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Downsizing the Army Profession

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Op-Ed: Downsizing the Army Profession

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John Carpenter, film director of horror movies such as *Halloween*, was once asked what he thought it was that scared theater audiences the most. His answer was simple: “Uncertainty.” Carpenter understood that not knowing what will happen next often produces more anxiety and angst than actual traumatic events. As anyone who has sat on the edge of their chair during thrillers such as *Psycho* or *Jaws* understands, it’s the apprehension and dread resulting from uncertainty that exacts the most psychological toll from viewers.

Unfortunately, today’s Army finds itself reading from a script saturated with uncertainty. For a force accustomed to the draining yet preordained forecasts of the “Patch Chart” and the frenetic yet predictable pace of the ARFORGEN cycle, the end of the war in Afghanistan signals the beginning of a journey into the unknown. Soldiers—many of whom have known nothing but the *Groundhog Day* routine of deploying or preparing to deploy—now find themselves in an Army with undefined budgetary conditions and a still evolving mission.

Looming large over the entire situation, however, is the specter of the Army’s impending downsizing driven by the curtailed demand for troops in Afghanistan and accelerated by a nation anxious to spend its treasure on more pressing domestic concerns. The inevitable downsizing will result in the reduction of the active duty rolls from an Army of 570,000 to a force of 490,000 (or less, according to murmurings in the blogosphere) by the end of fiscal year 2017.

Of course, the Army has already been down this path many times before, so executing a downsizing should almost be routine by now. For example, the Army’s active duty end strength after the Vietnam War dropped from 1.5 million to about 780,000 in a little over 5 years. But that force reduction included the momentous shift from a conscripted force to an all-volunteer Army. And one would be hard pressed to find anyone who would claim

that the post-Vietnam downsizing—typified by insensitive dismissals of combat veterans via pink slips accompanied by almost nonexistent transition assistance—is an example of a well-executed reduction in force.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, the Army once again reduced its size during the early 1990s, going from 780,000 soldiers to 480,000. During that downsizing, the Army deliberately endeavored to avoid the pitfalls and blunders of the post-Vietnam force reductions. For example, instead of summarily dismissing officers, the Army expended significant energy minimizing the use of involuntary separation programs, while heavily promoting a variety of more compassionate (and expensive) voluntary separation options. Additionally, the Army took great pains to provide assistance to those transitioning out of the force by fielding programs offering job placement and career counseling.

While the post-Cold War downsizing served to exorcise many of the demons of the painful post-Vietnam experience, it should be noted that the cutbacks of the 1990s were executed in an environment much different than today's situation. For example, in 1995 the unemployment rate was 5.5% compared to a 7.7% jobless rate today. Additionally, with the once-thought-impossible sequester now a reality, the probability of additional, and even deeper, cuts in defense spending seems not so unlikely. Across the world, incidents in Iraq and Afghanistan reveal that global unrest continues to simmer, while tensions involving North Korea, Iran, and Syria add to worldwide instability. In other words, the current downsizing will be implemented in a much more acutely unsure and uncertain environment.

In such a time of flux and volatility, it is imperative that the Army redouble its efforts to diminish the uncertainty associated with the downsizing. To be sure, much of the uncertainty originates from decisions (or indecision) outside the Army and is therefore inevitable and unavoidable. Nevertheless, there are some overarching principles that can guide the Army's efforts in minimizing the impact of uncertainty during the force reduction.

First, the Army must publish its downsizing plan as soon as possible to include specifying target reduction numbers, as well as describing the programs designed to entice, encourage, or compel Soldiers to leave the service. A detailed plan allows those who desire to stay to know when the risk of being downsized has passed, and it gives those who are thinking of leaving an improved ability to assess their options. More importantly, a thorough and transparent plan shows the entire force that the Army is engaged, proactive, and rational despite the fog of uncertainty surrounding the downsizing.

Second—and this is particularly crucial for the officer corps—the Army must identify those who are at risk and those who are the top talent. For too long, perfunctory promotion boards and inflated performance appraisals have conveyed the impression that every officer is above average. In these days, the Army must be brutally honest in communicating to officers where they stand in relation to their peers. No involuntarily separated officer should say that they were not warned that they were at risk for separation. Likewise, the Army should identify and doggedly pursue the most talented officers for retention. Note that the process of ensuring that each officer is aware of their relative position in their cohort can occur before the final downsizing plan is in place.

Third, as Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel recently pointed out, the downsizing is not only an occasion to understand the challenges and uncertainties associated with a reduction in force, but to also recognize the opportunities inherent in budget constraints. In other words, if the Army is going to rebalance to the Asia-Pacific theater, bolster cyber warfare capabilities, or strive to produce more strategically thinking senior leaders, then the downsizing is an opportune time to adjust force structure and shape the Army's talent toward those ends. In other words, the downsizing is more than just shrinking the size of the Army. It is also a chance to thoughtfully reestablish priorities and judiciously refocus now limited resources.

Finally, the downsizing must result from the concerted efforts of both the Army bureaucracy and the Army profession. The Army bureaucracy will efficiently reduce the Army's financial footprint while maintaining adequate levels of combat readiness. It is the Army bureaucracy that will carefully balance end strength and force structure within directed fiscal constraints. Additionally, it is the Army bureaucracy that will devise the myriad programs to eventually execute the force reductions.

However, it is the Army profession that will ensure that downsizing programs are carried out with meticulous care and compassion. It is the Army profession that will rally around those encouraged or induced to leave—including their families—and offer generous assistance in the transition to civilian life. It will also be the Army profession that clearly understands that the manner in which the Army conducts the downsizing will affect not only those who leave, but also those who remain; American society will also be curious to see if the Army really never leaves a fallen comrade behind.

The Army has made great strides reestablishing itself as a profession during a decade of war. Ultimately, the swirling uncertainty surrounding the downsizing can only be mitigated by, once again, the Army profession taking care of its own, thus continuing to earn the trust of both its Soldiers and the society it serves.

The views expressed in this op-ed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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