

USAWC faculty member reflects on Soldier separations

Army War College faculty member reflects on Soldier separations: Mission First, People Always

Prof. Charles Allen, retired Army colonel

Readers of headlines on Army force reduction measures would agree with the

assessment by University of Maryland sociologist Mady Segal that the US

military is a greedy institution. It makes "great demands on individuals in

terms of commitment, loyalty, time, and energy.. The demands that American

armed forces make on members and their families include the risk of injury

or death, geographic mobility, family separations, [and] residence in

foreign countries." We must acknowledge that its members are all volunteers

and joined to receive some benefits, including altruistic, from their

service. Its members knew what they signed up for when they donned the

uniform of our Armed Forces.



However, the most recent accounts of Army soldiers receiving pink slips as they are moving to new duty stations (PCS-ing) or deployed in still dangerous operational environments are uncomfortable. While we understand the need to draw down the force, especially with our current budget woes, it is perplexing and somewhat distressing to read an Army senior official comment that "we can't do the right thing" when it comes to policy decisions on how the separations are executed.

I find myself asking, "What did we learn from the drawdowns post-Vietnam and post-Desert Shield/Desert Storm?" In many cases this is the continuing challenge of managing excess inventory of people (in either specialty areas or grades) based on force structure decisions.

Appropriately in this drawdown from nearly 570,000, the Army sought to first identify and target relatively poor performers in the officer and noncommissioned officer ranks for separation through respective Selective Early Retirement Boards and Qualitative Service Programs for its more senior members. We are at the point where the Army is now separating good people-officers and enlisted-who have served faithfully and well.

I am reasonably confident that the trappings of farewell, retirement, and award ceremonies are happening in keeping with the traditions of a strong Army culture. With the recent focus on transitioning veterans back into society, the Army and Department of Defense have emplaced programs to assist with and mitigate challenges of separations.

My concern is how people within operational and functional Army units are treating their separating comrades from the time of notification to release from active duty. Are leaders conveying appreciation for their service? Or is there an unspoken, "it sucks to be you" or an offering of the trite saying, "Well, the needs of the ARMY."? I know from personal experience the discomfort of interacting with colleagues who have received notice. What should I say? How should I act?

One can imagine the thoughts of the separating service members as something like, "Well I joined the Army during our War on Terrorism, deployed X times, and my evaluation reports said I was a good soldier/officer...but the Army doesn't need me anymore. I did what was asked of me and now am being told to leave." For each, we hope there is a personal reflection of individual experiences with great training, great teams and esprit, and important missions. The reflections would include what they learned about themselves,

about other people and cultures, and about life.

Our unit leaders should engage with empathy and compassion with their soldiers-they are part of our team. We want separating members to be strong advocates for the Army and to recommend service as an option for the other 99 percent of our society. While a full career of 20 or 30 years is not possible for all, the quality of their experience should be high for the tenure of their service, regardless of the length.

The Army is a greedy institution, but it is made up of people who should care for each other. Accordingly, we should live "Mission First, People Always"-this a part of the Army Strong culture.

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