

STILL SOLDIERS AND SCHOLARS? AN ANALYSIS OF ARMY OFFICER TESTING

Arthur T. Coumbe
Steven J. Condly
William L. Skimmyhorn

Still Soldiers and Scholars? An Analysis of Army Officer Testing was written as a supplement to a series of monographs authored by members of the Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis (OEMA) and published by the Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) in 2009 and 2010. In those monographs, the authors proposed an officer corps strategy based on the theory of talent management. Other observers have contributed to the discussion, most notably, Tim Kane, a research Fellow at the Hoover Institution, in *Bleeding Talent* (2012).

This book focuses on one critical, yet neglected, aspect of the talent-based officer management system that performs four functions: accessing, developing, retaining, and employing talent. The book focuses on the cognitive testing and evaluation of officer aspirants, a critical element in the accession function. The book opens with an introduction in the first chapter, explaining the contemporary significance of the cognitive capability (and hence testing) of officers. Next, eight historical chapters are presented, which describe how the Army conducted cognitive testing for officers over time. The final chapter offers a conclusion in which the authors review their findings, highlight important conclusions, and offer recommendations for the Army to restore a system of rigorous and effective mental screening for officers.

Chapter 2 traces the history of officer testing from the Spanish-American War through World War I. The chapter is organized around the three principal commissioning sources during this era—the U.S. Military Academy (USMA) at West Point, the enlisted force, and civil life (that is, officers drawn from the civilian population). Except in wartime, West Point was by far the Army's largest commissioning source. The rigorous mental tests used to screen applicants for a commission are described in some detail, as are the admissions policies and conditions at West Point.

A surprisingly large proportion of cadets during this era, somewhere between 50 and 80 percent, attended post-secondary educational institutions before applying to West Point.

Chapter 3 covers officer selection during World War I. The Army had to take extraordinary measures to produce enough officers to direct its expanded force. The War Department established a system of Officer Training Schools (OTS) that vetted, and, to a limited extent, trained the men who eventually received line commissions. Starting with the third series of camps, the War Department drew principally from the enlisted ranks for its officers. The OTS model had pronounced shortcomings, but it brought some consistency and standardization to the commissioning process. The War Department's officer selection system for the technical and professional branches was more traditional and haphazard. In many of these branches, political influence, personal connections, and chance regulated the commissioning process. West Point underwent acute changes during the war; its curriculum was severely curtailed, and it eliminated the entrance test as a prerequisite for admission, thereby lowering standards.

Chapter 4 provides a review of officer testing during the interwar period. Standards for entrance into the officer corps remained quite high throughout that period, and applicants for commissions exceeded vacancies. West Point's entrance standards may have eroded slightly as the institution expanded and admitted a majority of its students by certificate until 1930. It also established a pathway for enlisted candidates into the Academy in 1920 via preparatory schools across the country. Even so, the admissions standards at West Point remained quite high. During the Great Depression, West Point could offer a free, elite education and a well-paying job after graduation.

The Army tightened up admissions policies in 1930 when it adopted a validating exam to screen applicants more carefully before admitting them into the Academy.

Accessing officers during World War II is the subject of Chapter 5. The calculus of officer production for the Army changed fundamentally in World War II. Officer Candidate School (OCS) accounted for the bulk of new line officer accessions, while direct commissioning furnished the majority of officers for the professional and technical specialties. While entrance testing for the OCS program was more consistent and standardized than it had been in World War I, it was no more rigorous. With the outbreak of war, the War Department abandoned the criterion-referenced exams of the peacetime Army and adopted the Army General Classification Test (AGCT) as the principal officer testing instrument. It did so not because the AGCT was optimal for the task, but because nothing better was available at the time. It also set a minimum AGCT score of 110; not for any objective reason, but because it enabled the Army to meet its wartime officer needs.

Chapter 6 analyzes the tests used to screen officer candidates in the 2 decades after World War II, when the mental testing of Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) graduates underwent a transformation. Before the war, candidates were given rigorous, criterion-referenced tests of academic attainment and general intelligence in order to identify individuals with the intellectual skills required of field grade officers. After the war, candidates were given norm-referenced tests of mental ability and academic attainment. The emphasis was on finding lieutenants capable of functioning effectively as junior officers and motivated toward a career in the Army. The transformation in mental testing was, in part, a result of the Cold War strategic environment, which demanded a military that was constantly ready to fight. The Army no longer focused on producing erudite, strategically thinking officers capable of managing a mass mobilization effort and leading a huge citizen army in a general war. Now it had a more immediate and intellectually less ambitious focus: well-trained and motivated junior officers capable of leading platoons.

In Chapter 7, officer testing during Vietnam, an era of declining standards for officer accessions, is reviewed. The rapid and massive expansion of the Army and its officer corps led to a compromise with quality in each of its three major commissioning programs. ROTC saw its institutional base changed drastically. Elite, private colleges were replaced with less competitive state institutions in the South and West. The entrance tests, ROTC Qualifying (RQ)-8 and RQ-9, were circumvented with hundreds of waivers.

OCS admitted thousands of undereducated officer aspirants and altered the intellectual, if not moral, complexion of the officer corps.

Chapter 8 reviews the officer cognitive screening during the first 2 decades of the All-Volunteer Force (AVF). In terms of testing, all three of the Army's main commissioning sources experienced a similar evolution in the post-Vietnam era. West Point, ROTC, and OCS all diluted their mental standards and increased their emphasis on non-cognitive measures of career motivation, including non-cognitive interest inventories and biographical surveys. ROTC adopted a less rigorous test of mental ability in 1972, and then abandoned cognitive testing completely in 1984. OCS adopted a less rigorous test in 1979, and then abandoned that test in the mid-1980s, leaving a general technical (GT) aptitude area score of 110 as its only mental screen. West Point eliminated the College Board math and English achievement tests as an admissions requirement in 1973.

Chapter 9 covers the aspects of officer mental testing during the post-Cold War era. Officer testing in all three of the Army principal commissioning programs has followed a similar trajectory during the post-Cold War period: cognitive measures continued to be eclipsed by non-cognitive measures of aptitude and performance. The latter tended to be better predictors of retention in pre-commissioning programs in the Army than the former, which were found to have an inverse u-shaped correlation with career commitment. Budgetary pressures and military effectiveness combined to push defense and congressional leaders to demand economy and efficiency in pre-commissioning training, and to place a premium on non-cognitive measures.

The final chapter, Chapter 10, offers a conclusion and makes recommendations for improvements. In short, contrary to popular opinion and scholarly assertion, the rigor of the Army's intellectual selection instruments has deteriorated over the last century. In all three of the Army's principal commissioning sources—the USMA, the ROTC, and the OCS program—the trend has been toward declining standards and declining (relative) scores. The size of the Army, changing economic paradigms and the consequent decline of the prestige of an Army career, expansion of college aid, unbalanced college growth, competition from the other services, increasing emphasis placed on officer retention, and diversity considerations all help explain this trend. To address and potentially reverse this decline, this book makes several recommendations with respect to officer mental testing. The principal recommendations are for the Army to: 1) require accessions testing for officer candidates in all commissioning sources; 2) establish

explicit standards for these tests, both in terms of a minimum and an average; and, 3) do more to identify and access cognitively capable individuals from its large and diverse pool of enlisted Soldiers.

More information about the programs of the Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) and U.S. Army War College (USAWC) Press may be found on the Institute's homepage at ssi.armywarcollege.edu.

Organizations interested in reprinting this or other SSI and USAWC Press executive summaries should contact the Editor for Production via e-mail at SSI_Publishing@conus.

army.mil. All organizations granted this right must include the following statement: "Reprinted with permission of the Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, U.S. Army War College."



This Publication



SSI Website



USAWC Website