An Interview with Martin E. Dempsey

TRADOC

After almost a decade of war, our Soldiers and leaders continue to perform magnificently in the harshest conditions and within the incredibly complex operating environments of Iraq and Afghanistan. They operate as part of increasingly decentralized organizations, and their tasks are made even more challenging by the unprecedented degree of transparency and near-instantaneous transmission of information. These trends are not an aberration. The future operating environment promises to grow even more complex. Because of that, we believe it is important to reflect on what it means to be a part of a profession. We are asking ourselves how 9 years of war and an era of persistent transparency have affected our understanding of what it means to be a professional Soldier.

To begin the discourse, we are adding "The Army Profession" as a key objective in the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Campaign of Learning over the next year and as a ninth imperative to our Leader Development Strategy. The Center for the Army Profession and Ethic (CAPE) will collaborate with the Center for Army Leadership and author a white paper that will serve as the catalyst for discourse on this subject as part of an Army-wide campaign. Ultimately, the results of this campaign will be incorporated as chapter 1 of Army Field Manual 1. To get the conversation started, Don Ahern of the Ahern Group, who was commissioned by CAPE to conduct a series of interviews with Army leaders on The Army Profession, recently interviewed me. By sharing this discussion with readers, I hope to make it clear that we will never take our stature as a profession for granted.

The Army's professional ethic, though steeped in tradition, has evolved over time and will continue to do so. Why at this

General Martin E. Dempsey, USA, is Commander of the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command.

time does the Army seem to be renewing its emphasis on the professional military ethic?

General Dempsey: An insight that has remained with me from my own professional development comes from a comment General Eric Shinseki made when he spoke to my class of brand new brigadier generals several years ago. General Shinseki was Chief of Staff at the time and someone asked him, "If we only remember one thing, what is a general officer's principal responsibility to the institution?" His answer was, "Manage transitions."

So to answer your question, "Why now?" I believe that we're an Army in transition. Transitions are not discrete moments in time but have a temporal dimension. The transition we're in now is a reflection of the institutional adaptations we've made in response to this era of persistent conflict. For example, ARFORGEN [Army Force Generation] is an institutional force management process that has allowed us to keep pace with operational requirements in Iraq and Afghanistan. We've adapted our force structure from an Army of Excellence organization to modular organizations. While we've always task-organized, we now move units around differently than we did before, and we've organized them differently to achieve this modular brigade-centric organization and structure within an ARFORGEN force management process.

However, in pursuing these adaptations, we may not have done so with a full appreciation of the challenges that would accrue in areas like leader development. So if you accept my premise that we're an Army in transition—becoming more mindful of what it really means to be in persistent conflict, what persistent conflict does to leader development, what ARFORGEN does to leader development, what modularity has done to leader development—then I think it becomes imperative now that we examine our profession. We need to ensure that we've got the right emphasis in place to maintain our standing as a profession and to develop leaders of character despite the pressures of managing an Army in transition.

We talk about leadership at every level of the Army being indispensable and a fundamental part of the fabric of our Army ethic. What do you see as a leader's responsibility to the profession?

General Dempsey: I think the leader's responsibility is to preserve that which defines us as a profession. For example, expert knowledge, a commitment to continuing education, a certain set of values, notably among them the idea of service. We are a service-based profession that must remain apolitical in the American system of governance.

I think it's also a leader's responsibility to mold the young men and women who may join our ranks off the streets of America with a different set of values. I'm not trying to be judgmental, but I think we'd all agree that our particular skills, qualities, attributes, and values are different than what you would expect to recruit from the streets of America today. For that reason, I believe it falls to leaders to build our profession and to reinforce it over time. We have to "see ourselves." We have to take a look at the pressures that impact upon our professional ethic. It falls to leaders at every rank to be introspective against this code of professionalism and to apply that code in how we lead the organizations under our control. In the case of Training and Doctrine Command, my job is to ensure not only that we're delivering the hard skills required for combat operations, but also that we're developing the

character of our Soldiers and leaders. In the end, it all comes down to character. We can't afford to be a force absent character; it's the foundation on which we have to build the American Army. Leaders must take ownership of that responsibility and avoid being pulled and tugged to the hard skills exclusively. I'm not suggesting that we have succumbed to current pressures and are neglecting character development, but there's a risk there and we should always be mindful of it. Were that ever to happen we certainly couldn't call ourselves a profession. Ultimately, it's a leader's responsibility.

How can we best shape the mindsets of Soldiers with respect to the profession?

General Dempsey: First and most important, the young Soldiers and leaders in our formations will emulate what they see, not what they hear. Recall that in my answer to your first question we discussed the effects of modularity on leader development. We've changed the way leaders interact with each other. The traditional mentoring, coaching, and teaching two levels down have been somewhat disrupted by modularity. Our corps and divisions are unencumbered in the traditional sense because our brigades and battalions have a different operating relationship with higher headquarters as a result of modularity and the ARFORGEN process. We don't have the same structures in place that in the past have allowed us to cultivate mentoring and coaching, so we're going to have to work through that.

We had great discussions recently up at the West Point Senior Conference about why we stayed in the Army. What lit our fire? What we were really doing in that exercise was describing the act of emulation. If you find someone you want to be like when you grow up, so to speak, it's much easier to follow a path that will get you there. If you've got a way to cultivate relationships that allows emulation, then I believe you have a recipe that will allow the profession and its values to permeate organizations. So I think first and foremost it's in that context that leaders are able to influence the behavior of their organizations.

Secondly, we just have to enter into a discourse about our profession. We can't take it for granted. We have to encourage, coerce if necessary, discussions within our ranks and within each cohort. By cohorts I mean officers, noncommissioned officers, warrant officers, and civilians. We need to collectively discuss what it is that makes us a profession and then encourage self-examination to help us understand whether we're living up to it.

Then we need to reinforce our commitment to the profession through our policy, doctrine, and leader development. We have to make some revisions in our evaluation reports, in our promotion board guidance, and in other ways that provide an assessment of whether or not we're reflecting the values of our profession. In other words, we can talk about it, but unless we place value on it and that value is reflected in promotions, advancement, and selection for command, then the discourse I described won't much matter. To me, it's some combination of personal conduct and setting the example ourselves while we in turn emulate the professional values of those we aspire to be, so it becomes an unbreakable cycle. It's also encouraging this discourse but not without following through to find ways to reward professional ethic behaviors in our promotion and selection processes.

You've described why now is the time to focus on the profession, but what makes the Army a unique profession?

General Dempsey: First and foremost, I always remind audiences broadly that the Army can do a lot of things, but it must do one thing on behalf of the Nation. It must have a monopoly on violence. It must have a monopoly on the use of force. That's the foundation. Lethality, if you will, is the foundation on which everything we do must be built, but lethality brings with it incredible obligations and responsibilities. And I think it's in understanding those responsibilities that we find the ethic, that we find the ultimate requirement for character. Although it probably goes without saying, you simply do not want men and women who lack integrity, who lack character, who lack a sense of belonging to something greater than themselves wielding the instrument of force.

So what makes us unique is not only what the Nation asks us to do, but also the very values derived from that tremendous responsibility. We're unique because the stakes are much higher for us than they are in other professions.

What do you believe will come from this renewed emphasis on the Army profession? For example, as TRADOC commander, do you foresee future changes to training programs and doctrine?

General Dempsey: I'll answer that, but first let me describe what we plan to do to emphasize the profession over the next year or so.

We're starting with a white paper that the Center for the Army Profession and Ethic and the Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth are collaborating on. The intent is for that white paper to be the catalyst for the discourse we want to have about our profession. To expand the discussion farther and wider, we'll use social networking—everything from blogs to Twitter to Facebook to whatever it happens to be—to begin to gain an appreciation for what the profession thinks about itself against this kind of benchmarking white paper.

From there, we'll encourage senior leaders and stakeholders who own those processes you described—the doctrine, training programs, as well as organizational development, leader development, and personnel policies—to adapt them as required because they all reflect and affect our profession. For example, our personnel policies on command tour lengths or on professional military education are important. We have to examine whether we have the proper incentives. Are there disincentives? All of these things affect this thing we call the profession. What we want to do is expose what we're doing well because we're doing a lot of things well. But we also want to know what we're not doing so well. With that gap analysis we want to take a DOTMLPF [doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, and facilities] look and then decide what we should do and what we can do. We will likely decide to do some things immediately. Others might have to be deferred because of the pressures of the current fight. But we need to understand it.

In describing my current concerns, I'd say that I sense some "weak signals." My instincts born over 36 years of service are telling me that we've got some challenges that we need to address. In this first year or so, we'll take time to understand the problem, to frame the problem, and then we'll endeavor to make the adjustments we need to make.

Are there any other insights you'd like to share as you go forward?

General Dempsey: I'm always alert for ways to bring these issues alive for people, make it something tangible and understandable. To make

changes in a big organization, you have to appeal not only to reason but also to emotion. Generally speaking, people will accept your rationale but may not change because they haven't been captured emotionally by what you're asking them to do. So I think one of the challenges we've got is to bring it alive. I've been looking around a lot to find examples of why we should change. When I say change, by the way, particularly when we're talking about the profession, there are many things we do that are enduring and must endure, but there are also some things that we are asking our profession to do differently.

I think probably the word *adaptation* or *adaptable* as an attribute has always been somewhat important, but in the context of an operating environment that's largely decentralized, I think that adaptability becomes more important. Today it's more important for a young captain to be adaptable than when I was a young captain. So what we've got to do is figure out how we get at that earlier as we develop our leaders.

Secondly, we've got to figure out what it means to decentralize. Decentralization has become a kind of unquestioned good. It's in our joint and Army doctrine. We talk about pushing responsibility and authority to the edge. We talk about enabling the edge. My concern is that as we push capability and authority and responsibility to the edge, with it we're also pushing all the risk. In pushing all the risk to the edge, at some point we begin to rub uncomfortably against one of the foundational aspects of the profession: trust. Because when we're pushing all the risk to the edge and holding junior leaders accountable for failure, we may not be sharing that failure with them back up the chain of command. As failures occur, and they will, we begin to erode trust, and when we begin to erode trust, we begin to erode the profession.

That's another reason why I think that now is the right time to conduct a comprehensive assessment of how these things intersect. One is our profession. One is this idea of leader development more broadly. Not just professional development, but leader development in general. Then there's this issue of decentralized operations and what they mean to our profession and to the development of the leaders who will lead the profession.

But I mentioned trying to find some examples to bring it alive. You may have noticed that I walked into the room reading. What I was reading was a *New York Times* editorial by David Brooks called "Drilling for Certainty" that describes the crisis with the [April 20, 2010] oil well explosion in the Gulf of Mexico. The piece makes note that at the end of the day, the event was caused by a combination of failures. It was a failure of processes and a failure of systems. But most importantly, it was a failure of imagination and a failure in leader development. Because what engineers and corporate executives apparently failed to appreciate is that they were asking their subordinates to deal in increasing complexity. The act of drilling at 5,000 feet was exponentially more difficult than drilling at 1,000 feet. As complexity was building and risk was accumulating, they continued to push that risk to the platform. We can learn from that.

We've said that the operating environment in which we ask a leader to perform is complex, but we make some linear assumptions about it, and in so doing we assume that it's manageable. Yet I think we've learned and continue to learn that risks and complexity are exponentially growing over time. If that's the case, then the example of this catastrophe in the Gulf can potentially inform our thinking about leader development.

In terms of images that may help us understand our challenge, that's a pretty good one. PRISM