

**POLITICAL-MILITARY AFFAIRS
OFFICERS AND THE AIR FORCE:
CONTINUED TURBULENCE IN A
VITAL CAREER SPECIALTY**

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INSS Occasional Paper 13

April 1997

USAF Institute for National Security Studies
US Air Force Academy, Colorado

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FOREWORD

This paper identifies several problems with how the Air Force trains, tracks, and uses political-military affairs officers. This issue is critically important for the efficiency and effectiveness of the Air Force in the post-Cold War world. Unfortunately, however, ensuring that the best trained personnel are in the right billets is often a secondary consideration—subsumed within larger issue-areas, or escaping notice altogether. As the military continues downsizing and taking on an ever more complicated array of responsibilities, it is more important than ever that we do things the smart way the first time. Political-military affairs officers—when properly trained and used—provide one of the best mechanisms to develop or backstop today’s increasingly complex policies.

INSS is pleased to offer for public debate the authors’ insights into this problem, as well as their recommended solutions.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper highlights the deficiencies of the Air Force's system for preparing and utilizing political-military affairs officers to help develop and implement the military dimensions of US foreign policy. Important policy-making and implementation billets are routinely filled by officers with inadequate education and regional expertise to perform their duties competently. Meanwhile, officers who have acquired such skills remain untapped for sensitive political-military positions due to the personnel system's inability to track them and assign them to billets where their skills are needed.

This paper first clarifies the need within the post-Cold War environment for officers with both general international relations skills and specific regional expertise. The authors then argue that a serious gap exists between these needs and the ability of the Air Force to meet them with qualified officers. In addition, the paper compares Air Force efforts to Army and Navy programs. It also evaluates the effectiveness of the Air Force's new foreign area officer program in addressing these problem areas and makes recommendations to go beyond the important first steps this new initiative represents.

The authors make specific recommendations aimed at improving the development and use of political-military affairs officers in the Air Force. First, a specific career field should be created that is capable of providing well-trained officers to fill billets requiring expertise in political science, international relations, or a specific region of the world. This career path would enhance the promotability of these officers and institutionalize tracking them within the personnel system. More importantly, it would ensure a ready supply of qualified officers to fill positions requiring political-military expertise. Second, specific recommendations for tracking

relevant advanced degrees, regional knowledge, and language skills are made. The authors also argue that the thousands of staff jobs requiring political-military officers should be reevaluated to determine which positions require specific advanced degrees and language skills and which positions can be manned by officers from purely operational backgrounds. Third, the paper recommends that an emphasis on political-military qualifications take precedence over “square-filling” for promotion in sensitive political-military positions, including joint billets. Finally, the report offers suggestions for striking a balance between getting a sufficient payback in follow-on tours for the specialized education and training required to develop political-military officers, and ensuring that these officers remain credible within their operational specialties.

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*Political-Military Affairs Officers and the Air Force: Continued
Turbulence in a Vital Career Specialty*

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has found itself more involved in international, transnational, and foreign intranational events than ever before. No longer are all issues colored by Cold War certainties of East versus West. Rather, we have become more aware of the complicated and uncertain nature of international issues more broadly defined. As the country's foreign policy focus has shifted from issues of grand strategy, such as strategic arms balances, to more regionally specific concerns, such as ethnic conflict, so too has the US military found it necessary to emphasize regional and political issues rather than traditional bipolar concerns regarding Soviet forces. As a result, the Air Force today is far more likely to be called upon to airlift humanitarian supplies than to ready a nuclear strike. Indeed, in the past five years the Air Force has been called upon to support major nontraditional operations in Northern Iraq, Somalia, Haiti, and Bosnia.

Few would contest the observation that the country, the military, and the Air Force are heavily involved in difficult missions around the globe. Few also would dispute the need for highly qualified officers to manage these operations, to deal with countries that are not enemies (yet may not be close allies either), and to effectively advance our country's foreign policy goals through the nonlethal application of our military instrument. The problem this paper addresses is that the Air Force has done a less-than-adequate job ensuring that officers with relevant knowledge and skills are developed, tracked, assigned, and appropriately utilized in this key area known as political-military (pol-mil) affairs. As a result, the Air Force

has had difficulty filling important policy-shaping and implementing positions with officers who are both military professionals and experts in specific regions or policy areas of political-military affairs. In short, the service is not matching the right people to the right jobs.

After laying out the problem, the second purpose of this paper is to evaluate the potential of two new initiatives, the Air Force and joint foreign area officer (FAO) programs, to meet the observed shortcomings of the current system. With the full support of former Secretary of Defense William Perry and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General John Shalikashvili, these initiatives call upon the services to provide officers with the education and experience necessary to operate in an uncertain policy environment. The political-military affairs officer, as currently defined, includes more than is encompassed in the FAO initiative, but the two are closely related, as will become clearer below.

The third and final purpose of this paper is to recommend solutions to the problems identified. These recommendations are intended to fulfill three closely related goals. The first is to ensure that the Air Force has a pool of qualified, educated, and well-prepared officers who can fill political-military affairs positions. The second is to manage the careers of those officers in the political-military affairs field, and those preparing to join it, more effectively, so they have a clear understanding of their career progression requirements. The third goal is to create a better process for matching people to positions by tracking job requirements and personnel qualifications. Our recommendations build upon the progress that already has been made through other initiatives.

In large bureaucracies such as the military services, it is hardly shocking to discover inefficiencies. However, two key reasons render the Air Force's shortcomings in this field rather more significant than otherwise would be the case. First, because of the geopolitical changes over the past

seven years, US military forces are called upon with increasing frequency to augment and implement foreign policy, often in unfamiliar corners of the world. Second, as a by-product of those same geopolitical changes, the US military has shrunk by over a third. Staffs at the Pentagon and the various command headquarters face pressures to reduce as the military budget shrinks. Fewer people are being called upon to perform more missions, many of which are increasing in complexity. As this trend continues, the services must ensure that the most-capable and best-prepared officers fill policy sensitive billets so our political leaders get the very best advice and their policies are competently executed.

This paper first addresses the needs of the Air Force for qualified political-military affairs officers. It then identifies the gap between needs and reality. Next, past and present efforts to address these problems are examined. Finally, the paper concludes with recommendations for the Air Force which go beyond implementing the new FAO program to include all political-military affairs positions. Throughout, comparisons with the Army and the Navy are made to illustrate that these problems are neither new nor unique to one service. In addition, the inter-service comparisons are essential to meeting the objectives of joint operations, which depend on a coordinated approach to problem solving.¹

Requirements

That the world has become more complicated since the end of the Cold War needs little defense. Nor is it controversial to state that the US as the sole surviving superpower finds itself engaged in a wider variety of situations around the globe. These situations frequently involve our military forces in missions ranging from drug interdiction and counternarcotics

training of foreign militaries to humanitarian airlift to peacekeeping and peace enforcement. It is but a small step, then, to acknowledge that these challenging missions in far-flung regions require expert policy advice and capable people on the ground to put the policies into effect. Specifically, as the military services endeavor to shape and implement US policy, they need to be as well informed about the broad political context of their missions as they are about military matters.

Indeed, these newer missions and contingencies seem to require greater sophistication and understanding of political nuance than ever before. At the military level, the Cold War put a premium on force application and responsiveness, tasks at which our military excels. However, the US military is systematically deficient in training and utilizing officers to develop and carry out the military dimension of US foreign policy. While the US military, especially the Army, has been engaged in what we now call “military operations other than war” for many decades, in the post-Cold War era these operations have taken on more importance and greater centrality to the military. Although the Gulf War demonstrated that the blunt application of our military instrument is far from obsolete, it has declined in relative importance. Instead, less traditional roles requiring close interaction with other nations have become more prevalent. While this shift is one of degree, not of kind, these less traditional roles place a greater premium on the kind of expert advice and the ability to create and implement complex policy that skilled political-military affairs officers can provide.

Earlier reports clearly state the requirement for political-military affairs officers. The 1991 Inspector General report on the Air Force's Foreign Area Specialist Program (FASP) found that, “Increasingly, coalition and bilateral relationships were replacing unilateral action as the DoD strategy. . . . The Functional Management Team found foreign language

ability and regional knowledge increasingly necessary for attachés, military advisory groups, security assistance teams, counterintelligence agents, and planners.”² Similarly, the December 1995 Air Force Foreign Language Skills Process Action Team (PAT) report quotes Senator David Boren of the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Just as we were ill-equipped to deal with the technological threats of the Cold War era, today we lack the linguistic and cultural skills and resources fundamental for competing in the new international environment. We can no longer define our national security interests in military terms alone. Our ignorance of world cultures and world languages represents a threat to our ability to remain a world leader.³

The report also notes that, “Recruiting, training and equipping military forces for a ‘world defined by contingencies,’ as the Secretary of the Air Force has written, is obviously more challenging than building and sustaining forces to counter known threats.”⁴ As the above quotations indicate, education is the key. To meet the growing requirements for officers knowledgeable about the world outside our borders, the Air Force must ensure there is a large pool of individuals trained in political science, international relations, regional studies, and language skills. It then must match those individuals and their skills to the demands made by today’s complex policy environment.

Corroborating these earlier reports, interviews with officers filling political-military affairs positions confirm these pressing needs. Nearly all of those interviewed at the Pentagon routinely worked 12 to 14 hour days dealing with a plethora of complex pol-mil issues. Those who had no prior background in the pol-mil field spoke of the months required to “get up to speed” in their new jobs. However, even the most diligent staff officer will find it difficult to compensate for the lack of appropriate education or language skills. Indeed, several officers interviewed said they did not feel

adequately prepared for their pol-mil positions. The combination of the increased importance of nontraditional roles, a shrinking force structure, and higher required levels of regional and functional knowledge leads to a greater demand for pol-mil expertise in our armed forces.

So who performs the vital jobs of shaping foreign policy initiatives, working with allied officers and military officials, and implementing complex policy initiatives? While the titles vary, each of the services has a designation for officers in this field. The Army has personnel code 48 for its FAOs. Suffixes to this code indicate further specialization in areas such as psychological operations and civil affairs. The Navy uses codes N31 and N52 for its political-military affairs officers.⁵ Like the Army, these are secondary specialty codes, listed after the officer's primary career field. The Marine Corps also has a small FAO program with fewer than 50 officers.

Within the Air Force, political-military affairs officers are awarded Air Force Specialty Code (AFSC) 16P; air attachés are coded as 16A. Neither of these codes is a career field; rather, they are specialties, identifying positions being held rather than an officer's career path. Generally, officers must be O-4s or higher to hold a 16P position, though in certain circumstances some O-3s do as well. Currently there are 375 officers holding 16P positions, and an additional 143 in 16A positions.⁶ The qualifications for AFSCs are specified in Air Force Manual 36-2105, Attachment 5.⁷ Its summary of the specialty says a political-military affairs officer

plans, formulates, coordinates and implements Air Force aspects of international politico-military policies. Advises and briefs commanders and government officials on international problems affecting the Air Force, and represents the Air Force in international and interdepartmental conferences and negotiations.⁸

Similarly, air attachés “maintain good relations and effective liaison between the US Air Force and the armed forces of the country or countries for which responsible.”⁹ For both specialties, the manual states that “knowledge is mandatory of: geopolitics, international law, international relations, United States foreign policy, international power relationships; . . . [and the] organization, mission, and capabilities of United States military organization and operations.” Yet for both specialties, a master's degree in political science, history, or international affairs is merely “desirable.”¹⁰

Thus, US policy determines the need for political-military affairs officers, not just in the Air Force, but across all of the services. Events since the end of the Cold War show just how vital this need can be. For example, shortly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, Russia and the other newly independent states were invited to participate in some of NATO's political activities through the North Atlantic Cooperation Council. This participation quickly grew and was followed by the Partnership for Peace program. Suddenly, there was a great need for experts in the region beyond linguists; officers were needed who could converse professionally and understand the Russian and East European cultures. However, most of the officers assigned to work directly with the post-Communist militaries to facilitate their transition to democratic control had no specific training in political science or the regional languages.

The Joint Contact Team Program is a specific illustration of an effort that would benefit greatly if fully qualified personnel were available. This program was conceptualized and implemented with neither significant contributions from regional experts nor the consideration of the underlying theoretical issues which consultations with experts in democratization processes could have provided. As a result, the program has been ineffective in its mission to facilitate the democratic transitions of postcommunist military institutions.¹¹ Without officers trained in Russian

and other regional languages and educated in the politics, history, and culture of the region as well as in the basic principles of political science, important opportunities may be, and indeed already have been, missed.

As one example, in the 1950s a shortage of Asian specialists in the defense policy process resulted in faulty analysis, which led to the escalation of US involvement in Vietnam. The shortage was a result of the purge of Asian experts in the defense policy process due to their perceived failure to predict and prevent the “loss” of China to the Communists. Consequently, subsequent regional analyses, which depended on political-military expertise which no longer existed, were necessarily flawed.¹²

The above examples show the damage that can be done when expertise is lacking across the spectrum of national security policy making. Until we have a way to ensure that qualified officers fill these vital positions implementing US foreign policy initiatives, there clearly is a risk of missed opportunities. As the Foreign Language Skills PAT report notes, “USAF officers with language proficiency and greater cultural awareness can better exploit the engagement strategy at various levels and are valuable resources in regional policy formulation and execution and in joint and foreign exercises and operations.”¹³

In addition to in-country positions, pol-mil officers fill vital billets in various headquarters, at NATO, and throughout the Pentagon. At the Pentagon, Air Force pol-mil officers serve in policy-shaping action officer positions on the Air Staff and Joint Staff and in the Office of the Secretary of Defense. There, language or cultural skills are not the issue; rather, an informed understanding of policy, politics, and process is needed as US foreign military policy is constructed.

The Gap Between Needs and Reality

If the requirements for political-military expertise are clear, the path toward identifying, training, assigning, and tracking such officers is murky at best. Various problem areas and obstacles thwart this process. The problems start with a lack of institutional knowledge of available personnel resources. The Air Force simply does not know the resources it has, nor does it fully realize the implications of the new political realities detailed above for its political-military affairs force. The second problem area is an unresponsive assignment system that hinders rather than helps in matching skills with positions. Finally, while the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 improved many aspects of interservice relations and enhanced the promotion opportunities for officers in political-military affairs positions, an unintended consequence has been that many key jobs—the “joint” and “joint critical” positions—have been set aside for those being groomed to become general officers, rather than those best qualified or prepared for these positions.

Foremost among the obstacles to a better process is the service culture bias, present in similar but distinct forms in each of the three services, which does not give political-military knowledge and training equal credit in promotions and assignments and treats nonoperational billets as inferior. Corresponding to this cultural bias are problems associated with the personnel assignment system. Since the Air Force Personnel Center (AFPC) is the Air Force agency responsible for matching people with billets, it bears the primary burden for the system's deficiencies. Yet, in many ways AFPC is merely responding to stimuli—it does what the Air Force directs it to do. Finally, the commands and staff agencies bear some responsibility for their own woes. The methods they use to fill their positions prolong and exacerbate the problems already mentioned.

Unfortunately, many of these flaws have been identified before. The Air Force has been severely criticized at least five times in the past

seven years for its failures in foreign area education, training, and utilization.¹⁴ Reference will be made to these previous studies as the problem areas and obstacles are catalogued below.

Tracking Problems

In order to assign qualified officers to the challenging pol-mil positions that call upon their specialized education, training, and experience, the Air Force first must have some idea who these officers are. To the detriment of the agencies requiring such people, however, it does not. While degree areas are loaded into the personnel system for those who received Air Force Institute of Technology sponsorship, the data limitations described below prevent the system from being useful in assigning political-military affairs officers. Similarly, regional experience is not encoded so that assignment officers can identify a pool of specially qualified officers when trying to fill a position. Language qualifications also are only partially accessible to assignment officers. These limitations inhibit the assignment system's ability to use the Air Force's vast human resources to meet demonstrated needs.

A 1991 Inspector General report concluded as one of its six major findings that, "Personnel with regional knowledge and/or foreign language proficiency were often not identified or effectively utilized."¹⁵ Five years later, the situation is largely the same. The AFPC database contains the academic degrees of officers, coded to four digits. For example, a degree in international relations is coded as 9ECY. However, according to a former AFPC data analyst, the database is unwieldy, and it currently is impossible to identify all officers who have a certain degree.¹⁶ Nor does it include the advanced degrees earned by members on their own. Thus, the system has no way to capture some of the information directly relevant to assignments requiring specialized backgrounds. The situation is even less satisfactory for

regional experience. There is no database that identifies officers who have been stationed in a particular region. It is impossible, for example, to find all officers who have experience in Japan. As the IG report also pointed out, there is no coding or tracking of regional knowledge acquired from "educational and professional exchange tours, bilateral liaison positions, political advisor positions, Fulbright and Olmsted Scholarships, and human intelligence case officer jobs."¹⁷

The personnel system does keep track of language skills, but only for those officers who have taken the Defense Language Proficiency Test (DLPT). The personnel system does not track those who self-identify as a native speaker. As the Foreign Language PAT report noted, language capabilities for those who choose not to take the DLPT are "consequently not available to decision makers/ resource managers."¹⁸ The PAT report also recommended that the personnel data system be modified to collect and enter language data from all accession sources as well as self-reported proficiency and that AFPC assignment officers use this information to make assignment decisions.¹⁹ While language capability is but one of the relevant qualifications for political-military affairs officers, and is not required for stateside positions, it seems obvious that tracking this information would increase the chances of finding qualified officers for hard-to-fill positions, especially those specifying less-prevalent languages such as Portuguese or Hungarian.

The interviews conducted for this report at AFPC and in Washington revealed that the assignment system relies on self-reporting of qualifications and on volunteers to fill billets. If qualified people are not looking for a position, the system cannot find them.

Without knowing the capabilities that exist in the Air Force, the personnel system cannot even hope to provide the most qualified officers to fill positions demanding political-military expertise. Advanced education,

regional experience (whether prior to or during military service), and language proficiency all directly relate to an officer's ability to perform in a political-military affairs position. In order to enable assignment officers to make informed selections, they must have access to more complete information.

A further problem faced by the Air Force as it seeks to match people to positions is that it "is not sure what its needs are as far as officers with special language and area studies training."²⁰ While language designated position (LDP) and advanced academic degree (AAD) requirements are supposed to be revalidated annually, the Foreign Language PAT report wondered whether the onerous procedures to alter these requirements might make the system unresponsive to changing circumstances.²¹ Indeed, our research found that the validation process is not accomplished on a regular basis and, as a later section will discuss, the updates that are done are made to match a desired applicant's qualifications. There are only 524 officer LDPs in the entire Air Force, and just 50 of the 16A positions and 26 of the 16P positions require AADs.²² Clearly, these numbers are quite low given the hundreds of officers performing these jobs. At the very least, they provide a reason to reevaluate how these designations are arrived at with an eye toward bringing the actual qualifications necessary to perform the job in line with the paper requirements. In sum, tracking officers with the knowledge and skills relevant to the political-military affairs field is an area with plenty of room for improvement.

AFPC and the Assignment System

The purpose of AFPC is to ensure that Air Force needs are met by moving people between assignments while also ensuring they obtain the education and training required to perform those assignments. AFPC attempts to perform this central task smoothly so that positions neither go

unfilled nor are double billeted for any length of time. It also attempts to perform this task fairly so that Air Force personnel have an equal opportunity to compete for desirable jobs and are treated equitably when it becomes necessary to fill undesirable positions. Unfortunately, AFPC is plagued with problems that inhibit its performance in all of these areas. In the political-military affairs specialty in particular, the assignment process is fraught with difficulties, including misplaced priorities, senior officer interference, a recent ill-advised reorganization, and a lack of control over position requirements.

AFPC operates under a set of procedures that emphasizes filling slots rather than ensuring the right people are matched to the right jobs. An assignment officer's operating guidance is satisfied whenever an officer is assigned to a position for which he or she is minimally qualified. There is no incentive to search for a better fit. As one pol-mil assignment officer said when interviewed, "The best match may not be the best qualified." He said the officer's time on station and move status were more important.²³ This imperative to put names against openings rather than focusing on job requirements creates problems throughout the Air Force, but especially in positions that require specialized backgrounds, such as political-military affairs. The result of this misplaced emphasis is that instead of getting the best people for the job, the system "satisfices".

Related to this first problem is another case of misplaced priorities. AFPC treats political-military affairs positions as merely career broadening assignments for officers who belong to other career fields (i.e., operations, maintenance, etc.). These jobs are not seen as important in their own right because political-military affairs is not itself a career field. Since there are no long-term training, currency, or qualification requirements for the majority of these positions, assignment officers treat them as "soft requirements," meaning virtually any officer can fill them. This state of

affairs can be attributed to both the lack of a clear understanding of pol-mil requirements on the part of assignment officers and the insufficient guidance received by them. The Air Force does not treat pol-mil jobs as requiring any special preparation; thus, it is willing to accept a less-than-optimal assignment process for them.

AFPC's view of the pol-mil affairs specialty is manifested by its recent reorganization. Until recently, all career broadening assignments had been handled by a central office, with individual assignment officers managing rated assignments, non-rated assignments, attaché jobs, joint duty jobs, etc. While there were some coordination problems under this system, these assignment officers at least had some familiarity with the requesting agencies and their requirements.

On 1 August 1996, responsibility for joint duty officer assignments within the career broadening assignment branch reverted to primary career field assignment officers. However, responsibility for handling joint duty assignments designated as pol-mil or attache positions remained within the career broadening branch. This partial decentralization of responsibility for joint duty assignments may make it more difficult to fill these positions with officers who have specific pol-mil related skills, officers for whom these skills should enhance their ability to serve in these career-enhancing joint billets. Only positions specifically designated as pol-mil or attache positions will receive this centralized attention.

A fourth problem with the assignment process is that senior officers, O-6 and above, frequently interfere with it to get their protégés assigned to them. The several assignment officers interviewed at AFPC who work with pol-mil positions estimate that the frequency of this practice ranges from 25-40 percent of the time. Similarly, more than half of the Pentagon pol-mil officers interviewed for this paper acknowledged that they had used colonel or general officer connections to obtain their current

positions. There is a potential positive outcome to this practice--senior officers should have a better feel for the match of skills to requirements than a distant personnel officer. However, there is no guarantee that senior officers are not merely grooming subordinates regardless of job qualifications. Further, by undermining the system, senior officers also impair its fairness. The bottom line is that pol-mil assignments have an *ad hoc* quality to them; the assignment system ensures neither quality nor fairness.

The fifth problem with AFPC's management of political-military affairs positions stems from its lack of control over job descriptions and requirements.²⁴ Using agencies have near-total discretion over these descriptions and requirements; thus, they are subject to easy manipulation. The gaining agencies tend to keep the requirements low to give them greater hiring flexibility. The small number of jobs requiring AADs and language proficiency, as noted above, is a prime example of this. The problem comes from the hobbling of any effort to standardize pol-mil qualifications. AFPC is stuck with the requirements it is given, and specialized preparation is not provided due consideration for pol-mil positions.

Unintended Consequences of Goldwater-Nichols

The 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Defense Department Reorganization Act is a milestone in the history of the military services. Frustrated by the rivalries made apparent by the inefficiencies of the Granada operation, Congress mandated greater interservice cooperation, enhanced the role and authority of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and took other steps to improve the joint operation of our nation's military forces. Along with major improvements, however, came some unintended consequences that adversely affected the political-military affairs field. In particular, implementation of the act undermined the goal of making job requirements

and capabilities the primary consideration for many of these positions. Instead, joint political-military affairs positions became required stops for officers being groomed for flag rank.

Prior to the passage of this bill, joint duty assignments were not always highly sought after. There was a perceived risk to one's career advancement in taking a job outside one's own service or primary career field. One purpose of Goldwater-Nichols, then, was to increase "jointness" by enhancing the desirability of joint positions. This was done by making joint duty assignments a requirement for advancement to general or admiral. Suddenly joint jobs, including many pol-mil positions, became hot tickets.

If the intent was to increase the quality of officers filling these jobs, the results have been mixed. The military services, recognizing that the only path to the top passes through joint duty assignments, filled these positions with their rising stars, officers with superb operational records but not necessarily the relevant knowledge and skills. Some Pentagon pol-mil officers spoke candidly about the drawbacks of "fair-haired boys," staff officers with less-than-adequate backgrounds, filling policy positions as they move through the ranks.

Intermediate and senior service school graduates in particular are channeled directly into joint jobs by AFPC. Assigning these graduates is one of AFPC's top priorities—it is required to assign a majority of in-residence service school graduates to joint positions.²⁵ Thus, these officers get a leg up in consideration for joint jobs, including pol-mil positions, based not on their background or qualifications, but on their desired career advancement.

A provision of the law called Title IV mandates that joint duty officers must be promoted at a rate greater than or equal to the line of the Air Force. Even more stringent is the rule for joint specialty officers (JSOs) who fill what are called joint critical positions; they must be promoted at a

rate at least equal to the Air Staff average. These requirements have given rise to an AFPC “joint duty assessment.” The records of officers being considered for JSO assignments are thoroughly screened for promotability (although the joint duty assignment officer insisted on calling it a “joint suitability check”).²⁶ An examination of the screening checklist revealed that job qualifications were not the primary consideration for assignment to joint or joint critical positions; probability of career advancement was.

Rather than ensuring that joint jobs, including many pol-mil positions, are filled by the most qualified officers, the effect of the Goldwater-Nichols Act has been that these jobs are reserved for “fast-burners”—capable officers to be sure, but not necessarily those best suited or prepared for these positions. Given the importance of sound political-military advice and policy implementation, these jobs should be filled by fully qualified officers who may not be on a future generals list. More to the point, screening for joint jobs should focus more on qualifications and less on promotability checks.

Obstacles to Solutions

Service Culture Bias Against Pol-Mil Officers

Service culture is a term used to represent the collective attitudes of senior leaders in a military service which have come to characterize that service’s organizational climate. Since the military’s *raison d’être* is to fight wars, it is not surprising that each service’s culture revolves around its primary warfighting mission. The effect of service cultures does have some drawbacks, however, especially when they are applied to individual careers. While any flag rank officer would be quick to extol the importance of

support forces to the total warfighting effort, that same general or admiral might in the next breath allow that more rewards, in the form of promotions, ought to go to those who perform the central operational mission of that service. Thus, nonoperational missions, including the operational support mission of political-military affairs, become disadvantaged in the bureaucratic game; those performing these missions are not held in the same esteem as pilots, armor or artillery officers, or sea-going officers. In short, the system does not fully appreciate or reward the efforts made by those involved in political-military affairs.

Political-military affairs officers in all of the services face this dilemma. The Army's FAO program is only now recovering from the decimation it endured during the military drawdown of recent years. As promotion opportunities tightened, FAOs were frequently passed over. Two of the Army officers interviewed noted the current shortage of FAO-experienced colonels and generals because of the previous rash of passovers.²⁷ The problem came from the length of time required to educate and train FAOs—time spent away from their primary career branches. It is not uncommon for an Army officer to spend over five years preparing to be a FAO—one and a half years for graduate education, one year for language training, six months for in-country training, and a two to three year follow-on tour is typical. However, an officer is likely to be passed over for promotion to O-4 or O-5 if the board convenes during this five-year process. The Army's service culture insists on combat arms branch experience for promotion.

In recent years, the director of the FAO program, located at the Defense Language Institute (where most FAOs receive training), has carefully managed the careers of FAOs and FAOs-in-training to prevent a recurrence of this situation. The director, together with the FAO Proponency Office in Washington, DC, ensures that officers return to their

combat arms branches prior to promotion boards, even if their follow-on tour as FAOs must be delayed. The current director points out that in recent promotion boards FAOs have done slightly better than the Army average, but he admits that problems remain in getting officers key in-residence service school slots.²⁸ As the Air Force launches its own FAO program it should note the career management and promotion problems which the Army experienced.

Because of the unique nature of the Navy's ship-and-shore duty rotation, it has had the greatest difficulty of the three services preparing and using pol-mil officers. Like the Army, the Navy puts a premium on holding the appropriate billet at the right moment in an officer's career. Time spent away from an officer's "community"—either surface ships, aviation, or subsurface—is viewed as less than fully productive; it is considered more or less "R & R" from ship duty according to one source.²⁹ Again, operational experience matters most.

The Navy's service culture bias is not just a matter of operational (ships) vs. non-operational (shore), however. An additional influence is the Navy's place in the country's overall military mission. Whereas the Army is frequently required to work in-country with foreign militaries and civilians, and therefore appreciates the need for pol-mil knowledge, the Navy's mission requires projecting power and showing the flag. Thus, there is no perceived need to learn about and appreciate foreign cultures.³⁰ To this day, the Navy places less emphasis on graduate education in general, and even less emphasis on pol-mil or regional education, than either the Army or the Air Force.

The Air Force's service culture today revolves around pilots, with a special emphasis on fighter pilots. They embody the "fly-and-fight" mentality, and they have for at least the past decade been rewarded with higher than average promotion rates and those key staff jobs which are seen

as helpful to career advancement. Indeed, several positions on the Air Staff that meet the criteria for pol-mil jobs are reserved for fighter pilots, calling for an 11F AFSC. Some adjustment to these set asides has been necessary of late because of the fighter pilot shortage—some positions are being filled by fighter back-seaters, weapon system officer (WSO) navigators—but the practice continues.

The most obvious example is in the International Affairs Division of the Air Staff (SAF/IA). A few years ago, the primary function of SAF/IA, a division broken into geographic branches, was foreign military sales (FMS) of Air Force planes and equipment. While this security assistance mission remains, the International Affairs portfolio now includes more political-military interaction with foreign militaries than occurred in the Cold War era. A branch chief described his office's function as maintaining Air Force military-to-military relations and keeping the offices of the Secretary of the Air Force and the Chief of Staff apprised of developments in his region which could affect the Air Force.³¹ In other words, a greater understanding of other countries is called for by the changing mission, yet the billets remain coded for fighter pilots. When filling these billets, branch and division chiefs seek fighter pilots with international experience, but often find it difficult to meet both criteria. One (a fighter pilot himself) said, however, that “operators can learn the pol-mil stuff” on the job—an attitude unfortunately shared by more than a few others.³²

Another Air Staff agency, Regional Plans and Issues (XOXX), manifests the same fighter pilot bias. This office, which is also broken down into geographic branches, helps determine how Air Force assets are allocated worldwide and how regional plans interface with the air forces of foreign countries.³³ The FMS rationale does not apply here; yet, up to half of the billets are fighter pilot or WSO coded. Two action officers in one

regional branch noted that XXXX does a fair amount of pol-mil work and that language skills and regional knowledge are very important to its mission.³⁴ Their boss said he would like to have more foreign experience in his shop, but it isn't available among the fighter pilot population from which he draws his staff.³⁵

While many Air Force pol-mil positions are filled by fighter pilots, many others clearly are not. Political-military affairs officers come from a variety of fields—intelligence, security police, and instructor duty, for instance—as well as from operations. However, for any of them to advance, regardless of background, they must stay closely connected with their primary career field. Just as the Army's FAO experience revealed, officers have to maintain career field credibility and currency to advance. They must maintain a tricky balance between a primary, preferably operational, career field and political-military affairs. Whether this is seen as a cultural bias that hurts the level of pol-mil expertise or as a beneficial way to keep pol-mil officers in tune with the larger Air Force is debatable. However, what cannot be denied is that this need to return to the fold greatly complicates the career choices and timing of officers who desire to do pol-mil work, and it puts them at a disadvantage during promotion boards because of the time they spend away from their primary AFSCs.

AFPC as a Hindrance to Resolution

The second obstacle that stands in the way of solutions is AFPC itself; its institutional deficiencies inhibit its ability to solve many of these problems. One important obstacle is that AFPC has not developed a system to keep track of skills, qualifications, and requirements. This leads to a process in which AFPC merely responds to impending vacancies by requesting volunteers and, if necessary, selecting nonvolunteers to fill positions. In addition to this short-sighted approach, the personnel

headquarters also suffers from inappropriate assignment priorities; alternatively, it might be said that AFPC is merely responding to a lack of guidance, or misguidance, from higher headquarters concerning these priorities. In either case, the service suffers because the most qualified officers are not assigned to positions that could benefit from their skills.

As discussed above, tracking officers with relevant skills, education, and experience is essential to matching people to political-military affairs positions. That AFPC has not developed this capability up to this point is a matter of technology and will. The headquarters' Personnel Data System (PDS) does keep track of an amazing amount of information, including assignment histories and flying data. Also included is educational data and language abilities, if the individual has taken the DLPT.³⁶ There is a second database that contains information on billets. According to a former AFPC data analyst, one major problem is merging the two databases together so, for example, positions that call for a certain degree can be matched against all officers who possess that degree.³⁷ The databases also are too unwieldy to track the utilization of AADs beyond their initial payback tour. A General Accounting Office report several years ago raised some of these criticisms, but so far AFPC has not corrected its deficiencies. As a result, it still must rely on self-selection to find those officers with the qualifications needed for specialized jobs such as those in political-military affairs.

Last summer's reorganization removed political-military affairs positions from the special duty assignment section and gave that responsibility to primary career field assignment officers. This decentralization, which resulted in a shift of responsibility from a specialized branch to assignment officers with little knowledge of pol-mil requirements, occurred despite the simultaneous emphasis placed on FAO skills by DoD and the Air Staff.

However, AFPC alone is not wholly responsible for the deficiencies of the system. After all, AFPC does not determine assignment priorities; it simply responds to direction from the Air Force Directorate of Personnel and other senior Air Force leaders. If the Air Staff tells AFPC to make assignment decisions that result in favoring or disadvantaging a particular group, that is what will happen. If the priorities are moving personnel regularly or taking care of shortages in intelligence or among pilots, those considerations will come first. Until higher headquarters makes clear its desire for better management of the political-military affairs field and follows through with directives compelling AFPC to mend its ways, there is little likelihood of positive change.

The Role of Pentagon Offices and Headquarters

If the personnel system gets some blame for not matching the right people to the right jobs, then the using agencies must also share in that blame; they contribute to these problems by subverting the intent of the assignment system. At the Air Staff, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, and headquarters worldwide, action officers are assigned not necessarily because their qualifications are a good match for the job, but because of high-level connections. Senior officers frequently intervene in the assignment process, job descriptions are altered to fit the desired candidate, and sometimes position requirements are just ignored.

At both AFPC and the Pentagon, officers noted with near consensus the frequent involvement of O-6s and flag officers in picking specific individuals for political-military affairs positions. Rather than relying on the two names AFPC forwards for selection when hiring (only one name for joint positions), senior officers frequently make by-name requests. Assignment officers are frustrated by this practice, which they see as subverting the intent of the process of seeking volunteers, while also

being unfair to officers without high-level sponsors. Instead of screening those volunteers, time is wasted responding to senior officer inquiries. There is more to the problem than merely picking favored subordinates; another issue is manipulating positions to create jobs in the first place. One assignment officer referred to this practice as a “shell game” whereby Air Staff directors move officers around to make room for a desired individual when there is no position available.³⁸ Pentagon officers also agreed that personal contacts were more important than the personnel system in obtaining their positions—only two of the more than twenty pol-mil officers interviewed said they got their jobs through the system. One said the system was “irrelevant” to the hiring of most pol-mil officers; another called AFPC a “bit player.”³⁹ The bottom line is that senior officers impede the rational operation of the personnel assignment system through their intervention.

Another common practice is writing job descriptions to match the record of a desired applicant. There is little control through personnel regulations of this practice, so using agencies have relatively free rein. Although assignment officers complained of gaming out in the field, they have no way of knowing the special qualifications needed for a job, so they are stuck with the instructions they are given. Altering job descriptions is a “backdoor” way of getting a by-name request without appearing to specify a particular individual; if the only person matching the job description is also one of the applicants, then AFPC must select that person.⁴⁰ Again, manipulation of the system by using agencies skews the assignment process.

The final obstacle to be discussed here is the failure to validate annually the requirements of positions requiring AADs, language proficiency, and other qualifications as stipulated by manpower regulations. Validation serves as a check on the integrity of the system by forcing a periodic examination of position requirements, which are supposed to be tied to actual job needs. What happens in practice is that the validations are

often “pencil whipped”; the response is usually “what did we put down last year?” instead of a real evaluation.⁴¹ A recent *Air Force Times* article noted that the 9,000 to 10,000 current joint positions have never been validated as requiring a joint designation since the passage of Goldwater-Nichols, even though the bill mandated that problem is not limited to just the Air Force. There is a pervasive reluctance to follow the procedures in pol-mil assignments, in part no doubt because of the time and effort required to do so, but also perhaps because following procedures could mean a loss of control over assignment manipulation by the using agencies.

Summary: Problems and Obstacles to Fixing the System

The result of these problems and the obstacles to their solution is an ad hoc personnel system that does not respond to and anticipate Air Force needs. Rather, it muddles through. Officers are not systematically developed to fill political-military affairs positions; qualified officers are not utilized, or are underutilized, in filling these positions; and officers are put into these positions as a reward or to punch their tickets rather than because they are the best qualified. As a consequence, in the best case scenario, the Air Force is forced to rely on officers’ can-do attitudes and ability to learn quickly instead of taking advantage of existing talent or developing new talent. More dire is the possibility that our policies are poorly considered, inexpertly administered, and insensitively applied. The resulting impact on the effectiveness of the military component of US foreign policy is potentially severe.

Thus, the problems in managing the political-military affairs field are systemic. From identifying qualified officers to tracking their skills to defining jobs requiring those skills to matching the right people to the right positions, the system is broken. This makes these problems all the more intractable and requires a system-wide approach to correct them. There is a

chicken and egg dilemma. Agencies that utilize pol-mil officers and their senior leaders circumvent the system because it does not fulfill their needs, but the real story may be that the system does not work because so many people try to game it or avoid it altogether. In either case, tinkering around the edges will not eradicate the long-standing problems and the practices that reinforce them. A thorough revamping of this process is in order.

Previous Criticisms and Solutions

As mentioned above, the criticisms detailed in this report have been made numerous times before. In talking to senior and retired officers, it became apparent that some of the problems discussed here go back decades. While this does not bode well for the short-term prospects of improving the management of the political-military affairs career field, there are some reasons for optimism.

First, the critiques and recommendations contained in the current and previous reports reinforce each other. It seems reasonable to believe that truths, even difficult ones, repeated often enough and loudly enough can bring about action. Indeed, some of the provisions previously recommended are on the verge of being implemented. Second, the previous critiques, some of which are catalogued below, offer workable solutions to seemingly intractable problems. While some proposals may require that money be spent, most involve bureaucratic reorganization or instituting better control procedures. The technology exists to capture personnel data, for example, if only the directives are issued to do so. Finally, the latest round of critiques seems to be hitting its mark. The highest levels of Air Force and DoD leadership not only support improvements in political-military affairs, in some cases they are the instigating force. Former Vice Chairman of the

Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral William Owens, former Air Education and Training Commander (now head of Air Force Materiel Command) General Henry Viscellio, Jr., and Air Force Chief of Staff General Ronald Fogleman all strongly support the idea of improving the knowledge and experience base in regional and international affairs, including language training.

This section briefly reviews the major findings and solutions offered by three recent reports, all of which already have been referenced above. These reports are a thesis done by Captain Randy Burkett for the Naval Postgraduate School in 1989, the 1991 Inspector General report on FASP, and the Foreign Language Skills PAT report, which was completed in December 1995. These three studies emphasize FAO-type programs and skills, not the overall political-military affairs field. Hence, they focus on language and cultural education, not more general political knowledge and skills. However, there is significant overlap between these fields and great value in reviewing their conclusions. After examining these reports, Army and Navy experiences in this field will be reviewed to glean the advantages and avoid the problems of these programs. This section concludes by examining the new DoD directive instituting the joint FAO program and gauging its prospects for alleviating some of the problems discussed in the previous section.

The Training and Employment of Area Specialists in the Military

Captain Burkett's 1989 master's thesis is based on 483 surveys of NPGS graduates representing all three services. The surveys asked officers about the preparation they received and the relevance of their NPGS education to the jobs they were performing. His thesis made an explicit comparison of the three services' area specialist programs to try to capture the best features of each. He emphasized the propriety of conducting education and training early in an officer's career and made a series of

recommendations, many of which address the current situation in the Air Force.

He suggested an Air Force parallel to the Army's FAO Proponency Office, a recommendation that the Secretary of the Air Force's Office of International Affairs now plans to implement.⁴² He suggested instantly certifying as FAOs those officers who already have the requisite education and language skills, no matter their career field or pattern, a recommendation echoed by the Foreign Language Skills PAT report discussed below. Other suggestions run counter to current plans. Contrary to the PAT report, Burkett wanted language training to be administered only to those who were going to a job that directly required it. He also suggested separating full FAOs from area or country specialists, the distinction being that the latter would not have language proficiency but would have an AAD in regional studies only. The advantage is that area specialists could form a ready pool of officers who could quickly be brought up to full FAO status if needed. He saw this as especially useful for pilots so they would not have to spend as much time out of the cockpit but would be available for attaché duty later in their careers. Finally, Burkett's thesis stressed the need to make FAO-type careers more attractive to bright young officers, and he emphasized jointness as the way to achieve solutions to our common problems.

Functional Management Inspection of the Air Force Foreign Area Studies Program

A 1991 IG report provided an in-depth study of the FASP, the Air Force's equivalent of the FAO program, which was instituted in 1969. This report recognized the increasing need for area specialists based on global conditions and noted that FASP was an inexpensive way to educate these specialists. The report is highly critical of the program's management, pointing out that the Air Force did not adequately track or utilize trained

officers after their initial payback tour. In all, the report had six major findings and made 44 recommendations; to date, none of the findings have been corrected. Included here are some of the recommendations that have broader application to the political-military affairs field.

The first of these recommendations sought to establish a career path that would encourage repeated use of trained officers. Another focused on the long-term benefit on developing field grade officers who could serve as area specialists and attachés. A criticism of FASP was that it was too closely identified with and managed by Air Force Intelligence; the report recommended that SAF/IA run the program. The NPGS was seen as valuable, but the report stressed the need to also use civilian institutions to avoid developing only one perspective among area specialists. Like Burkett, the IG suggested including some pilots in FASP to meet the Air Force's needs for rated specialists. The IG report made tracking and oversight recommendations for AFPC similar to those presented below. Specifically, it recommended establishing a FASP position at AFPC to manage assignments and careers, implementing personnel codes to identify and track specialists, and further specifying AAD codes to capture more information. The bottom line is that "FASP did not meet Air Force requirements for Foreign Area Specialists."⁴³

Foreign Language Skills Process Action Team

This study was chartered by the Commander of Air Education and Training Command and the Air Force Chief of Personnel to evaluate the current system for developing and using foreign language skills, and to recommend improvements. It echoes DoD IG report 1993-INS-10, which examined the overall Defense Foreign Language Program. The major findings of this report confirmed previously identified concerns, including the shortcomings of the existing system in responding to changing

requirements and the need for the assignment system to “recognize and value language skills.”⁴⁴ It also found that “one shot” language training is ineffective in learning to communicate with foreign counterparts, and learning a language early in an officer’s career is beneficial to long-term retention.

The Foreign Language Skills Process Action Team report recommended revalidating all language designated positions and filling them with 16P political-military affairs officers, establishing political-military affairs as a career field, creating a language proponent office in SAF/IA, and amending the Personnel Data System to capture all language data on all officers. One recommendation we disagree with is to make language, not regional or political education, the basis for entry into the pol-mil field. Such an approach emphasizes language proficiency to the exclusion of academic expertise about a given region. While the recommendation to work toward a goal of 10 percent of all officers having a limited working ability in a foreign language is not likely to be met, this report noted the mission-enhancing value of language skills in interacting with foreign militaries. Language skills combined with an understanding of regional issues can be “influence multipliers by promoting feelings of partnership, cooperation, and mutual respect and understanding.”⁴⁵ These are the same arguments for increased reliance on educated and trained pol-mil officers.

The Army’s FAO Program

The Army’s FAO program, the only true area specialist program, has been in existence since 1947. What separates it from the other services’ programs is the incorporation of graduate education, language study, and in-country field experience into its initial training. Furthermore, as a secondary career path, FAO allows an officer to carry an experience identifier throughout his or her career rather than only holding the title when

occupying a FAO billet. The career field is highly selective, but the burden is on the officer to ensure combat arms credibility. Promotion and service school selection are still based on holding appropriate command positions in the officer's primary branch.

As a model for the Air Force, the FAO program offers many positive and a few negative lessons. Properly managed, the Air Force's equivalent program should be able to avoid the worst of the promotion purges suffered by the Army. A pol-mil proponent office must be tasked with ensuring that officers meet relevant career markers in their primary fields. As the Army learned, pol-mil education and training might have to fit in around tours in an officer's primary field to avoid promotion problems. The FAO program also recognizes the value of in-country training to gain an understanding of regional perspectives that differ from our own. The balance between formal education and practical experience serves both the FAOs' and our country's interests. While some FAOs believe that the worst of the management problems plaguing the career field is over, others do not share that positive outlook. These FAOs feel that the Army still has not fulfilled its career promises to them, and that senior officers do not have a full appreciation of what FAOs do. While most FAOs now recognize the need for officers to pay primary allegiance to their combat arms branches, career balance is very difficult to manage in practice, and it is still hard to compete with line officers for rewards. A separate branch, not just a separate secondary career field, might go some way to alleviating these sentiments. Finally, the FAO field is not the same as political-military affairs. Other Army staff positions that relate to pol-mil affairs are not necessarily FAO positions, meaning that the requisite knowledge and skills vary considerably. There is no pol-mil career identifier for this type of position that is distinguishable from FAOs.

The Navy's Political-Military Affairs Career Specialty

As noted earlier, due to the unique nature of the Navy's mission and its requirement for officers to serve alternating tours at sea, the Navy lags behind the other two services in its development of a political-military affairs officer program. There is little emphasis on developing regional or political-military experts. Education in political science and international affairs in general is not valued as highly by the Navy, and only about twenty officers a year are allowed to attend the National Security Affairs program at the NPGS. Unlike the other services, the Navy does not send officers to civilian graduate schools.⁴⁶ However, the Navy does do a good job of tracking and identifying its pol-mil educated officers. It also does a better job than the Air Force at requiring justification for positions requiring pol-mil expertise.⁴⁷ Like the Army, pol-mil affairs can be a secondary career path for naval officers. This can have a beneficial effect on later careers. As one Navy officer said, attaining the rank of O-5 and gaining a command billet depends on sea performance; what happens beyond that depends on shore duty performance.⁴⁸

On a positive note, the Navy has recently agreed on the details of a Navy FAO program in accordance with the DoD directive discussed immediately below. The Navy's approach envisions a hybrid career that blends the ship and shore aspects, much as the current system does for pol-mil officers.⁴⁹ While other details of the program are not yet available, it is clear that the careers of Navy officers still will be managed by the three operational communities—surface, aviation, and subsurface. Operational considerations, therefore, will continue to take precedence. As a possible model for the Air Force, the Navy's plan to establish balance enforced by alternating tours shows that career credibility considerations need not be crippling to the development of political-military affairs officers.

The Department of Defense Directive on Service Foreign Area Officer Programs

A new Department of Defense policy directs the services to develop FAO programs and includes provisions for joint FAOs. This initiative, after years in development, recognizes that close interaction with foreign governments is needed to further US interests and that this requires officers who are educated in the politics, culture, economics, geography, and language of foreign countries *or* who have duty experience abroad. It mandates that the services develop programs to train, retain, and promote FAOs “commensurate with meeting DoD requirements for qualified officers in the program.”⁵⁰ The existence of this directive itself is a testament to the leadership of people such as Admiral Owens and General Viccellio, as well as to the dedicated staff work of international affairs offices in all three services. It is a great start to resolving some of the problems identified in this paper and elsewhere, but it does not go far enough.

The main shortcoming of the DoD FAO directive is that it does not adequately address other political-military affairs officers. Instead, the directive focuses on overseas postings, such as embassy duty and other diplomatic posts. It does, of course, consider the need for officers with “similar capabilities” to serve on DoD component staffs and “officers who possess the experience and skills necessary” to serve on political-military staffs, but it does not specify positions or requirements for any of them.⁵¹ The idea that foreign duty experience is a substitute for education instead of a supplement to it also is problematic. Finally, implementation, with all the thorny issues that entails, is left to the services; no guidance is offered on how to put the directive into practice. For these reasons, we feel the following recommendations take the necessary steps beyond the DoD directive by providing particulars to the Air Force. They also go further by including all political-military affairs positions.

Recommendations

As the services' experiences indicate, and the previous reports and inspections confirm, there are serious, long-standing flaws in the way the military services, and the Air Force in particular, provide political-military affairs officers to fill the vital needs that exist. The good news, however, is that solutions are not only possible but are eminently feasible, given the will to correct these shortcomings. Some of the proposals below have been made by other reports, while others are unique to this paper. Implementing the full combination of recommendations made here will, in the opinion of the authors, best correct the litany of problems detailed above.

Referring back to the introduction to this paper, the recommendations below are intended to fulfill the following goals:

1. To provide a pool of qualified, educated, and prepared officers to meet the needs of the Air Force for sophisticated advice on formulating and implementing complex international pol-mil policies.
2. To better manage the careers of officers engaged in political-military affairs. This includes providing paths to career development, giving clear expectations about career progression, and providing transparency in the assignment process.
3. To better match the right people to the right jobs by keeping better track of job requirements and available officers.

Developing a Political-Military Affairs Officer Career Field

Many of this report's findings point to the lack of a specific career field—as opposed to a career specialty—capable of providing well-trained officers to fill billets requiring expertise in political science, international

relations, or a specific region of the world. The Air Force's response to the DoD initiative mandating that each service create its own FAO program makes great strides in addressing this deficiency; however, it will not affect many of the non-region-specific assignments at the Pentagon and elsewhere. The FAO program recognizes that the development of expert officers capable of shaping and implementing the military dimension of foreign policy requires career-long education and training. Such an approach should be extended to the system at large so officers expert in political science and international relations also are developed and tracked throughout the course of their careers. For instance, the Air Force has recently created a procurement officer track in recognition of the need for specialists trained in the acquisition arena.

To implement the idea of extending the FAO approach to the entire pol-mil field, it will be necessary to treat political-military affairs as a career path rather than a temporary job. This means establishing a career manager like the Army's FAO Proponency Officer. The Air Force will need to think of political-military affairs as a viable secondary career path when it comes time for promotions and selection boards. It also will be necessary to create a new AFSC so both FAOs and other pol-mil officers can be recognized by the personnel system.

Tracking Relevant Qualifications, Officers, and Jobs

Creating a career field that will ensure the development of officers competent in political-military affairs is a solution that will take some time to realize. Improving the tracking of officers who have acquired these skills through the course of their careers, however, is a first, immediate step that will at least enable the assignment system to better match qualified officers with jobs requiring their specific skills. All advanced degrees relevant to political-military affairs positions should be tracked along with regional

expertise and language qualifications. Ideally, the implementation of such a tracking process would allow assignment officers and commanders to access pools of officers with the qualifications to perform specific jobs. The computer systems at AFPC are capable of handling this proposed improvement; what is lacking are the instructions to make it happen.

It will be necessary to muster the political will to evaluate thousands of staff jobs at the various headquarters and the Pentagon to decide which require pol-mil expertise and which require operational experience, then to write job descriptions that match actual requirements. Too many jobs are reserved for the wrong reasons. If fighter pilot experience actually is required for a foreign military sales position, include it in the description. But, if the job really requires education in a regional specialty, or language capability, or political expertise, write those requirements in as well. Such a reclassification may help to enhance the prestige of officers who have made diversions in their careers from a purely operational track to acquire the language skills and advanced degrees relevant to political-military positions, and will better serve true Air Force needs.

Improvements in the Assignment Process

Without implementing the tracking procedures described above, it will be difficult for the assignment process to do much better than it is doing now. However, more emphasis can be placed on ensuring that political-military qualifications take precedence over “square-filling” for the promotion of officers who may have top-notch operational backgrounds but little or no educational preparation for sensitive political-military positions. Furthermore, assignment officers need to become better acquainted with the

political-military affairs career field so they can better match people and positions instead of treating these jobs as fillable by anyone.

Better Utilization of Qualified Officers

In concert with the other recommendations, once officers have been educated, trained, and tracked, the Air Force needs to ensure that these valuable resources are effectively and repeatedly used. The Air Force has done better than the Navy and almost as well as the Army in ensuring that officers follow their specialized education with a payback tour. However, the Air Force needs to go beyond the idea of a one-time payback to thinking about developing and using the skills of these officers throughout their careers. Operational credibility still must be retained, so officers should think about returning to the political-military affairs career field every other tour. Assignment officers should also look for opportunities for officers to do an operational tour in the same region as his or her pol-mil specialization. But whatever their primary career path, officers who have pol-mil qualifications should alternate between the policy arena and their specialty, allowing the Air Force to take full advantage of the investment it has made in them.

Summary of Recommendations

Even if it were possible to mandate the immediate implementation of all of these proposals, some obstacles to the effective and efficient management of political-military affairs officers would remain. Chief among these is the service culture bias discussed above. While operational considerations will always come first in all three services, more consideration must be given to the need for fully qualified political-military affairs officers spread throughout the ranks from captain to colonel and across the spectrum of primary career fields. Attitudes will have to change,

particularly among senior officers and those who make decisions about promotions and other forms of recognition, to realize the full benefit of changes to the system. Further, it is necessary to change the habits of agencies that employ pol-mil officers to ensure they use the system to obtain the most qualified officers available rather than manipulating it to benefit favorite sons and daughters.

Additionally, some of the recommendations made here will take years to reach full effect. While the tracking, assignment, and utilization proposals can have an immediate impact, the development of a viable career field, the education and training of a new generation of political-military affairs officers, and their rise through the ranks to positions of responsibility constitute a process that will take years. Along the way, care must be taken not to lose sight of the goal. A one-time push from far-sighted leaders is not enough to ensure success. Entrenched interests can derail the best intentions. Changes made must be institutionalized to minimize that danger.

Finally, junior and middle-ranking officers need to be made aware of changes to the management of this specialty as it becomes a career field. To attract and retain intelligent, motivated officers, the career field needs to be actively promoted to potential candidates, and they must believe they have a reasonable chance to advance in their military careers. The country's interests depend on attracting such people to this field and assuring them that they have a future in political-military affairs.

Conclusion

In terms of numbers alone, political-military affairs is not a very significant field. Fewer than a thousand officers out of over 76,000 in the Air Force currently hold the relevant AFSCs.⁵² Yet, the influence of these

officers is great. They are not commanding squadrons or managing acquisition programs, but they are shaping and implementing US foreign military policy. In the post-Cold War era, that means assisting Central and South American militaries as they combat insurgents and drug lords. It means helping Bosnia implement its peace plan. It means working with Central and East Europeans as they adapt their military structures to democratic principles. It means helping our former Soviet enemies become global partners. Political-military affairs officers perform all of these tasks and also accomplish more mundane day-to-day jobs such as maintaining good relationships with militaries and governments around the world and developing plans and programs to further US security interests.

Because pol-mil officers are used in so many ways, there is no one right way to prepare them. However, in today's Air Force their preparation is not well-managed. Instead, we rely on an *ad hoc* system that combines officers from intelligence, instructor duty, and an assortment of interested operational career fields to fulfill the needs of our service for political-military advice and policy implementation. The Air Force, in other words, continues to muddle through in this area. It assumes that what worked during the Cold War will suffice today. However, there are too many differences between the Cold War world and today's international environment.

The demands made on our foreign military policy are only likely to increase in the next decades. As the sole superpower, US leadership is in high demand. As we seek to influence world events, it is essential that we develop and maintain close relations with other countries. At the same time, our military forces continue to shrink. We do not have the luxury of assuming that sufficient numbers of appropriately trained and educated experts will be available to fill our needs. Thus, it is imperative that the Air

Force become more efficient at managing this career specialty and the relatively small group of officers who staff it.

We hope that the recommendations made here will be taken seriously by Air Force decision makers. They are directed primarily at the Air Staff's Directorate of Personnel and AFPC, but other elements of the central leadership also need to make commitments to change the way we do business. The tone which Air Force leaders set can provide the needed impetus to reform the service's approach to the field of political-military affairs.

We have argued that there are serious deficiencies in the way the Air Force matches its need for well-trained and educated political-military affairs officers with personnel qualified to perform these roles. As the post-Cold War era continues, the international environment is likely to be unforgiving in the face of further neglect of these problems. We must identify and develop officers with specialized training, education, and experience in political science, international relations, and specific regions of the world without further delay.

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ENDNOTES

¹ This paper is based on nearly 50 interviews conducted by the lead author between May and July of 1996 at the Air Force Personnel Center (AFPC), various Pentagon agencies, the National Defense University, and the Naval Postgraduate School (NPGS). Research materials also included AFPC-supplied personnel information, reports conducted by DoD and the Air Force, and DoD and Air Force directives and manuals. This research was made possible by a grant from the USAF Institute for National Security Studies. The conclusions reached are those of the authors, and do not reflect the official policy or position of the US Air Force, the Department of Defense, or US government.

² US Air Force, "Functional Management Inspection of the Air Force Foreign Area Studies Program," *PN 89-623, Report of the Inspector General*, 3 April 1991, p. 2.

³ US Air Force, *Foreign Language Skills Process Action Team: Report and Recommendations* (Colorado Springs: US Air Force Academy, 1 December 1995), p. 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁵ N31 is for strategic planners; N52 is for regional affairs. Both fall under the Director of Political-Military Affairs on the Navy Staff.

⁶ US Air Force, "Fill Rates by AFSC," *Air Force Personnel Center Analyst Page*, <http://www.afpc.af.mil/analysis>, 15 October 1996.

⁷ There are other officers performing related staff jobs who hold an AFSC other than 16P. However, there is no way to count or track them.

⁸ US Air Force, "Air Attaché and International Politico-Military Affairs," *Air Force Manual 36-2105*, Attachment 5, 31 October 1995, p. 129-131.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Marybeth Ulrich, *Democratization and the Post-Communist Militaries: US Support for Democratization in the Czech and Russian Militaries*, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Illinois, 1996.

¹² Interview with former Air Attache to Southeast Asia, March 1997.

¹³ US Air Force, *Foreign Language Skills Process Action Team*, p. 4.

¹⁴ Randy P. Burkett, Major, *The Training and Employment of Area Specialists in the Military*, Master's Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 1989; US Air Force, *Foreign Language Skills Process Action Team*; US Air Force, "Functional Management Inspection of the Air Force Foreign Area Studies Program," US Department of Defense, "The Defense Foreign Language Program," *DoD IG Report 1993-INS-10*, 1993; and Government Accounting Office, "DoD Training of Linguists," *GAO/NSLAD-94-191*, 1994.

¹⁵ US Air Force, "Functional Management Inspection of the Air Force Foreign Area Studies Program," p. 3.

¹⁶ Pentagon interview.

¹⁷ US Air Force, "Functional Management Inspection of the Air Force Foreign Area Studies Program," p. 14.

- ¹⁸ US Air Force, *Foreign Language Skills Process Action Team*, p. 63.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.
- ²⁰ Burkett, p. 74.
- ²¹ US Air Force, *Foreign Language Skills Process Action Team*, p. 34.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- ²³ AFPC interview.
- ²⁴ This is not to deny the existence of an Air Force Manual (AFM 36-2105) which outlines the International Politico-Military Affairs career field, to include duties and responsibilities and specialty qualifications.
- ²⁵ AFPC interview.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ²⁷ Pentagon and Defense Language Institute (DLI) interviews.
- ²⁸ DLI interview.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*
- ³¹ Pentagon interview.
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ The Air Force conducted a survey of self-reported language skills in the fall of 1996, at least partly due to Foreign Language PAT's recommendations. This data will be included in the PDS in the future.
- ³⁷ AFPC interview.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*
- ³⁹ Pentagon interview.
- ⁴⁰ AFPC interview.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴² Randy P. Burkett, "The Training and Employment of Area Specialists in the Air Force," Master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, March 1989, and Pentagon interview.
- ⁴³ US Air Force, "Functional Management Inspection of the Air Force Foreign Area Studies Program," p. 3.
- ⁴⁴ US Air Force, *Foreign Language Skills Process Action Team*, p. 1.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- ⁴⁶ Pentagon interview.
- ⁴⁷ National Defense University interview.
- ⁴⁸ Pentagon interview.
- ⁴⁹ Naval Postgraduate School interview.
- ⁵⁰ US Department of Defense, "Service Foreign Area Officer Programs," *Draft DoD Directive*, Office of John P. White, Deputy Secretary of Defense, 21 Jun 96, p. 2.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Of course, many others have held pol-mil AFSCs previously; since this is not a career field, however, the designation only obtains when the pol-mil position is actually held.