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Military of Millennials

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Military of Millennials

The next generation of soldier: tech savvy, open-minded, multitasking, and perhaps unprepared for command-and-control.

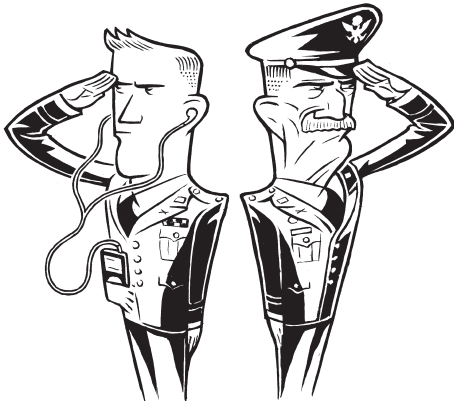
by Art Fritzon, Lloyd W. Howell Jr., and Dov S. Zakheim

The U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) took an unprecedented step on May 15, 2007, blocking troop access to MySpace, YouTube, and other popular Web sites. The official reason was to conserve bandwidth and safeguard security. But the DOD's ban also highlighted a gap in understanding between senior military leaders and what demographers call Generation Y (alternatively known as the millennial generation or the baby-boom echo). Few members of this generation, born after 1978, can recall a time when the Internet was not at their disposal.

Not long ago, one of the authors of this article was asked to lead a U.S. Air Force study on the implications for the military of this new online generation. The request came from senior officers who had been appalled to discover a number of junior officers using the still-permissible Facebook Web site for the purpose of organizing their squadrons. These senior officers were having difficulty with the concept of using a civilian social-networking site for military purposes.

What would that mean for military security? How would it affect the control and vulnerability of squadrons in the field? And from the perspective of DOD "middle management," what was a major supposed to do? Forbid the behavior and risk losing the real benefits of an online community? Or protect it and risk the wrath of more senior officers who just didn't understand?

This kind of conundrum is relevant not just for the U.S. military. A wide range of organizations, including most global corporations, will soon face a large, new cohort of young employees. Generation Y's affinity for the interconnected world is just one of its intriguing characteristics. Other conspicuous traits include its widespread, matter-of-fact adoption of hip-hop culture (baggy clothing, piercings, and tattoos have already prompted stricter regulations regarding military appearance) and a casual indifference to distinctions of race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation (a phrase that itself first came into widespread usage around the time this generation was born). Indeed, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," the U.S. military's policy on homosexuality,



feels absurd to many members of this cohort, who would otherwise see no shame in asking or telling. Survey research (for example, a January 2007 Pew Research Center study) shows millennials to be the most tolerant generation on record.

Are such traits lifelong fixtures of the majority of Gen Y individuals, or simply markers of youthful naivete among a visible minority? At present, no one really knows. But the question is important because the future of the military — and other institutions as well — will rest in their hands. The oldest members of this intriguing demographic, born in 1979 and 1980, are already of an age to be lieutenants in the Navy and captains in the U.S. Air Force, Army, and Marine Corps, and those born just after the end of Desert Storm in 1992 are currently in high school. Within the next 10 to 20 years, the members of this generation will become majors, colonels, and Navy captains, with similar progress through the enlisted ranks. And soon thereafter, they will be flag and general officers and occupy similarly prominent leadership roles in other organizations — not just in the U.S. but all around the world.

Generation gaps are not new to the military, of course, or to the culture at large. The Vietnam era was defined by the distinctly different attitudes between the 20-year-old draftees and the older career officers and senior enlisted men who commanded them. More recently, a report issued on February 15, 2000, by the vice chief of staff of the U.S. Army noted that the rate of voluntary attritions among captains had risen sharply, and the report cited generational differences as a chief reason. “Senior officers *think* they

understand the world of lieutenants and captains,” the report observed, “but many junior officers and others are convinced that they do not.” As an example of these differences, the report cited senior officers’ “careerism” and dogged loyalty to the military as opposed to junior officers’ preference for a better work–life balance. To the typical junior officer, it noted, “being an Army officer is a noble profession...not an all-consuming source of self-identity.”

The report presciently foresaw the U.S. military’s current difficulties with recruiting and retention, exacerbated by its expanded involvements in Iraq and Afghanistan. Because of Generation Y’s significantly larger numbers, and because its attitudes have been shaped by unique circumstances, these young men and women will provide distinctly different challenges and opportunities for the military, the business world, and every other kind of organization that they enter.

Observable Differences

To put these challenges in proper context, any assessment of millennials’ potential — in the military and as citizens — must look beyond any current military and political situations. Whatever happens in the Middle East during the next few years, for example, we can be certain that the recruiting and training of American military personnel will not remain static. Gen Y’s presence may lead the military to adopt broader, more far-reaching policy and management reforms that empower this cohort and take advantage of its special strengths.

Just how does this generation differ from its parents, the baby

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boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), and its immediate predecessor, Generation X (those born between 1965 and 1978)? With more than 75 million members, Generation Y is nearly as large as the baby boom and at least 50 percent larger than Generation X. (Estimates vary because demographers, who generally agree that prevailing generational characteristics shift roughly every 20 years, disagree about exactly which years represent the specific cusps between them.) These population figures alone should be heartening to military and business recruiters, because Gen Y's larger size translates into more

in life than their parents had.

Generation X grew up in a time of dual-career couples and soaring corporate layoffs. Its members married even later than their baby-boom predecessors — the median age at marriage has risen to 26 for women and 28 for men (from 20 for women and 23 for men in 1960) — and they have tended to steer away from large employers in favor of entrepreneurialism.

By contrast, Gen Y has grown up in an era when childbearing and child-rearing seem once again to be social priorities, with “Baby on Board” signs displayed in the rear windows of their parents’ minivans,

almost the norm. (In many states, it is now a school requirement.) After college, this generation is competing for places in organizations like the Peace Corps and Teach for America in extraordinary numbers, even as the military struggles to attract them. Indeed, the research summarized by Strauss and Howe (in their book and in the *Harvard Business Review*, July–August 2007) suggests that this new generation may in fact be more civic- and family-oriented than any since World War II, reversing long-term trends toward increased rates of criminal activity, drug use, and teen pregnancy.

It would appear, therefore, that if the current leadership in the public and private sectors learns to accept, deploy, and manage Generation Y effectively, the millennials could even provide an echo of the grit and selfless heroism that inspired journalist Tom Brokaw to label their grandparents “the greatest generation.” On the other hand, if the leadership fails to understand and adapt — if it insists on harnessing millennials with outdated mindsets, rules, and processes — it could squander a historic opportunity to reinvigorate the military and rekindle an idealistic, can-do spirit in a wide variety of institutions.

An Online Generation

As current military leaders look more closely at the nature of this new generation, they will discover that it conflicts with both their organizational structures and their communications strategies. Most of Gen Y lives on the Internet, which is why the U.S. Navy now places recruitment videos on YouTube and the Central Intelligence Agency has begun advertising on Facebook. In contrast to earlier TV-watching

Millennials could echo the heroism of their grandparents, “the greatest generation.”

potential recruits. Beyond mere numbers, of course, any attempt to characterize an entire generation must rely on gross generalizations, especially in the absence of hard data. Therefore, Booz Allen Hamilton is initiating a new research effort aimed at defining and tracking Gen Y's attitudes and aptitudes as they relate to the U.S. military.

Preliminary though the research may be, it already points to clear differences separating all three generations now present in the military and in the civilian workforce. The generation of baby boomers began life in the sunny, optimistic aftermath of World War II and were reared with unprecedented sensitivity according to the precepts of Dr. Spock. In adolescence, many members of this generation turned cynical and anti-authoritarian; they started careers and families later

as Lieutenant Colonel Wayne A. Sinclair observed in *Marine Corps Gazette* (September 2006). Two of the most prominent theorists of generational change, historian and satirist Bill Strauss and historian and demographer Neil Howe, have suggested in their book *Millennials Rising* (Vintage, 2000) that Gen Y may be something of a throwback to its grandparents' generation — the generation that grew up in the Depression, fought in World War II, and came home to build a powerful national economy along with strong, effective community institutions.

Like their grandparents, millennials appear deeply committed to family, community, and teamwork, which they have made priorities. Among middle-class high school and college students, volunteering for nonprofit work has become

generations, however, millennials do not use the Internet merely to absorb information passively. They also insist on communicating — through text messages, handhelds, homemade videos, audio mixes, Weblogs, and personal pages.

Gen Y's familiarity with the interconnected world suggests that its members will respond enthusiastically to management styles that encourage creativity and initiative, and that they will be comfortable working in teams. Millennials exhibit characteristics likely to render them facile and effective decision makers, especially in combat situations, where decentralized operations are paramount. They are also adept at gathering information and sharing it with peers. The U.S. military has long struggled to smooth interservice rivalries and achieve better working relations between military and intelligence operations. Corporations face similar challenges in getting people to work together fluidly and productively across functional, regional, and operational boundaries. Might Gen Y, with its deeply ingrained habits of openness and teamwork, eventually succeed in breaking down some of these barriers?

In other ways, those deeply ingrained habits challenge established organizational values. To command-and-control organizations like the military (and many corporations), knowledge is power and, therefore, something to be protected — or even hoarded. To Gen Y, however, knowledge is something altogether different; it belongs to everyone and creates a basis for building new relationships and fostering dialogue. Baby boomers and Gen Xers have learned to use the Internet to share information with

people whom they already know, but members of Gen Y use blogs, instant-messaging, e-mails, and wikis to share information with those whom they may never meet — and also with people across the hall or down the corridor. Their spirit of openness is accompanied by a casual attitude toward privacy and secrecy; they have grown up seeing the thoughts, reactions, and even indiscretions of their friends and peers posted on a permanent, universally accessible global record.

When they serve in the military, however, millennials are speaking not just for themselves, but also for those who report to them. If they are officers or senior enlisted men or women, this may mean hundreds of people. They are also responsible for high-stakes operations that may have covert components. Training and procedures must address these gaps, without losing the value that comes with openness and initiative.

And there is a still more challenging issue: A Concours Group report on generational change proposed (in August 2004) that Gen Y's comfort with online communications may mask the group's inexperience in negotiating disagreements through direct conversation and a deficit in face-to-face social skills. Beyond the implications for this generation's future management style, how might such a skill deficit affect the military's ability to "win hearts and minds" in future conflicts? In recent years, the military has done extensive training to offset educational deficiencies. Indeed, the promise of such training has been among its greatest attractions for recruits. Should the military now begin to focus on developing new recruits' interper-

sonal skills, neglected through years of staring into cyberspace?

A related issue is this generation's well-known ability to multitask. Few parents of millennials can fail to marvel at their almost superhuman ability to do homework, instant-message friends, play a video game, and track the latest episode of *The Simpsons* all at once. On the other hand, some worry that this uncanny facility for doing several things at one time is accompanied by a superficial approach to analysis and problem solving and an inability to think deeply about complex matters. (Some observers have argued that the most successful multitasking is actually a form of attention deficit disorder.)

It's still unclear how military and business leaders can adapt their traditional command-and-control operating models to make millennials feel comfortable. The U.S. military, and many corporations, rely on effective chains of command — on leaders who give orders and people in the field who execute them. It will be neither easy nor entirely desirable to make a transition away from that.

To be sure, the reasons for making such a transition continue to increase. Modern military adversaries — and, in the business world, commercial competitors — increasingly use nontraditional structures. Al Qaeda, for example, is not a top-down hierarchy. It is a flexible, decentralized network. As numerous experts have pointed out (for example, University of Pennsylvania professor Marc Sageman in his 2004 book, *Understanding Terror Networks*, and former U.S. Treasury Department analyst Jonathan Schanzer in his 2004 book, *Al-Qaeda's Armies*), this network relies

on shared ideologies, common hatreds, and distributed technical know-how, rather than on centralized command, regimented training, and tightly organized supply lines. Will it take a Gen Y military to learn how to effectively counter such virulent franchises?

Network Advantages

A recent bestseller, *The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations*, by Ori Brafman and Rod A. Beckstrom (Portfolio, 2006), argues that networked organizations — including al Qaeda, Alcoholics Anonymous, the Wikipedia Foundation, and open source consortia like those

of their own.

Moreover, most networked organizations have a way of morphing into bureaucracies. Once a decentralized terrorist network achieves certain goals — gaining control over territory and property, for example — it is bound to adopt more familiar, centralized structures to consolidate, protect, and administer those gains. As with French and Russian revolutionaries in 1789 and 1917, with Castro's Cuba, and with countless other regimes that began as shadowy insurgencies, a seemingly invisible enemy eventually acquires a face, along with the burdens of administering its conquests. In other words, the more

tries like Iraq and Afghanistan but also through the blogs, Web sites, and other electronic communications vehicles that its adversaries use.

It hardly needs saying that Gen Y is better prepared than any previous generation to do battle in cyberspace. To prevail, however, it will need the proper resources, as well as the proper military structure. Authority and decision rights will have to be more broadly distributed, so that those fighting on the information front can act in real time, as their enemies do. This does not require replacing or negating decisions made by top leadership; rather, in an environment of networked warfare, people in the field and at computer monitors need greater leeway to carry out those decisions. In effect, it means redesigning military structures and processes to distribute authority and accountability more broadly.

Increased empowerment is a natural outgrowth of any well-designed, well-executed reengineering initiative. In the corporate sector, for example, good organizational redesign accomplishes much more than reducing head count and cutting costs; it also flattens the organization and brings people throughout the enterprise closer to the problems they are being asked to solve, giving them the authority to act in pursuit of organizational goals. The problems at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in its treatment of wounded soldiers are somewhat typical of bureaucracies that have become too layered and impersonal. The best cure for such problems is to infuse the organization with a sense of urgency and unified mission and to hold people responsible for taking commonsense actions, instead of passing the buck

The U.S. Navy now places recruitment videos on YouTube, and the CIA has begun advertising on Facebook.

forming around Linux — have certain built-in advantages over more traditional command-and-control hierarchies like the U.S. military. Although perhaps true in theory, this argument is less than fair to current U.S. military practice.

The thinking of the Pentagon hierarchy can be linear at times, but the behavior of U.S. and allied troops in the field is, by necessity, much less so. Field units are trained and empowered to make quick decisions and to act on them. In fact, U.S. military efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan rely heavily on the use of Special Forces specifically designed and trained to function autonomously. Military leaders understand that the way to combat enemy networks is with networks

successful an unseen enemy becomes, the sooner it discards the cloak of decentralized invisibility.

For that reason, it is important for any organization — civilian or military — to build its capabilities to make the best of both worlds: to combine the best aspects of networks with the best aspects of command-and-control operations. Interestingly, such efforts are already under way within the U.S. intelligence community, which is preparing to launch an internal communications tool called “A-Space”: a social-networking site for its own members, modeled on Facebook and MySpace. Similarly, the U.S. military must improve its ability to outmaneuver enemies, not just in the deserts and mountains of coun-

to some other faceless part of the bureaucracy.

Current leadership is well aware that the military needs this kind of empowerment and esprit, even if such goals seem elusive. A few years ago, Marine Corps leaders and their staffs visited a Wall Street trading desk. “These are the dynamics I want us to have in battle,” declared one general, pointing to the traders’ seamless communications, speed, agility, and ability to multitask. Happily, members of Gen Y already seem to possess such dynamics, almost as a birthright.

In short, the military’s greatest human capital need may be the structures and leadership techniques with which to leverage the inherent strengths of its new generation of people. Some might argue that the U.S. military has already delegated too much responsibility, and with

Navy Seals, and Army Special Forces have traditionally done. Lately, the U.S. military has been struggling to fulfill its recruitment mission. In addition to a rising rate of voluntary attrition among the Army’s junior officers, the enlistment and retention of African-Americans in all four services has been declining since well before the United States began its engagement in Iraq. Such disturbing trends may point to something more than the unpopularity of the engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan; they may also point to a breakdown between the promises that the military makes to its recruits and the actual value that it delivers.

Until recently, the military has offered its enlisted men and women a strong value proposition — preparation for a better way of life through continuing education;

of command at all levels are trained and stress-tested to maintain a delicate balance — the balance between empowering Gen Y troops and providing them with direction, discipline, and cohesion. Indeed, balanced leadership is the only way to empower a millennial-dominated military to think and act creatively, responsibly, and with the right sense of mission.

Confronted with the reality of Gen Y’s unique characteristics, what’s a military leader to do? More research into the attitudes, aptitudes, and habits of young military officers and noncommissioned officers should help to clarify key issues; we already know that the answers are unlikely to lie in stifling this generation’s natural talents and predilections. Most generations have a way of challenging their elders’ fundamental assumptions and ways of doing things. Gen Y is poised to do the same — and in potentially constructive and original ways. The job of today’s captains, majors, and colonels is to encourage and guide millennials and protect them from the senior officers who may not appreciate their unique qualities. Let’s hope the military, and the corporations that hire the people who leave the military, can learn to make the most of this new generation’s distinctive talents and instincts. +

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Those in command should maintain a balance between empowering Gen Y troops and providing them with direction.

disastrous results — witness the Abu Ghraib prison scandal. Such incidents of abusive behavior, however, result not from delegating responsibility but from poor leadership, inadequate training, and lack of accountability.

The Leadership Challenge

Leadership is, of course, the all-important key to empowering a military soon to be dominated by millennials. And leadership must begin with recruiting people who are highly enthusiastic from the start — much as the Marine Corps,

practical training in useful skills; the inculcation of strong, wholesome values; and the opportunity to forge strong peer relationships. Now, not only are troops made to serve more combat tours in dangerous circumstances, but they also may not always receive the strong life-preparation skills that were provided in the past. If so, military recruiters are working against the grain of Gen Y’s strong commitment to family and community.

Besides restoring the right value proposition, the military leadership can ensure that those in positions

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