead, past a certain point, hypocrisy from on high increasingly felt like a betrayal. As he explained: when those who "professed a certain standard all along then are not there for you" that becomes personal. "You had their back; but now something happens and they prove they don't have yours." In his view, few command-select O6s would be command-select O6s had they not done things as O3s, O4s, and O5s that they knew flag officers wanted done, that then redounded to those flag officers' credit. But then, when things didn't go well -- ?

His pregnant pause brought to mind something I had been told years ago about one particular four-star before he became a four-star. In his role as a SOC theater commander, this particular individual urged Special Forces teams operating under his command to purposely go out and 'mix it up'; he wanted them to get into firefights. One explanation for why he did so was because he was stuck in a tertiary theater, not (yet) in command in Afghanistan or Iraq where firefights were daily occurrences. And so, he had to do something to continue to distinguish himself – not that the officers or the teams who were on the receiving end of his directive would have objected at the time; if anything, they welcomed the challenge. Except – this same eventual four-star was later known to hang officers out to dry, to include subordinate officers who had no more direct involvement than he did when aggressive operations elsewhere went awry. To those who received career-killing reprimands in the wake of these incidents, his scapegoating of them felt like willful abandonment.

Of course, people can also read someone else's description of their being thrown under the bus as sour grapes, and without being able to hear all sides of a story it is often hard to tell whether the person complaining is a real victim or just a victim in his and his supporters' minds. Then, too, where one comes down on what one believes is often a function of one's own cynicism, which highlights the hall of mirrors effect cynicism creates.

For example, here is what one SF one-star wrote shortly after he retired as a terminal one-star: "senior leaders are not seen as underwriters of mistakes by their subordinates," but instead are "managing mistakes and failures of their subordinates to minimize the impact on themselves." Given how centrally placed this one-star had been throughout his career, he would have known whereof he spoke, but what is ironic about his offering this judgment is that he himself had a toxic reputation.[12]

Toxicity

According to the literature, toxic leaders are self-aggrandizing, petty, abusive, motivated by interpersonal malice, and indifferent to the organizational climate they create.[13] Their dysfunctional qualities include: deep-seated inadequacy, selfish values, and deceptiveness. They are also controlling and overly demanding.
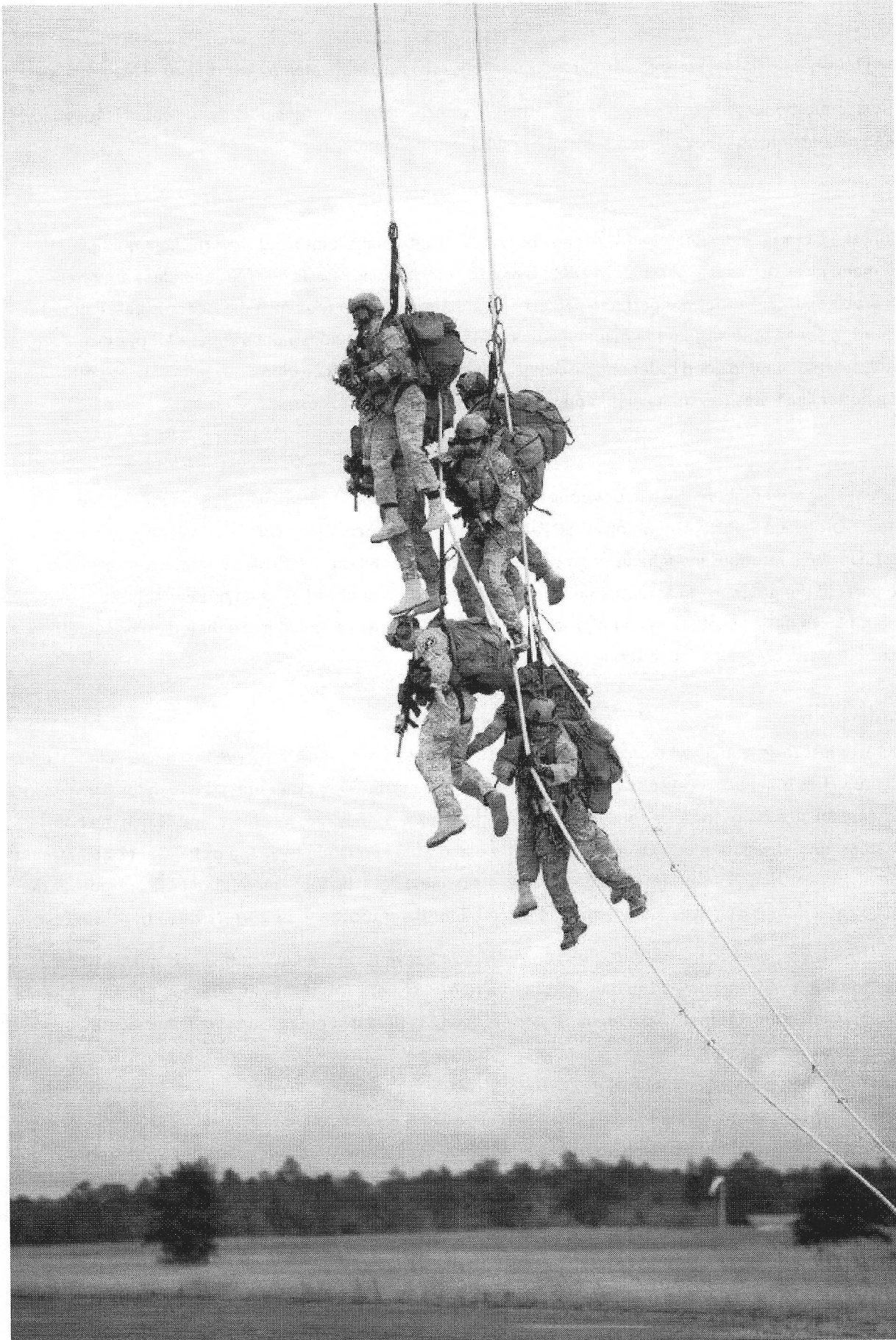
Without question, the fact that individuals with toxic attributes are able to make it into and then through multiple echelons of command gives rise to lots of cynicism. But so do toxic urges and ideas. Toxic urges and ideas are rarely singled out as a problem because they are part and parcel of what happens when too much deference is baked into hierarchy. It is hard to spend time around the military and not notice how obsequiously deferential a lot of officers are. Hierarchy is absolutely essential to good order and discipline, but too much deference ultimately undermines both. Actually, nothing better illustrates this than what happens with good ideas gone toxic.

Toxic ideas are ideas that aren't inherently bad or wrong so much as misguided. Or they end up being misapplied. Think: "three cups of tea." Or Village Stability Operations (VSO) and Afghan Local Police (ALP). Once the ALP program was deemed successful in some locations in Afghanistan, it was presumed to be suitable everywhere. Yet, elders at some VSO sites wanted no parts of the program. In at least some locations, elders who opposed ALP had to then be blackmailed – cleverly set up, but blackmailed nonetheless – into providing recruits so that teams could make their quotas, something that can hardly be considered a recipe for fostering goodwill.

To be clear, it is never just toxic leaders who promote toxic ideas. The best-intentioned, most well-respected commanding officers (CO) fall prey. This is in part because staff members are prone – maybe even programmed – to defer. Even when staff members realize an idea is not the silver bullet the boss might think it is, they rarely correct him: "Once the boss is smitten, no one steps up to disabuse him." Or, as someone else elaborated in relation to SF Major Jim Gant's anointment as the 'Lawrence of Afghanistan,' "Once Gant became *the guy*, everyone below the four-star adopted the attitude, 'if the boss wants him, I want him.'" People who knew Gant had reservations (later proven to be correct when Gant was relieved of command).[14] But in response to my obvious question, 'why didn't anyone on the CO's staff speak up at the time?' the answer was: "You don't want to piss off the four-star; he can ruin your life." This is the same reason given for why no one explained to this same four-star that "from Afghans' perspective CSTs (female Combat Support Teams) were concubines."

Meanwhile, the flip side of a four-star being able to ruin subordinates' lives is how much he, or anyone with stars, can do *for* and not just *to* those working for him – particularly since, no matter how meritocratic the military is, it can't escape lineages and patron-client networks.

STABOing[15]

Officers repeat 'luck and timing' like a mantra to account for who does, as opposed to who doesn't, receive career-

enhancing assignments. In doing so officers are alluding to the luck of the draw in initial assignments and who then gets to draft behind whom – which is not to say that individual merit and effort don't matter. But everything else being equal, working under a CO who is well thought of by those above him proves to be the gift that will keep on giving so long as that CO continues to rise.

What the catchphrase 'luck and timing' leaves out, however, is the third leg of the triangle: favoritism. It is actually thanks to favoritism, and not just luck and timing, that entire skeins of officers are pulled up and along – with Captain X who worked for Colonel Y who himself was a captain under General Z staying figuratively linked and rising together over the course of their careers.

Favoritism is inescapable for a multitude of reasons. Among them: commanders at all levels are in the business of recognizing and managing future talent. Consequently, it would be perverse of them to not want to see their best subordinates continue to excel. But also, it only stands to reason that they would want to keep dependable, reliable (and ultimately beholden) familiars in the fold since ideally these are officers they will be able to tap later on as staff officers and/or subordinate commanders.

As even the most cynical officers concede, so long as it is 'good guys' being selected for command, everyone should be able to live with a modicum of favoritism. Or, as one retired O6 put it, up to O6 "promotion boards work about as right as you can get them. It's above that that it's all a matter of connections." As a senior O5 from a different service concurred: "Certainly, the perception is that meritocracy gets you to battalion command, and nepotism everywhere else."

According to numerous officers, separate SOF communities recognize early on who they want on the command track: "people are pushed out of the circle of trust earlier than they recognize; the pool is so big that it's not obvious it's happening. Usually by the time someone is an O4 or O5 they understand the patronage system." Or as an O6 friend of his from another service added, "The higher you go, the more hidden the message; the more senior you get, the less clear it is. It can then hit you like a ton of bricks. Maybe you can tell from the jobs you're given [whether or not you will keep advancing], but not always."

It can also appear from below that GOs themselves are disturbingly insecure, which makes it all the harder to read the tea leaves: "[Senior] GOs receive no performance reports; instead, they can vote each other off the island." One dynamic that results is that flag officers don't just need to keep currying favor with everyone who outranks them, but they have to continually vie with one another without seeming to compete, meaning there is a lot of indirect passive aggressiveness and the maneuvering never ends. Maneuvering is all the more attenuated, too, because no one can afford to look out just for his own proteges; he also has to ensure his rivals' picks aren't in position(s) to out-compete his.

Unfortunately, machinations mean that while some officers get help from above, others remain totally unprotected, especially if their commanding officers have been mediocre, can't write good OERs (officer evaluations), or get off the

command track and/or leave the service early. Here is where 'luck and timing' definitely come into play, although perhaps nothing throws the importance of protection into starker relief than what happens during official internal investigations – from who chooses the investigators, to how the results are handled, to who gets hammered and made an example of. Everyone intently reads these tea leaves, too. Among the takeaways whenever punishments appear selectively applied or reprimands are issued (or issued, withdrawn, and reissued as has happened recently) is that you had better be part of someone's network and/or know someone who can provide top cover: otherwise, your career will be over if anyone under you ever does anything wrong.

Of course, this really is no different from what is required to stay on track for further command: essentially "you need someone to pay homage to. Job moves complicate staying in touch, but if you get off track or beyond a mentor's radar, you're done."

In theory, networking would seem to run counter to the attributes the military extols: integrity, service above self, and excellence in all you do. But in reality, with each Service akin to a giant gameboard, ambitious officers are given little choice but to act the part of clients vis a vis those above them and like patrons to capable officers below them, and then ideally the whole skein will continue to advance together.

Sometimes all of this jockeying gets to be too much or officers discover that there are problems with those they have hitched themselves to, or they question the integrity of the system as a whole. O6s can be particularly critical of those directly above them given the personality changes they see occur:

> They [flag officers] come back from Capstone and something has happened to them there; they are completely different. Capstone must be a cross between Bohemian Grove and a finishing school; maybe they sodomize each other and it's captured on film… They can't say 'no' to each other; they become professional cheerleaders for the organization.

Or, as an O6 who spent considerable time working with and for some of SOF's best known senior leaders discovered: "If you buy into core values – integrity, service above self, excellence in all you do – you're naïve, too naïve to operate at a senior level."

* * *

Again, what should be most sobering about perspectives like these is that the Army, Navy, and Air Force officers I am citing are officers who haven't just been among SOF's 'best and brightest' – **by SOF's own standards** – but they are among those who deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq early on in both wars and came home hopeful. They looked forward to bad leaders, bad practices, and bad ideas being weeded out; their study of military history taught them that the system re-sets by, with, and through war. Yet, this is not what happened. Or as one former O6 offered by way of example: when he was the CJSOTF commander in Decade Two of the war in Afghanistan, he was required to call the one-star Air Defense officer

rather than the SF general directly above him to get Level One CONOP approval because no one had confidence in his SF boss. "So then," in his words, "why was that SF one-star there in the first place?"

Or, more to the point: why was he a one-star at all?

To have leaders rise to the top of a very narrow, highly competitive pyramid who then fail to live up to ideals or expectations is profoundly demoralizing. Even worse, though, in this former O6's view, is when the rare general officer who *can* walk the talk finally makes it into a position where he can implement all of the changes that he always told his proteges he would make – but he doesn't. Most officers can count on one hand (if that) the number of leaders they have *wanted* to follow. Thus, when one of these rare individuals makes it through all of the wickets, is finally on top, and fails to deliver, that feels like a betrayal. It also feels personal. It especially bothers those who are in the running to become general officers themselves and who, given everything that they have seen, done, and been asked to do, have needed to continue to believe that change *is* eventually possible – or else, what is the point?

Covenant-level betrayal of a career-long, inter-personal sort is probably the worst kind of betrayal there is, while betrayal, we should remember, is one of the three horsemen of cynicism, along with hypocrisy and loss. A trailing fourth horseman is hopelessness.

Hopeless-ness

Forty years ago, the military had to worry about junior officer retention. Then-Air Force Captain Ron Keys recounted some of the reasons why in his famous 'Dear Boss letter,' sent to his ultimate boss, the Tactical Air Command commander in 1979. As a *Small Wars Journal* article noted in 2012, Keys' letter, which resurfaced in 1997 and then again in 2009, could just as easily have been written in 2012 (or today). Here is *SWJ*'s take:

> Young officers aren't chafing against high operational tempo or demanding tactical requirements. They are chafing against a bureaucracy that misplaces its incentives, fails to penalize underperformers, rewards overperformers only with more work (but not removing the incompetents from the ranks around and above them), fails to prioritize the institution's efforts and expenditures (empty MWR facilities, embarrassing swing bands, etc.), fails to properly care for its people (this is not a money problem – most officers are vastly overcompensated today – but a personnel management problem), and focuses on inane superficialities rather than combat excellence, just to name a few.[16]

I do not want to minimize the significance of junior officer retention *ever*. But – shouldn't an equally pressing concern be: *who is staying in for junior officers to be able to* **model themselves on**?

So, who is staying in past 20 in SOF today? In addition to those who have finally made it into command, the default cynical answer would be: those for whom machinations are fun, interesting, and/or at least tolerable, to include just enough Happy Warriors to keep the system afloat.

'Happy Warriors' is my term for those who loyally help keep the system functioning. Happy Warriors are individuals who may be cynical, but don't feel disaffected enough to exit. They include many O6s who are genuinely grateful to have made it as high as O6. Maybe getting to be a company or battalion commander sufficed; maybe something happened along the way to make rising above O6 impossible; alternatively, other priorities (e.g. family) might have surfaced midway through someone's career. Regardless, all Happy Warriors (as I am using the term) remain dedicated patriots. They are smart, highly capable problem-solvers, and while they haven't lost their competitive edge, they just aren't as driven to have to (still) be #1 as others are. Two other features that distinguish Happy Warriors are that few seem to fall into the trap of regarding themselves as strategic thinkers or visionaries when they are not, and most prize loyalty. Sometimes they are overly loyal to their bosses; more often their allegiance is to the enterprise.

In short, Happy Warriors still believe. Chief among the things they believe in is the worth of those who work around and for them. Like so many career members of the military, Happy Warriors are acutely aware of the sacrifices that others have made and they take pride in belonging to a long line of men and women who continue to pay it forward.

Ironically then, it turns out to be Happy Warriors who most epitomize integrity, service above self, and excellence in all they do. Of course, in a further irony this also means that they become an impediment. What do I mean? Happy Warriors don't upset the status quo; as good citizens, they don't rock the boat. Again, they are the reason the system continues to work as well as it does, but consequently, for anyone interested in system change, the combination of Happy Warriors *and* reluctant, risk averse, overly political (small 'p') senior leaders make orchestrating change extremely difficult.

Actually, it is not clear that the synergy between Happy Warriors and go-along-to-get-along senior leaders *can* be overcome without considerable structural changes to the system first.

Compounding factors

What, meanwhile, constitutes 'the system'? Here we could invoke President Eisenhower and cite the military-industrial complex, or David Hackworth who one-upped Eisenhower with his military-industrial-Congressional complex. Post-9/11 we would also need to throw in intelligence and acknowledge that along with the expansion of the military-intelligence complex across the National Capital Region and beyond, there has also been a progressive fudging of the lines between things that the military can still do for itself and things that it has to outsource. Although dependence on defense contractors has captured quite a bit of attention since 9/11, the trends that contractors exemplify have received much less – they deserve more. Two of these trends are: 1) the monetization of service, and 2) the ubiquity of transactionalism.

Exhibit one in the **monetization of service**: when SOF officers retire today, they can market themselves in many more ways than SOF officers could two or three decades ago. Senior officers do especially well by writing books, giving speeches, peddling leadership lessons, becoming talking heads on television... there is almost nothing SOF credentials can't be used to sell. In some regards, this is quintessentially American. But – when former general officers (especially) suddenly, visibly, and even proudly rake in hefty fees on the heels of their having extolled 'selfless service' to others for decades – **and don't care how this looks** – their behavior strikes more than just a few of the people they previously commanded as obscene.

Push beyond the unseemliness of general officers cashing in, though, and the extent to which they do so suggests an even more deep-seated issue: when retired flag officers behave as though they believe they aren't just worth, but actually might be *owed* more than a six-figure retirement in exchange for sitting on corporate boards, making speeches, meting out advice, lobbying former colleagues and subordinates, and the like, we should wonder: what trickle-down effects does their ability to finally 'get theirs' have?

In 2015, Forrest Crowell, a serving Navy SEAL, documented just how extensively former SEALs have used their prior service to personal, political, and financial advantage.[17] Apparently, Naval Special Warfare's leadership is still wrestling with what, if anything, it can or should do to put the SEAL brand back in the bottle. But while former SEALs may be more notorious than others for selling their special-ness, they are hardly alone. Nor is it hard to understand why operators might go out of their way to capitalize on their service-related skills given how short-lived public adulation and fascination can be. Yet, those brandishing the brand aren't just individuals trying to making a living once they are out. Increasingly, some men (and now women) *join* SOF in order to be able to turn their Trident or tab into something more; they join with the express aim of burnishing *them*selves. This marks a significant shift.

It used to be that if you managed to pass through Navy SEAL or Army Green Beret selection and made it onto a team, that was 'it'; nothing you did later in life was likely to prove as satisfying or more rewarding. Nor was belonging to a team regarded as a stepping stone to anything else.[18] Yet, parlaying *as* a goal now enables more than just a few SOF officers (and operators) to turn 'having been' a SEAL or Green Beret *into* personal capital.

Again, to be fair, many more entrepreneurial opportunities exist today than existed exist three, four, or five decades ago. To be sure, too, we Americans have long been encouraged to seize the day and, thanks to luck and literal timing, more of us can; not only are we able to transact with anyone, anywhere, for virtually anything we want these days, but we can sell anything to anyone provided we can create a market for it.[19] Maybe it shouldn't be surprising, then, that 'what's in it for me?' has become so pervasive an attitude, one that may be associated with Millennials, but that clearly suffuses society. Case in point: former general officers openly cashing in.

The fact that there is a market for all things SOF explains one dimension of the monetization that has occurred. But **transactionalism** runs much deeper than just the commodification of SOF (to use Forrest Crowell's term).

Transactionalism can be thought of in a couple of different ways. As we have already seen, there is *what's in it for me*. Then, there is the flip side of *what's in it for me,* which is 'what can you *do* for me?' Or, better yet in the SOF realm: 'what can I *get* you to do for me?' One problem with each of these is that they are as antithetical to working **with** other people as is putting service after self.

To illustrate why, let's consider **transactionalism overseas**. SOF is an expeditionary force. Not only are relationships essential to successfully operating in other people's countries, but Americans on their own can't conduct Foreign Internal Defense or Unconventional Warfare. Nor do unilateral counter-insurgency, counter-proliferation, or counter-terrorism campaigns work particularly well either. Maybe at some point in the future it will be possible to fashion reliable partnerships out of expedient quid pro quos. But for the long moment it still takes time – as in years, if not decades – to secure trust. And while sweat equity, shared risk, and mutual sacrifice can help quickset trust, sustaining it requires ongoing *meaningful* effort. Also, reputations travel fast. Earn a reputation for neglect or for *not* acting in good faith, and regardless of however much good will particular individuals will have banked, Americans as a whole become suspect.

Everyone in SOF should recognize this dynamic given how important reputations are within SOF communities. But curiously, SOF senior leaders use terms like 'trustful relationships' without seeming to realize how their playbook approach to short, serial deployments cuts against any such thing, as if sending different sets of operators and officers to work with the same units that have been partnered with by umpteen different sets of Americans already won't incentivize everyone to behave in opportunistic ways.

Tellingly, students in my long-running military advisor class would often volunteer that all they needed to do was to *act* as though they cared (emphasis on the word 'act'), and they would be effective. But, as foreign classmates sitting right beside them might have, but were too polite to tell them: other people aren't quite so easily fooled, and any American who thinks he is pulling the wool over counterparts' eyes usually sets himself up to be used in turn. More than once when I asked O3s and even young O4s whether they really thought it was possible to go overseas and successfully 'manipulate' (their word of choice) other people *at home in **their** countries*, I was told that, well, advising is akin to a mutual 'use' job, so 'yes – they can.'

Perhaps. But whenever I heard these young officers treat relationships as a transactional means to some clever end, I cringed. None of them liked it when senior leaders weren't genuine with them. They also didn't like it when they suspected they weren't being told the truth. So, why would they think that foreign 'partners' might feel any less differently about being fed a line – unless they assumed that foreigners are easily fooled which, I tried to remind them, is an extraordinarily dangerous thing to presume in the 21st century.

* * *

Transgressions are another set of challenges associated with transactionalism. Not only does a transactional *what's in it for me* approach belie being able to establish 'trustful relationships,' but such an approach invites everyone to try to get away with whatever they can as often as they can. The evidence? All sorts of transgressions have occurred over the past

two decades. Worth noting is that transgressions have occurred both in and out of war zones, and so while it has been easy to attribute most bad behavior to the caustic impact of 20 years of war, there is likely more to it than this since it is not as though only combat veterans have committed crimes, broken rules, and skirted regulations. Or to come at drugs, alcohol, assaults, 'zipper problems,' corruption, and the like from a slightly different angle, aren't these all just further manifestations of transactional, *what's in it for me*-ism run amuck?

At the same time, whenever adults are treated as adolescents they will usually, eventually revert to behaving like adolescents, especially if they are kept in adolescence for a prolonged period of time. Or, to cite a second truism: micro-management tends to make people *want* to rebel, particularly when they are already prone to question authority, which SOF legend and lore suggest is a defining characteristic of SOF operators. As for a third truism: in most jobs people reach a point when they begin to question why certain inefficiencies persist. Ergo impatience when things don't work as well as they could (or should) – people get testy and impatient, and begin to bend or ignore the rules, especially when rules stand in the way of being able to get something done.

Some rules, too, *are* stupid. Maybe no one foresaw a well-intentioned rule's unintended consequences or maybe the need for it has become outmoded. Smart organizations actually don't need many rules. They need a handful of 'thou shall nots,' rules that represent that organization's redlines. So long as these rules are uniformly enforced (and they shouldn't be rules if they can't be), *thou shall nots* help delimit and define the organization's culture. They also permit those at the top to delegate oversight downward, where it belongs. By letting command teams convey their own 'should nots' – things that command teams *expect* those under them to *know* not to do – organizations stay supple.

Ironically, this is how most civilians assume command and control in the military already works. And doubtless top-down and bottom-up trust *could* be restored if SOF and the military overall reined in their corporate *thou shall nots* and instead allowed subordinate leaders to formulate appropriate 'should nots.' At a minimum, resynching accountability with authority would realign command *and* control. It also would grant apprentice leaders at every level the opportunity to both test *and* prove their leadership potential.

In theory, none of this should be difficult. SOF, after all, prides itself on admitting individuals who want to surpass, never mind live up to expectations. Though to ensure that there is truth in advertising here, too, SOF would have to return to being unforgivingly serious about frontloading quality control, something best done through assessment and selection, periodic review, and de-selection and reassignment – especially since trying to micro-manage quality control after the fact and once people are in only creates problems.

Further suggestions – and in sum

There are actually a host of internal adjustments SOF could – and not just should – make to mitigate cynicism's cumulative effects. For instance, while some might contend that as soon as personnel and HR systems are finally brought into the 21st century, and the right person can be slotted into the right job, this will alleviate a lot of current frustrations. But – while HR fixes will certainly help, it will still be leaders who make or break the system. Officers (like operators) still need to

hear certain things from their commanders. Otherwise, leaders aren't leading and the command structure will continue to needlessly disaffect too many O5s and O6s who then become toxic versions of Happy Warriors.

UnHappy Warriors are O5s and O6s who wear the rank but feel aggrieved. Unlike Happy Warriors, UnHappy Warriors are not at peace with a two-tier status system. They resent the fact that those on the command track are treated as favorite sons (or daughters) when, in their view, they (as non-command officers) are just as essential and perform vital functions. It rankles them when they don't receive the respect that they think they deserve, which causes more than a few to then throw around what rank they do have, usually by saying 'no' to others or by pouring cold water on others' ideas.

The O6 who first raised the issue of disrespect with me was unusual; he wasn't critical of the peers who passed him by; he actually regarded them as good, deserving guys. As he explained, he knew after O5 command that he wouldn't screen for O6 command. What he objected to instead was the manner in which he had been informed: his command didn't treat him like an adult, his word. Nor did it treat him "as someone who deserved the courtesy of being told directly 'you are not the kind of leader we are looking for.'" No senior leader sat down with him. Instead, his chain of command treated him with, as he put it, "willful neglect." Essentially, he became a still-serving has-been, but one whose ongoing commitment was taken for granted. Indeed, the system seemed to count on his willingness to still give his all or, as a sardonic O4 once put it, the system counts on people being chumps. This matches what a former USASFC chief of staff told me when he explained how he finally decided to cut the cord and retire: "the system doesn't care; it'll keep using you until you're all used up."[20]

But – no one wants to feel used. Feeling used unnecessarily torques people. It is also avoidable. In the words of the O6 who initially raised disrespect with me: just "**don't engage in willful neglect**."

Of course, not wanting to feel used also holds for those in operational command.

Certainly, no commander that I know has wanted to think that he might have lost or was going to have to put at risk anyone under his command on behalf of hollow policy. Up to a point, officers seem able to rationalize the operational non sequiturs they have been asked to engage in by believing that every mission must be additive; it *must* serve some larger strategic purpose – especially if everyone just keeps forging ahead... But then, let officers get a glimpse behind the curtain and see that, in fact, no larger strategy or coherent policy exists, and their faith dissolves. Their natural reaction is to then begin to do hand waves back up the chain of command. Or, to be truly cynical about what occurs, once smart officers come to believe that the arc of fighting doesn't bend *to* anywhere, then why not preferentially look after 'them and theirs,' especially since this, too, is one of their many duties?

If, meanwhile, we ignore all of the political (and not just policy-related) directives that are about to roil the military from without – vis a vis equity, inclusivity, and other externally generated pressures – one thing seems evident: SOF has more than enough *internally* generated issues to attend to without needing any more. Among them: when decent enough

leaders have toxic ideas; when promising leaders betray their promise; when senior leaders don't deliver; and when an otherwise meritocratic system fails to appear meritocratic beyond the rank of O6, officers find it difficult to remain sanguine. One reason officers can't remain sanguine is that, to the military's own credit, from basic training onward everyone in uniform has been taught that units are only as strong as their weakest link. SOF units, in particular, live by this. So, when SOF officers regard their senior leaders as SOF's weakest link, not only does this *signal* a problem, it *is* a problem. Unfortunately, it is also a problem whose impacts are all too easy to identify: if senior leaders don't (or can't) learn to self-correct more quickly, and/or don't (or can't) trust those under them to do the right thing, SOF will lose more of its most promising officers, thereby further shrinking its pool of daring future leaders. Not only will this be terrible for SOF, it will be dreadful for the country.

Note: I owe a large debt of gratitude to everyone, both in the U.S. as well as overseas (officers, NCOs, and spouses), who took the time to help me try to think through this critically important, but less than happy topic.

[1] Jonathan Waldman, *Rust: The Longest War* (Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2015), p. 139.

[2] Because an Army, Air Force, or Marine captain (O3) is not the same as a Navy captain (O6), I use 'O' ranks. For anyone unfamiliar with these designations, O3 in the U.S. system refers to Army, Air Force, or Marine captains and Navy lieutenants. O4 refers to Army, Air Force, or Marine majors and Navy lieutenant commanders. O5 refers to Army, Air Force, or Marine lieutenant colonels and Navy commanders. O6 refers to Army, Air Force, or Marine colonels and Navy captains. Flag officers are O7s and above, referred to as admirals in the Navy and generals or general officers (GOs) in the other three Services.

[3] Of course, who is where in terms of cynicism also depends on where officers are in the arc of their careers, since some have been exposed to more senior level decision-making than others have, thanks to time spent as aides or in key staff positions. This, though, is just one of the ways in which timing matters. Other ways in which timing matters include: where and under whom officers have served, as well as where the military is along the arc of conflict (presuming there is an arc to conflict, which there may no longer be).

[4] I should note, too, that the project this article draws from examined cynicism from a number of additional angles. For instance, this article does not address corruption or a slew of other ethical issues. Nor does it discuss the relationship between cynicism and PTSD, cynicism's impact on 'lessons learned' and PME, or the tricky issue of cynicism and hindsight. As a topic, cynicism could easily yield a dissertation or two, especially for those interested in being comparative. It would be fascinating to examine cynicism over time and/or across space, as in other countries' experiences, and even comparatively across different types of units.

[5] At the same time, the national mood also needs to be taken into account since it, too, plays a role in cynicism. Consider, for instance, how sociologist Jeffrey Goldfarb opened his book, entitled *The Cynical Society*: the "single most pressing challenge facing American democracy today is widespread public cynicism." And that was his first sentence **30 years ago**. Alternatively, we could go further back, to Albert O. Hirschman's classic work, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*. In the late 1960s, Hirschman (an economist) couldn't figure out why more high-ranking government officials weren't resigning in protest over the Vietnam War. He did not focus on the military specifically, but had he done so he might have noted that for all of the similarities between the military and other government bureaucracies and institutions, the military remains unique. Not only do the Services lock individuals in and prohibit them from being able to honorably exit at will (unlike every other institution except prison), but stuck as service members are, they need to have some *indirect* way to voice frustration and vent. Ergo, cynicism.

[6] *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Fifth Edition.

[7] https://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_cynicism.html

[8] Lynne Andersson and Thomas Bateman, "Cynicism in the workplace: some causes and effects," *Journal of Organizational Behavior* (18), 1997, p. 450.

[9] Refers to the need to detail: who, what, when, where, and why.

[10] Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force.

[11] Leonard Wong and Stephen Gerras, *Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute), February 2015.

[12] Which is also one reason I do not want to identify him by name; I don't want his comment to be dismissed.

[13] See, for instance, George Reed, "Toxic leadership," *Military Review*, July-August 2004; George Reed, *Tarnished: Toxic Leadership in the U.S. Military* (Potomac Books, 2015); and James Dobbs and James Do, "The impact of perceived toxic leadership in officer candidates," *Armed Forces & Society* (45:1), 2019.

[14] For more on Jim Gant, see https://warontherocks.com/2014/04/the-rise-and-fall-of-major-jim-gant/ or David Edwards, "'The perfect counterinsurgent': reconsidering the case of Major Jim Gant," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* (31:2), 2020.

[15] From: Stabilized Tactical Airborne Body Operations.

[16] https://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/the-dear-boss-saga

[17] Forrest Crowell, Navy SEALs Gone Wild: Publicity, Fame, and the Loss of the Quiet Professional, NPS Masters thesis, December 2015.

[18] Something that began to change with the invention of SEAL Team Six and Delta Force, followed by Special Mission Units – all of which developed the reputation for being more elite, and thus worth striving to move on (or up) to.

[19] True even during COVID-19, despite the hardships it has imposed – particularly when one looks at the world of e-commerce.

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[20] U.S. Army Special Forces Command.

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