



U.S. Navy (Chad Plunge)

Reconsidering *The Armed Forces Officer* of 1950

Democracy, Dialogue, the Humanities, and the Military Profession

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The 1950 edition of *The Armed Forces Officer* is the best book by the prolific military writer S.L.A. Marshall, and it is probably the best book on military leadership ever written by an American.¹ In this article, I briefly describe how the timing and circumstances of the composition of *The Armed Forces Officer* helped Marshall to write his masterpiece, and then go on to illuminate the book's innate, enduring, and timely strengths. This book represents a significant and perhaps still-unmatched achievement in uniting the form and content of the values and outlook required of an officer serving in the armed forces of a democracy. *The Armed Forces Officer* emphasizes both the accessibility and complexity of military leadership. In *The Armed Forces Officer*, the profession of arms itself becomes an interdisciplinary subset of the humanities, connected to both



Navy and Marine Corps officers toss hats during graduation and commissioning ceremony for Naval Academy Class of 2011

military professionalism. On the one hand, Marshall rejects the narrow, technocratic approach to professionalism that had overtaken the German officer corps and General Staff in the later 19th century, in effect reaching back to an older, more humanist, and ethical model (represented by Gerhard von Scharnhorst and the other Prussian reformers of the Napoleonic period). Moreover, he takes into account American culture and conditions. Marshall may also have been aided by the fact that he was writing before the field of “leadership studies” and military professionalism had come to be dominated by sociologists, psychologists, and others in academe, so that there was still room for eclecticism, even eccentricity. As opposed to the prevailing social science model of the officer as a “manager of violence,” Marshall’s officer is much more a leader, an in-person figure and not a faceless member of a bureaucracy.⁵ The book reflects the era of the common man in which it was written. With liberal 20th-century ideas of education in the air, such as those of John Dewey, Marshall writes of the Armed Forces as a school in liberal democracy whose subjects include citizenship, virtue, self-knowledge, and even creativity and self-invention.

It is no coincidence that *The Armed Forces Officer* was written just a few years after World War II. World War II was a life-changing event for Marshall, as it was for the U.S. Army (in which he served intermittently for three decades), for the Armed Forces, and for the Nation. Marshall had created and developed on World War II battlefields the method of small-unit combat analysis that would make him famous. He would go on to write about the next war. His postwar works *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War* and *The Soldier’s Load and the Mobility of a Nation* were explicitly intended to prepare the country for wars to come.⁶

If these works prepared the Nation for future wars by addressing tactical and logistical challenges, *The Armed Forces Officer* can be seen as having a similar purpose concerning officer leadership and military professionalism. In World War II, the United States had created an enormous officer corps almost from scratch. Prewar regular and reserve officers provided the cadre, but the great majority of junior officers had no military experience or training before the war. These were the products of the various officer candidate schools, the

a canon of writing on military leadership and officer education, and most importantly to the larger culture, past and present. Marshall’s approach to the paradoxes of the citizen-soldier and the commissioned elite in the service of a democracy is dialogic and inclusive. The book merits widespread reading and reconsideration at a time when the American military profession is beset by great challenges and confronted with formidable adversaries.

Marshall and the Army of a Democracy

How did it come about that this book, apparently written at speed in 30 days after Marshall (at least by his own later account) had assumed responsibility for a languishing Department of Defense (DOD) project, come to be his tour de force?² One important element might be that Marshall was an anonymous author in the earlier Government

Printing Office editions of the book. Writing without his own name dampened Marshall’s strong inclination for self-promotion, allowing his undoubted abilities, which included a prolific, although not infallible, memory to dominate.³ The Marshall of *The Armed Forces Officer* was just nearing 50. His lively mind was full of his readings and of the scenes and voices of his recent war experience, and he was not yet as curmudgeonly or reactionary as he sometimes seems in some later writings.⁴ The tone of this book is decidedly democratic and egalitarian.

Perhaps partly due to the instructive experience of World War II, *The Armed Forces Officer* is very non-Prussian, rejecting militarism, dogmatism, and other forms of professional insularity in favor of one more suited to America’s Army. The book eschews the German model that sometimes seems to be the dominant historical example of

90-day wonders—“gentlemen by act of Congress”—who attracted considerable derision for their growing pains and inexperience. The United States and its allies won most of the battles and the war, but it was obvious that some of the leaders could have been better prepared for their responsibilities. In *The Armed Forces Officer*, Marshall focuses on certain challenges to the performance and perception of officer candidate school-trained junior officers in particular, but also of American officers in general.

One of the main difficulties addressed in *The Armed Forces Officer* is an American discomfort with hierarchy and elitism. The rigidly stratified structure of an army, and in particular the elevated, even privileged status of junior officers over men sometimes older and more accomplished, had struck earlier generations of Americans as paradoxical and even untenable in a democracy. This perception had been sharpened in the citizen army of World War II, which drew on an American society grown more egalitarian. If the military community seemed to World War II British novelist-turned-officer Evelyn Waugh as a “happy civilization” in which “differences in rank were exactly defined and frankly accepted,” the military insistence on hierarchy struck some Americans as anachronistic and artificial.⁷ Part of Marshall’s task was to establish a hierarchical basis for officer status and authority that was acceptable in a democracy while maintaining professional

to adopt an ethos of duty and service, and to communicate freely on these matters within the military and with the civil community. He introduces the idea in the very first words of chapter 1, “The Meaning of Your Commission”:

*Upon being commissioned in the Armed Services of the United States, a man incurs a lasting obligation to cherish and protect his country and to develop within himself that capacity and reserve strength which will enable him to serve its arms and the welfare of his fellow Americans with increasing wisdom, diligence, and patriotic conviction.*⁸

Humanities and the Profession of Arms

Marshall’s approach to officership builds on a venerable canon of works on military leadership. Earlier works on this subject had taken pains to establish the terms of an officer’s right to command, wage war, enjoy privilege, and compel obedience. In writing his work, Marshall is adding to a distinguished tradition of works on military leadership, sometimes inspired by defeat, but sometimes by the cost, consequences, or imperatives of victory. This body of work can be traced at least as far back as Xenophon, through many other Greek and Roman writers to include Vegetius, author of the enduring *De Re Militari*. The catalogue of writers on military leadership should not exclude medieval works such as Christine de

since Cicero, through medieval manuals on chivalry and kingship, to Baldesar Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier* (1528) and the “self-help” genre named if not started by 19th-century Englishman Samuel Smiles. The best of the works on military leadership draw on larger intellectual currents and traditions. They contain explicit and implied reminders of the officer’s civic role and responsibilities, and of his obligation to acknowledge ties with the culture, government, and populace of his society. As works of literature concerned with the education and betterment of the individual and of society, they form a link to the classical conception of the humanities as not only a set of academic disciplines, but also an education for public life and leadership.

In *The Armed Forces Officer*, officer education, and the military profession itself, is a branch of the humanities. The book is open-ended, creative, and inquisitorial more than it is prescriptive. By reaching outside itself to a broad culture, in the form of frequent quotations and allusions, it stresses the human, humanistic, literary, and artistic aspects of leadership and officership. The allusiveness of *The Armed Forces Officer* is one indication that it is not meant to complete even a junior officer’s education, but to inspire a beginning, a journey of experience, reflection, and discovery that ideally will last a lifetime. The narrative voice is well-read and even cultivated, but it is also unmistakably the voice of an officer and of an American. From early in his book, Marshall in effect makes an instructive example of his own broad, selective reading.

Chapter 1 contains quotations or citations from Voltaire, Bertrand Russell, the British politician Lionel Curtis, Confucius, Thomas Jefferson, William James, Theodore Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, and an anonymous admiral. Tellingly, only two of those cited are professional officers. Unlike most more recent writers on military leadership, Marshall makes it clear that an officer’s education consists of much more than military knowledge, and that an officer’s values are not a thing apart from those of the civilization that he or she serves. The officer is a human being and a citizen serving in the armed forces.

In a refreshing relief from uncritical and repeated references to Servicemembers as “warriors” among current writers, Marshall notes that the American military does not produce “warriors *per se*,” but instills in its members a sense of “the right thing to do” in

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standards. In common with the works on civil conduct and self-improvement of which it may be said to be a close relative, Marshall’s book is about locating and promoting oneself on a hierarchy. As in many other accounts of social existence, this is not merely a matter of ambition, but of legitimacy and authenticity. Marshall provides the bases for an officer’s authority, right to lead, and even entitlement to certain privileges and deference. The reader is given to understand, in a manner urbane and commanding, that the commissioned person must constantly and restlessly acquire and reacquire the justifications for officership in order to be worthy of the title of officer. Marshall emphasizes that the officer’s position is actually dependent on a willingness to acquire knowledge, to assume responsibility,

Pizan’s *Book of Acts of Arms and Chivalry* or Honoré Bonet’s *Tree of Battles*.⁹ The genre experienced its own renaissance following Niccolò Machiavelli’s *Art of War* (1521), a rebirth that gained momentum during the early modern “military revolution” of 1550–1650.¹⁰ During the 18th century, written works centered in France where a reexamination of military practices would follow French defeats by the British and Prussians.¹¹ One of the best 19th-century books on military leadership, a work that anticipates Marshall in its emphasis on cohesion and morale (and which he cites more than once), is French army Colonel Ardant du Picq’s *Battle Studies: Ancient and Modern Battle*.¹²

As a genre, works on military leadership may be linked to works on civil behavior

the “long run.”¹³ Marshall explains the need for the armed forces to instill values, saying they have a greater need to do so than “gentler institutions” because of the unregimented character of American citizens and the demands and pressures of war and combat. In these settings, “all barriers are down” and only a strong internal sense of right and wrong will prevent atrocity and disorder.¹⁴ Not only are officers accountable to their society for their own moral conduct, but they are also in a position to articulate and exemplify moral standards. Officers are not a group apart, not a “guardian class,” but “a strong right arm.”¹⁵ Finally, officers require broad educations because the demands of their calling are often novel and unexpected. An officer must anticipate encountering the enemy’s opposing and unpredictable will, the ways and manners of unfamiliar cultures, technological change, the inherent chaos of the battlefield, and human nature at its most beleaguered. Marshall presents this as a fascinating challenge. He writes:

*If he has the ambition to excel as a commander of men, rather than as a technician, then the study of human nature and of individual characteristics within the military crowd becomes a major part of his training. That is the prime reason why the life of any tactical leader becomes so very interesting, provided he possesses some imagination. Everything is grist for his mill.*¹⁶

As the list of quoted writers from chapter 1 indicates, Marshall only lightly draws on the writings of officers and other military writers. What connects his diverse citations is that they all underscore the value and character of the civilized works, practices, and attitudes that the military officer must sometimes paradoxically use force to protect. For Marshall, that an officer understand and exemplify these civilized values hardly takes second place to an understanding of the use of force itself, since only a civilized person will appreciate the depth of the officer’s commitment to use force only as consistent with the mission, proportionately, and even with reluctance—certainly with a desire to see peace restored as soon as possible. Only in this way will the officer keep faith with his or her constitutional oath, and only in this way is the officer distinguished as an educated professional from a mere technician or “manager of violence.” The military profession is a branch of the humanities because war is such a human activity, calling

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DOD

on all of one’s capabilities, knowledge, and emotional and intellectual depths.

The Dialogic Form

In *The Armed Forces Officer*, the education of officers, and their roles as educators, is largely a matter of dialogue. Officers should talk with subordinates, superiors, peers, and the people. Perhaps the most important reason for open speech by officers is the fact that American officers are servants of a democracy. Officers must not be “intellectual eunuchs” who remain aloof from debate out of either an exaggerated sense of infallibility, a habit of obedience, or because they do not believe they have a right to express an opinion on the policies it may be their professional duty to enforce.¹⁷ Even in their areas of expertise, officers should be prepared to have their views questioned. Marshall offers arguments supporting officers engaging the open market of ideas, and he gives many examples of how to talk in various settings and to a variety of audiences and interlocutors.

Marshall provides both precept and example on the art of conversation. He cautions against the temptation to score off seniors as shortsighted and unwise. He encourages officers to talk to their subordinates about their families and interests and

to scrupulously avoid patronizing them or addressing them as other than his “intellectual and political peers from any walk of life.”¹⁸ Characteristically, Marshall quotes both soldiers and civilians on dialogue. He cites William Hazlitt on developing one’s own strength by testing it against others: “A Man who shrinks from a collision with his equals or superiors will shrink below himself.”¹⁹ This observation is echoed by Marshall Saxe, who asks that the assurance with which he expresses his opinions not be taken amiss by “experts”: “They should correct them; that is the fruit I expect of my work.”²⁰ Eisenhower is quoted (in fact, slightly misquoted) on the importance of enlisted men talking naturally to officers so that the “product of their resourcefulness becomes available to all.”²¹ For the officer uninterested in or unconvinced of the value of dialogue, Marshall offers two observations. One is that “fully half of boredom comes from lack of the habit of careful listening.” The other is an anecdote about a newspaper editor who greeted enthusiastically the dubious ideas of his juniors, encouraging them to develop a completed plan, and allowing them in effect to discover the flaws in their ideas for themselves. The need for an exchange of words and ideas is upheld by Marshall’s insistence—in

another valuable holdover from World War II experience—that an officer must be receptive to new knowledge and attainments, seeking or creating knowledge along with greater responsibility, rather than relying on a narrow specialization. The officer’s education should give him or her cognitive and linguistic tools to question old ideas and new, to articulate change and adaptation, and to process and to channel experience rather than to rely on formulas or conventional wisdom.

atomic bomb, had been built by an unprecedented alliance of industry, academe, government, and military. The 1950s would see a series of best-selling books on the lives of Soldiers and Sailors by veterans such as James Jones, Leon Uris, Norman Mailer, James Gould Cozzens, Herman Wouk, and Thomas Heggan. Many of these became popular and critically well-received feature films. *South Pacific* was both on Broadway (1949–1954) and on the screen (1958). The Nation was

country. Unlike the post–World War II period, the military has neither a “nation of veterans,” nor numbers of former officers in prominent nonmilitary positions, nor a recent example of large scale and highly public civil-military cooperation on which to form a foundation of understanding and trust.

Admiral Mullen’s concern with the lack of communication between the American military and its nonmilitary citizenry struck a chord with his distinguished audience of military educators. Indeed, except for maintaining the relevance of its warfighting capability, communication with the rest of America may be the great challenge facing the military profession in the coming decades of the 21st century. While it is not possible to recapture a lost age, a consideration of Marshall’s work points a way to alleviate the estrangement of civil and military. Marshall’s view of the profession of arms is in essence a branch of the humanities. His emphases on the need for dialogic communication and on a daily recognition of the American officer as a servant and exemplar of democracy address the challenges of our time as I have depicted them above, and in other ways I discuss in the rest of this article.



Army second lieutenants commissioned at Indiana War Memorial

U.S. Army (John Crosby)

Finally, for Marshall, talk and dialogue are vital to the success of a unit in combat. “Talking it up” is an essential part of Marshall’s menu of actions (as argued at much greater length in *Men Against Fire*, and running through his many works on small-unit combat) that a leader must take to remove “the paralysis which comes of fear.”²² Communication, practiced in peacetime, delivers its greatest rewards in battle.

The Armed Forces Officer, Then and Now

Despite its occasional anachronisms, Marshall’s book is probably needed now more than when it was first published. In 1950, Marshall’s emphasis on humanistic dialogue and democracy were underwritten by America’s World War II experience of a citizen army. George C. Marshall, the only American career Soldier to win the Nobel Prize for Peace, signed as Secretary of Defense the first edition of *The Armed Forces Officer*. In 1952, the voters elected another career Soldier to the Presidency. The machinery of war, to include the fearful, war-ending

crisscrossed by interconnecting networks of soldier-civilians and civilian-soldiers engaged in a dialogue based on shared experience. Soon after Korea, the military would desegregate, reluctantly at first but with growing progress, and nearly always in advance of the rest of American society, playing a leading role in an important social issue.

How different is the situation today? As then—Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Admiral Mike Mullen noted at a conference on the future of the military profession in January 2011, the American people respect their armed forces but scarcely know it. Although the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have produced their share of literary and media attention, the scale is much smaller, the interest more limited. The need for democratic and humanistic dialogue is greater because it is too rare—and because we are in an era in which the links between civil and military will be tested and forced to grow or give way like unexercised muscles. As in the 1940s and for most of the 1950s, the military is shrinking, heavily deployed overseas, and demographically and geographically isolated in its own

The 21st-century *Armed Forces Officer*

The prevailing attitude to military professionalism may be inadequate to deal with the contemporary challenge of the need for a wider, discursive approach. In this context, the social science model for military professionalism could be described as necessary but insufficient. An example may be found in the most recent edition of *The Armed Forces Officer* (2007). Compared to the 1950 edition, the range of reference and allusion in the newer work is relatively narrow, drawing mostly on American military history. Although the book discusses the officer’s role as a member of a larger society, it sets an unsatisfying example in this area, suggesting by inference that the military profession should look mostly inward for example, inspiration, and instruction.

The 21st century requires American military officers to engage in continuous dialogue both within and outside the ranks of their profession. Officers have already recognized that the “communicate” branch of the “move, shoot, communicate” trivium is assuming greater importance in our times. Counterinsurgency, humanitarian, security, and peace operations, contact with U.S. Government

agencies, international nongovernmental agencies, allies and coalition partners, and even joint operations all stress the officer's role as a professional conversationalist and facilitator of dialogue: a lawyer, diplomat, or counselor in uniform and under arms. Americans have had to slow their pace of conversation to come more in line with the allusive and

as educated, but they must be educated, and even learned, men and women comfortable and capable with words as well as deeds. The officer may be a "manager of violence," but he or she is more than that: part artist, part storyteller, part scholar, and part teacher. The military profession is correctly conceived as a branch of the humanities broad in both scope

MA: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1957); and Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1960).

⁶S.L.A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War* (Alexandria, VA: Byrrd Enterprises, 1947, rpt. 1961); and *The Soldier's Load and the Mobility of a Nation* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Association, 1950, rpt. 1980).

⁷Evelyn Waugh, *Officers and Gentlemen* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1955, rpt. 1979), 90.

⁸AFO, 1.

⁹Phillipe Contamine, *War in the Middle Ages*, trans. Michael Jones (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1985), 212–214.

¹⁰Since the term *military revolution* was first coined by Michael Roberts in his inaugural address at Belfast University in 1955, many works have been written on this idea. For a compendium of works on the subject, see Clifford Rogers, *The Military Revolution Debate: Readings on Military Transformation in Early Modern Europe* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995).

¹¹R.R. Palmer, "Frederick the Great, Guibert, Bulow: From Dynastic to National War," in *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret, 93, 105 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

¹²Ardant du Picq was killed in action during the Franco-Prussian War in 1870. His book was posthumously compiled from his writings (organized as he had outlined) and published in France in 1880. The 1921 American translation of the eighth French edition by John N. Greely and Robert C. Cotton can still be found in reprints today.

¹³AFO, 17.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 14–15.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 77, 190.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 174.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 113.

²¹*Ibid.* Marshall quotes Eisenhower as stating, "There is among the mass of individuals who carry rifles in war a great amount of ingenuity and efficiency." Eisenhower's words in *Crusade in Europe* (New York: Doubleday, 1949) are "ingenuity and initiative" (314).

²²AFO, 120.

²³See Charles Hill, *Grand Strategies: Literature, Statecraft, and World Order* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). This book is a compelling argument for the importance of the humanities tradition in developing sophisticated strategic thought. Although aimed mostly at the civilian diplomat or statesman, the work has value for the military strategist as well. Hill teaches a highly selective, yearlong seminar on this subject at Yale.

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ruminative nature of Middle Eastern discourse. They have had to acquire knowledge of customs, manners, social codes, habits of mind, and religious beliefs, but it is even more important that these diplomats in uniform be able to serve as fit representatives of their own culture, its history, its literature, its values and aspirations. The role of talker may have struck some officers as incongruous or unwelcome. It requires innovation, new skills, and personal change, but it is in a sense a reconnection with a traditional role for the profession of arms as bearer of order and civilization.

Military officers need skill in dialogue and narrative to do their jobs, to tell their stories, and to participate in the civic discourse of a democracy. Officers must be equipped to engage in common speech, but some must also be prepared to communicate with intellectual and political elites as equals.²³ The post-World War II alliance of civilian and military elite cultures was largely a casualty of the Vietnam War. It might seem that the differences are insurmountable, but the post-"Don't ask, don't tell" military offers the opportunity for a rapprochement with elite universities, the media, and big cities such as Washington, DC, for a role in social change equivalent to the desegregation of the 1950s and 1960s.

A Call to Arms and Letters: Knight and Scribe

A reading of Marshall's magnum opus can serve as a necessary and timely correction to the narrowness and insularity that may afflict all professions or institutions in the course of their development, but which is particularly insidious and undesirable in the case of America's profession of arms. Committed autodidact Marshall is also a corrective to the creeping anti-intellectualism that sometimes seems to infect the American military profession. Officers must be trained as well

and purpose, which are the study and the betterment of humankind. For S.L.A. Marshall in *The Armed Forces Officer*, the profession of arms and the people who make up the armed forces are a tremendous repository of knowledge and belief, a great book to be read in crowded and in quiet moments: fight, endure, reflect, grow wise. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹*The Armed Forces Officer* was first published by the Government Printing Office in 1950. (This original version is hereafter referred to in endnotes as AFO.) Since then, it has gone through a number of reprintings and revisions. Marshall wrote an expanded version published as *The Officer as a Leader* (Stackpole Books, 1966). The American Forces Information Service published a revised edition in 1975 and a greatly altered version in 1988. The 1975 edition is especially good, leaving the original mostly untouched but adding sections based on Korea and Vietnam. A completely new edition was co-published by NDU Press and Potomac Books in 2007, although this copy contained chapter one of the original: "The Meaning of Your Commission" in its entirety as an appendix.

²*The Officer as a Leader*, 12–13.

³This is noted by David H. Hackworth and Julie Sherman in *About Face: The Odyssey of an American Warrior* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), although Hackworth is often S.L.A. Marshall's unsparing and even unfair and untruthful critic.

⁴John Douglas Marshall, *Reconciliation Road: A Family Odyssey* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993). Grandson John Marshall identifies S.L.A. Marshall's 1960 heart attack as a watershed, following which he became increasingly difficult and inflexible.

⁵The social science approach to military professionalism may be traced back to some of the works of Max Weber, the seminal German sociologist. In America, the classic works are probably still two based on the post-World War II military: Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge,