Grading the Army’s Choice of Senior Leaders

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Political Science in the Graduate School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This study seeks to determine how the Army institutionally selects its 3 and 4-star officers. The central focus, *What patterns are evident in the output of the Army’s 3 and 4-star selection process?* has three main findings: 1. The Army has institutional preferences, 2. Multiple paths are possible to the senior leader level, 3. The Army’s most preferred path is operational and command experience. These findings were the result of a comprehensive analysis of a database developed utilizing the standardized resumes of 3 and 4-star generals who have served or retired after 1985. The database, along with the results presented here can help determine if the Army is selecting the right senior leaders and meeting its senior leader development goals. In addition, by understanding the breadth of experience of the Army’s senior leaders, we can identify potential shortcomings in experience or skills required to meet current and future threats. The Army is tasked with defending the nation, we must therefore continually assess how it adapts and evolves with contemporary events and adversaries. The database, while extensive by itself, serves as a starting point for future researchers. The paper’s narrow lens will offer insight into the Army process of selecting senior leaders and provide a follow-on analysis template.
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1. Introduction

How does the U.S. Army institutionally select its senior leaders? Understanding the process will help us understand what the Army values. Individuals who rise through the ranks of the Army personnel management system reflect the character traits and leadership qualities that the organization seeks to sustain. Much research has been devoted to understanding what values Army leaders should possess. This paper however, does not focus on determining the specific character traits or qualities, rather it seeks to empirically prove what traits and experiences are actually selected over time. A better understanding of the process can help policymakers and the Army critically evaluate if the current system is generating leaders optimized to face future threats. In short, this research highlights the skills and experiences Army senior leaders possess and identifies trends in their selection over time.

The overall findings in this study reveal five primary assignment paths officers take to reach the rank of General: instructor, commander, exposure to policy makers, joint, and balanced. Additional findings include the Army’s preference for senior leaders with respect to military and civilian education, commissioning source, decorations, and branch type. The results of these

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1 The term “institution” is used as defined by J.P. Clark. See J.P. Clark, “Adapting to Strategic Change: Organizational Change and Adaptation in the US Army,” Parameters 46, no. 3 (2016): 26.
findings were determined with quantitative methods but they also suggest numerous qualitative implications. One example the data reveals is an institutional preference for operational and direct leadership experience. The qualitative implication is that the Army values operational leadership experience more than strategic leadership experience. Does this finding match the Army’s current leader development goals? The research is not intended to judge the merit of the Army’s goals, but rather to give voice to the available data in the hope that it can help identify potential shortcomings. An empirical assessment of the Army’s senior leaders is critical because of the role leaders play in maintaining the organization.

Numerous studies have demonstrated leadership impact on organizational culture.² There is strong evidence that senior leaders shape and maintain their organizations.³ They are bellwethers against outside influence and they serve as the catalyst for change within.⁴ This is especially the case within the Army’s up-or-out, hierarchical structure. A better understanding of the Army’s personnel framework will reinforce this idea. The U.S. Army is currently

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composed of around 467,000 active duty personnel. To manage these personnel, US legal code has set the limit of general officer positions within the Army at 231. An additional 85 joint general officer positions are available to the Army. Of these 300+ general officer positions, between 45-50 are reserved for 3-star generals. At the very highest level, only eleven are coded as 4-star billets. It is this elite group that determines the Army’s organizational culture and priorities. They interpret guidance and directives from the Executive and Legislative branches. They control the Army’s nearly $150 billion annual budget. These senior leaders play a crucial role in civil-military relations and interagency policy formulation. In short, they are the “voice of the Army” in both policy deliberations and within the Army itself. How this small group is selected matters.

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7 Ibid. See also: “Department of Defense: Active Duty Military Personnel by Rank/Grade.” (2017)

8 The number of billets can fluctuate based on Army General Officers assigned to Combatant Command positions. For the most current roster see: https://www.gomo.army.mil/Ext/Portal/Positions/Positions.aspx?View=3


At its core, the Army’s primary goal is to fight and win the nation’s wars.\textsuperscript{11}

To do so, it must be led by the very best. The best at what though? National threats change over time requiring leadership transformation to address that change. During the Cold War, conventional threats were high and priority was given to those leaders who could effectively fight a peer competitor with traditional ground weapons deployment. Following 9/11, counterinsurgency operations became a central focus with this new threat environment significantly more difficult to ascertain. The Army must still be prepared to fight a conventional war; however, the growing threat of non-state and terrorist actors has presented a dilemma in selecting senior leaders to deal in this new threat arena. Ideally, those leaders promoted to the ranks of 3 and 4-stars would be generalists with a diversity of experience across multiple warfare domains and varying environments. They would be capable of strategic thought and flexible enough to adapt quickly to changing conditions.

However, is this really the ideal leader? Is it perhaps better to have experts with a career spent exclusively in one domain or environment who can then be “pulled from the bench” when required? Again, there has been ample amounts of debate concerning these questions. This paper seeks to determine what the

Army and policy makers over time have actually chosen. How a lieutenant eventually achieves the rank of General is a process with many variables, to include individual performance, luck, and relationships. While many of these variables cannot be measured, the process itself is important to understand. If scholars, policy makers, or the American people identify a sub-optimal pool of senior leaders within the Army, because of failed campaigns or evolving threats, etc., then debating the merits of senior leaders’ individual characteristics will not help. Adjustments to the process must be made. Due to the nature of the Army’s closed personnel management system, transformation would need to occur early in an officer’s career to have an impact. If, however, the Army is meeting the nation’s needs and contributing to healthy civil-military relations, then no change is required. It is also possible to determine a situation somewhere between these two extremes. The research presented here cannot fully determine if the Army is producing the optimal senior leader or if the process itself is sufficient to meet future threats. It does however, provide an important empirical contribution in the evaluation process of selecting Army senior leaders.

The remainder of the paper will focus on identifying quantifiable data points for comparative purposes. The examination of the standardized professional resumes of all active component three and four-star Army officers
(living, deceased, retired, and active duty) after 1985\textsuperscript{12} will allow us to develop a database that can then be used as a comparative rank analysis, year groups, and a variety of other variables. The database, while extensive by itself, should serve as a starting point for future researchers. Ideally, this effort could be extended to include both one and two-star ranks along with other military branches. The data aggregation will allow for a holistic comparison across time and service branch. Ultimately the analysis parsed with historical events could produce a Department of Defense institutional practices report card in selecting senior leaders. Refinements could then be implemented to produce an optimal senior leader development program which would provide the best possible national defense. The paper’s narrow lens will offer insight into the Army process of selecting senior leaders and provide a follow-on analysis template.

The paper’s structure will proceed with a discussion of the current Army personnel management process and promotion system up to the two-star level. This will allow us to focus exclusively on the three and four-star ranks. Next, an existing theories literature review related to the Army’s senior leaders’ selection will be discussed. The review will provide a foundation to build upon and it will

\textsuperscript{12} The Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 reorganized the officer promotion and selection process. Additionally, the 1980 Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA) requirements were implemented beginning in 1985. This dataset includes year groups 1943-1988.
allow the reader to fully understand alternative approaches. Following the literature review, I will introduce the research design by highlighting the key database variables established by coding general officer resumes. The design findings will be the result of a comparison between the three and four-star ranks. The comparison will specifically analyze what trends can be determined from those who got promoted to 4-stars versus those who were not selected and retired at the 3-star level. Trend comparisons within a rank, over time, also reveal interesting patterns. These patterns, or lack thereof, will be used to answer the paper’s central focus: What patterns are evident in the output of the Army’s 3 and 4-star selection process? The implications of these results will then be discussed through a civil-military lens with policy recommendations serving as the output. A brief discussion for specific follow-on research will then be offered.

1.1. Current Army System

At the Army’s institutional framework core for officers is Department of the Army Pamphlet 600-3: Commissioned Officer Professional Development and Career Management (DA PAM 600-3). This 486-page pamphlet:

“outlines officer development and career management programs for each of the Army’s career branches and functional areas. It does not prescribe the path of assignment or educational assignments that will guarantee
success but rather describes the full spectrum of developmental
opportunities an officer can expect throughout a career.”13

The document can be summarized in Figure 1, provided within the
pamphlet:

![Figure 1: Army Officer Career Progression 01-07](image)

Figure 1 outlines 2nd Lieutenant (grade 01) through Brigadier General
(grade 07) spanning a 28-year timeframe. It includes key positions at each grade
with “windows” for broadening and education opportunities. It also highlights
key developmental (KD) positions that are required at each grade in order to be
eligible for advancement to the next grade. Central to this process are the Army’s

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13 DA Pamphlet 600-3, i. Additionally, Schirmer, et al in Challenging Time in DOPMA, argue that
“it is obvious that an officer is expected to hold certain assignments [for promotion].” However,
they admit they “did not examine career patterns in actual officer records.” This study seeks to
confirm or deny their claim.
centralized selection boards.\textsuperscript{14} These boards “perpetuate the ideals, cultural
values, ethics, and professional standards of the Army by advancing and
retaining only those individuals best qualified to assume positions of greater
responsibility.”\textsuperscript{15} They determine retention, schooling, promotion, and command
designations by utilizing evaluation reports and strength requirements. These
boards are utilized up to the two-star level. Officers are selected to three and
four-star rank, “not from the outcome of a structured promotion board carefully
governed by law and policy but principally from the service chief and his fellow
four-star generals.”\textsuperscript{16} Therefore, the institutional Army precisely structures the
officer types it wants up the two-star level, around 250 officers. Roughly 60
officers move beyond this grade. They are hand selected by each other and
approved formally through the executive branch and Senate.

It is important to look critically at the process for selecting those
responsible for our nation’s survival. We cannot expect success if we are
unwilling to examine so vital a function. Senior leaders are the output of
decades’ worth of experience and indoctrination. Are we building them to
optimize performance at the strategic level?\textsuperscript{17} Are we leveraging a range of ideas

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{14} U.S. Army, “Army Regulation 600-8-29: Personnel General – Officer Promotions," Washington,
DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, February 2005.
\textsuperscript{15} DA Pamphlet 600-3, 10.
\textsuperscript{16} Barno, 27.
\textsuperscript{17} For a theoretical and business model approach to developing strategic leaders see Robert E.
Quinn,\textit{ Beyond rational management: Mastering the paradoxes and competing demands of high}
\end{flushright}
developed through a diversity of experiences or merely producing a uniform product on the spectrum of possible options? Other scholars have offered models to answer these questions and thus we shall begin there.

2. Literature Review

In 1960 Morris Janowitz published his seminal work in the field of Civil-Military Relations, *The professional soldier: A social and political portrait*. One of the book’s dependent variables is military self-perception; how does the military view itself? Janowitz introduces the idea that military hierarchy itself can answer this question. Those who are at the top (the elite cadre), referred here as “senior leaders,” determine what the military values because they fit the mold. Those who do not fit the mold or meet the institutional values leave military service. Janowitz was explicit in describing these particular values as dynamic and subject to change (mostly as a result of technological advances). His conclusions were the result of several studies that were an earlier version of what this research paper seeks to do.¹⁸

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The model he developed, that one can assess a military organization’s institutional values based on its senior leaders, is the same model I will use to ascertain what the Army currently values. At the time Janowitz was writing, he determined the critical variables required to attain elite cadre status were attendance at a service academy and exposure outside the prescribed career path.\(^{19}\) The prescribed, or ideal career path touted by the Army (the institution) at the time was operational assignments that allowed for constant rotation back to service with troops. Janowitz strongly argued that this prescribed path was a myth and not universal for the strategic personnel of the military profession.\(^{20}\) Essentially, the Army can outline a professional military education (PME) and experience path but this does not correlate to what the institution \textit{actually} values if the senior leaders’ duty assignments and experiences don’t align.

Morris Janowitz published his findings nearly 60 years ago. Are his conclusions still valid today? By utilizing the Army’s current prescribed career path shown in Figure 1 and comparing it to the resume data of the current senior leaders it is possible to confirm Janowitz’s findings. This will identify, as it did in Janowitz’s time, if the Army is achieving its prescribed goals or if a paradox still exists. The paradox outlined by Janowitz was that “the best leaders anticipate

\(^{19}\) Ibid, 126.  
\(^{20}\) Ibid, 167.
future requirements and expose themselves to experiences outside their prescribed career.” Thus, it is the innovators who can think strategically and will rise to the top. If, as Janowitz describes, this is optimal then why doesn’t the Army incentivize unconventional careers? Janowitz’s answer would suggest the military is highly resistant to change and “what happens in the past becomes a powerful precedent for future engagements.” Was Janowitz correct is his assessment? The empirical analysis in future sections of this paper will help us determine, as Steven Kerr cleverly framed it, if the Army is incentivizing career path “A,” while hoping for career path “B.”

Nearly two decades after *The professional soldier* was published, Richard Betts produced his landmark book, *Soldiers, Statesmen, and Cold War Crises*. The book primarily focuses on military influence on presidential decisions involving use of force, however, the author outlines a model of general officer appointments that is relevant to this study.

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In its current form, general officers are appointed by formal promotion boards up to the two-star level. Three and four-star ranks are nominated by fellow 4-star officers, approved by the service chief and service secretary, sent to the Secretary of Defense and the President, with final approval residing with Senate confirmation. Thus, prior to Senate confirmation, the President gets to select, albeit from a limited pool, the Army senior leadership.

Betts’ model describes three ways a president makes this decision as “routine-professional,” “professional-political,” or “exceptional-political.” Betts concludes his analysis with evidence suggesting that the military’s senior leaders are mostly appointed through the “routine-professionals” category because the closed military hierarchy narrows the candidate pool and produces a similar product. By the time leaders reach the nomination level, they have been fully inculcated in the Army’s culture (Janowitz’s argument) and are filtered to the senior leader level by individuals within the same organization. Stated differently, officers tend to agree with those who have followed a similar path to success, or “ducks picking ducks.” Betts describes the remaining two appointment categories as a safety net for the President to ensure that “the chief

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is not an enemy of administration policy or strategy.”

Much like Janowitz, Betts’ analysis supports the notion that the internal Army (the institution) mechanisms remove most of the diversity available and incentivizes a similar career trajectory. The final check in senior leader appointment is thus a formality that rarely gets denied. The findings of this study, discussed in a subsequent section, reveal more diversity in the senior leader candidate pool than Betts’ would suggest.

In contrast to Betts’ theory, Professor Peter Fever, finds the causation of the general officer selection process to be mostly political in nature. Feaver briefly discusses the process as a monitoring device within his larger civil-military Agency Theory. In Armed Servants, he explains how screening and selection mechanisms under the “monitoring” umbrella “ensure that only the right sort of agent [the military senior leader] enters into the contractual relationship.” The mechanisms allow the civilian agents (the President, Congress, etc.) to hire only those with characteristics they agree with because

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28 Betts, 56.
29 See also Meese and Calkins, 5: “The officer corps developed a strong preference for the ‘operational’ Army…Officers who took time away from the operational Army…put themselves at risk for promotion.”
32 Ibid, 78.
then they can more accurately predict future behavior with greater confidence. In summary, the military senior leader characteristics matter. Feaver elaborates that these characteristics are screened and socialized at various military service echelons through the PME system.\textsuperscript{33}

For Feaver, the importance of screening and the military accession process is to mitigate civil-military problems by promoting personnel who will share civilian preferences. In the context of this paper the idea speaks to the core of how the Army institutionally selects its senior leaders. If the underlying cause of selection (screening) is driven by civilian agents, then a healthy civil-military balance will likely be the result at the potential expense of an optimal Army senior leaders’ selection process. Are the civilians and their monitoring devices preventing the absolute best war fighters from ascending the ranks?

Feaver continues his rationale by highlighting how the President shapes the collective officer corps preferences through his ability to personally select officers to the most senior positions. The outcome of which is the promotion of senior leaders who will be “more in harmony with his administration’s policies.”\textsuperscript{34} Again, this may be necessary for healthy civil-military relations, but not necessarily for maintaining the optimal Army values. By shaping viewpoints,

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{33} Ibid, 79.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Feaver, 79.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
the President (civilian agent) affects the organizational culture. If, as Feaver describes it, the process is a political game, then behavior mutual conceptions allow both actors (military senior leaders and the civilian agents) to have “shared expectations of what the other will do.” The resume database developed in this study allows for former and current Army senior leaders career progression analysis. The analysis can more definitively articulate the civil-military relationship and if in fact the monitoring mechanisms Feaver advertises work.

Building on Feaver’s work, James Golby sought to answer, “what explains why certain military officers rise to the most senior positions while others do not?” He approached the question through a politicization lens rather than the experiential one that this paper seeks to do. Golby adeptly identifies that there has been “virtually no empirical work on the politics of the general officer appointment process.”35 His findings result in a 4-type model based on data derived from political campaign contributions of retired four-star officers. I seek to approach the same question from an institutional selection process given general officers’ resume data.

I will argue, as does Golby\textsuperscript{36}, that he only addresses a small slice of this question towards the end of its natural conclusion. To understand why certain officers are selected while others are not, we must identify career progression trends at a much earlier stage than the three and four-star level, something my resume dataset can achieve. Golby’s analysis highlights micro-differences among a very small pool of military officers. To get at the underlying question we must determine how the Army itself filters leaders to the very top ranks. The resume dataset in this study allows for a comprehensive examination of trends among those who have achieved the highest Army ranks. Unlike Golby’s model, I can observe numerous variables from the moment a senior leader is commissioned. These trends, coupled with Golby’s findings, paint a more holistic picture of the general officer appointment process.

Nevertheless, Golby’s model is helpful if we accept Feaver’s proposition that the President chooses those generals who most closely align with the President’s beliefs and thus influence the Army’s organizational culture writ large. A conclusion of Golby’s model is that “there may be considerable overlap between the military and political spheres.”\textsuperscript{37} In short, Golby argues that politics (partisan or ideological predispositions) is a general officer appointments driver.

\textsuperscript{36} Golby, 5.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, 20.
Golby’s contribution to this body of research helps us to understand the final piece of the senior leader selection process. However, this final piece is immaterial if the Army is weeding out potential talent at lower ranks to produce a virtually identical product at the senior leader level (as Janowitz and Betts suggest). If the institution filters and selects only those officers with the requisite skills and background desired by the institution (Golby’s “professional dominance model”), then senior leaders will be more alike than different. If the data developed in this paper confirms the process and it is coupled with Golby’s conclusion, then it is possible we have arrived at the healthiest civil-military balance. The President and congress are thus merely selecting a personality to work with, not the senior leader competence or commitment because the institutional Army has already selected for those qualities.

A recent research report published by the Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences (ARI) sought to investigate the preparedness and development of Army senior leaders. The study primarily used survey data from a workshop and in-depth semi-structured interviews. The authors admit that the study did not “involve a comprehensive job analysis,” (which this

39 Ibid, 1.
paper seeks to do by identifying trends in duty assignments, from
commissioning through retirement), among those selected to the senior leader
level. The report’s overall conclusion indicates that “Army leaders felt
underprepared for the challenges they faced...The Army culture is not fully
supportive of strategic thinking development.” The discovery points to an
urgent need to understand how the institutional Army is preparing and selecting
its senior leaders.

The ARI report determined strategic thinking competencies are critical for
senior leader success. Identifying and understanding specific experiences
(academic and duty assignments) and evaluating trends can bring us closer to
understanding where gaps exist between an optimal outcome and the status quo.
The report further clarifies that PME, Advanced Civil Education (ACS), and
having a diverse range of duty assignments are critical to developing strategic
thinking skills, and thus building the best senior leaders. Specifically, the
following types of assignments are the most developmental: teaching, joint and

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40 Ibid, i.
42 Sackett, et al referred to the concept as advanced civil education, however, the official Army program is known as Advanced Civil Schooling (ACS).
interagency, exposure to general officers, and strategic-level assignments.43 This
ccontemporary evidence highlights the Army career paradox Janowitz and Betts
articulated. To gain the skills necessary to being an optimal senior leader, one
must pursue an unconventional career path. The report determined that the
Army’s organizational culture is this paradox’s primary factor:

“Army culture is so focused on tactical excellence that other forms of
excellence are undervalued…Thus, there is a fundamental tension because
most high-level jobs are institutional and strategic, but leaders get there
through tactical excellence, which takes a different set of skills to be
successful…The Amy culture creates ‘a homogenous force’ because of
similar PME.”44

The research design within this paper seeks to provide empirical evidence
counter to these claims. While the Army does institutionally value operational
and direct leadership experience, there is more than one path officers can take to
reach the senior leader level. The design will use several of the ARI report
identified categories to help code general officer’s assignment history and
empirically prove that the paradox is not as evident as previously thought.
Before introducing the research design, it is important to briefly outline what is
meant by the Army “institution” and individual’s “experiences.”

43 Sackett, et al, 22. Also, Both Janowitz and Betts provide anecdotal evidence to suggest that
unconventional assignments are a benefit and serve to offer the officer a promotion advantage.
44 Sackett, et al, 32-34. See also Meese and Calkins, “Back to the Future”: 5 and Barno, Statement
2.1. Affecting Change in the Army

A recent article written by J.P. Clark, “Adapting to Strategic Change: Organizational Change and Adaptation in the US Army,” neatly defines three categories of influence that power change within the Army. These include institutions, experiences, and culture. The use of these terms in prior sections of this paper are in alignment with the definitions presented here.

“Institutions refer to all the mechanisms by which a military deliberately tries to shape the profession: curricula of military schools, policies governing the selection of officers, systems of promotion, and methods of organizing and giving preference to certain functional specialties over others.

Experiences encompass all the elements of military service that shape perceptions but are outside the control of the institution, such as informal norms or experiences in war.

Culture: the values, concepts, and outlooks inherited from civilian society.”45

This paper will provide an empirical dataset for the various institutions and experiences characteristics, which will allow us cross-generational as well as intra-generational comparison. A closer examination of how the Army defines its own institution will allow greater fidelity in accurately coding the dataset. In turn, the dataset will allow us to summarize the Army’s current culture, which is derived from a combination of experiences, civilian cultural influences, and

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institutional Army navigation. In other words, “an organization’s culture is composed of the norms and the shared values and premises (taken-for-granted assumptions) of its members… the habits and routines that develop, and the unwritten understandings that people gain about ‘how business gets done around here.’”46 Accurately pinpointing the Army’s culture through the selection of its senior leaders gives us insight into the change and development mechanism within the Army over time. At the center of this change mechanism are the Army’s senior leaders who steer the Army culture through its institutions.47

Several factors affect the extent that senior leaders can influence change. These include law, budget, and policy.48 An example of the policy impact can be seen in the 1980 Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA).49 This act was the last major Army personnel management structure revision. DOPMA created officer strength limits and “replaced an existing patchwork of rules and regulations governing the management of military officers.”50 It established the

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46 Robert P. Vecchio, Leadership: Understanding the dynamics of power and influence in organizations, University of Notre Dame Press, 2007: 485. See also Quinn, 66.
47 J.P. Clark, 27.
48 DA Pamphlet 600-3, 10.
promotion timelines framework (up-or-out system\textsuperscript{51}) and created uniformity across the military services.

A 1993 RAND assessment concluded that the 1980 DOPMA was “a better static description of the desired officer structure than a dynamic management tool.”\textsuperscript{52} The act did not allow for rapid changes or adjustments but did allow some flexibility. It, along with U.S. Code Title 10 has served as the Army senior leaders’ baseline legal structure to develop the Army’s Officer Personnel Management System (OPMS). One additional formal guiding document is Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction 1800.01D (CJCSI1800.01D).\textsuperscript{53} Last updated in 2011, this document provides “policies, procedures, and objectives” from the Chairman to the branch service chiefs regarding officer PME and Joint-PME. These policies have resulted in a standardized method to develop officers within the Army (see Figure 1, page 7).

3. Research Design

The current Army senior leaders commissioned in the late 1970’s to early 1980’s are the first “batch” of officers to navigate the OPMS created by the 1980


\textsuperscript{52} Rostker, et al, V.

\textsuperscript{53} Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction (CJCSI) 1800.01D, Officer Professional Military Education Policy (OPMEP), September 15, 2011.
DOPMA. By evaluating trends in their career progression, we can determine OPMS and DOPMA outputs. We can thus use the existing structure as an analytical frame to compare leaders across time and grade. The best experience and alignment indicator with this system will be an officer’s assignment history.\textsuperscript{54} When, where, and assignment type reveals a significant amount of information. The “assignment history” variable has multiple elements that determine how an officer is given an assignment. These factors include: Army needs, officer availability, professional development needs, other assignment considerations (preference, training and education, personal and compassionate factors, and overseas equity).\textsuperscript{55} In short, timing, luck,\textsuperscript{56} and “who you know” plays a role in determining if an officer will serve in optimal career progression assignments. The Army’s authoritative documents on officer career management readily admit they do not define an optimal success path. Similarly, this paper will not prove a single “optimal” path\textsuperscript{57}, rather it will show five distinct assignment paths an officer can take to achieve the Army’s senior-most ranks. Additionally, the design will reveal noticeable trends among other variables that

\textsuperscript{54} Meese and Calkins, 2, suggest four general categories: training, education, assignments, and mentoring. The first three can be quantified using resume data but the fourth category cannot.\textsuperscript{55} DA Pamphlet 600-3, 22-23.\textsuperscript{56} See Janowitz, 126: Luck is being at the “right spot when new opportunities suddenly develop.”\textsuperscript{57} The study can show the highest probability path to the SL level. See page 47.
past and present Army senior leaders have, which suggests institutional importance.

This paper’s research design is a straightforward process. Simply put, it is a database of standardized resumes of all three and four-star Army officers who have served after 1985. The timeframe was selected because it was the first year the 1980 DOMPA affects were implemented, which included standardizing officer resumes. Additionally, joint duty assignments and education became required by law in 1986 with the passage of the Goldwater Nichols Act. These two converging policies created a reliable and consistent data source. The Army General Officer Management Office (GOMO) has served as the primary source for resume collection used in this research. The data source includes 101 total 4-star resumes (11 active duty and 90 retired) as well as 379 3-star resumes (46 active duty and 333 retired). These 480 standardized resumes include every Army officer promoted to 3 and 4-star grades who retired or are still serving after 1985.

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58 The database consists of 1113 columns (categories of information) and 480 rows (3 and 4-star officers) of data. The effective cutoff date from new information is May 01, 2017.
The resumes were coded per the following categories: commissioning year, commissioning source, academic education (civilian and military), military courses, badges and qualifications, branch (functional area), valor medals, and specific assignments performed at each rank. This includes 870 different duty positions (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LT</th>
<th>CPT</th>
<th>MAJ</th>
<th>LTC</th>
<th>COL</th>
<th>BG</th>
<th>MG</th>
<th>LTG</th>
<th>GEN</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>62</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>870</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1: Number of duty positions by rank**

The Table 1 numbers represent the total number of duty positions held by the 480 officers in the study starting at Lieutenant through General. They can help shed light on broadening assignments, exposure to general officers, and instructor positions to name a few. They can also be used to identify unique assignments by the specific duty position, such as speech writer or assistant professor at a service academy. Identifying every possible experience will allow a comparison between individuals within the same rank as well as other ranks, and allow for trend identification. As an example, if 100% of four-star officers have served as a battalion commander, then this signifies battalion command as a critical factor (or chokepoint) to becoming a senior leader. The data will also offer insight into over and underrepresentation of specific categories at the 4-star level. One example includes commissioning source. Around 50% of all Army

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60 Year of commissioning is also referred to as an officer’s “year group.”

61 See Table 4 below.
officers are commissioned through the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC), yet only 38.6% of 4-stars are ROTC graduates. This represents a nearly 12% ROTC graduate underrepresentation at the 4-star level.

In addition to identifying trends within the same rank (such as the average number of command positions held by 4-star officers), a comparison between those of different ranks may reveal additional patterns. For example, we can compare those selected to the 4-star rank with those who retired at the 3-star level and were thus not selected. Significant differences can reveal institutional preferences for 4-star generals. Other dataset uses include comparisons between active duty and retired senior leaders. The comparisons can reveal changes in institutional values over time. For example, 61.4% of active duty senior leaders have two graduate degrees, whereas only 19.6% of retired senior leaders do. Some questions will be beyond the scope of the implications presented here, however, the database will allow future research to unequivocally prove commonalities or diversity within the Army three and four-star ranks.

3.1. Database Results

Database Results – Paths to 4-stars

The overall dataset results indicate that there are at least five career paths possible to achieve the 4-star general rank. The paths include: instructor,
commander, exposure to policymakers, joint\textsuperscript{62}, and balanced. Recall that officers are limited in the time they can spend at each rank due to the up-or-out promotion system. Therefore, the number of duty assignments at each rank are limited. By determining averages for each duty position held for those who have attained the 4-star rank, a baseline can be determined. Officers who perform duty assignments repeatedly throughout their career, at numerous ranks, will be above average in that category and fall into one of the paths. The “balanced” path is for those officers who have a balanced career and do not have an above average number of assignments in any single category. Table 2 shows the average number of duty positions held by 4-star officers among four of the five paths.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>AVE # Positions Held</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commander</td>
<td>5.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposure</td>
<td>1.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor</td>
<td>1.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Average number of duty positions held by 4-star officers among four path categories

\textsuperscript{62} Some “joint” duty positions are command billets or “exposure” positions. The database developed for this study codes all command positions (regardless if Joint) in the “Commander” category or exposure category to better isolate the categories. The duty positions considered “joint” can be found in Appendix B. For example, GEN Dempsey served as a “Special Assistant to the CJCS”. This duty assignment is categorized in the “exposure” path despite its simultaneous joint classification. Joint assignments in this database are those that do not overlap with any other path.
Table 3 visually shows the four-star officers in this study arranged by the path they took to reach the senior leader level. Again, an officer was placed into a “path” or category if they held an above average number of duty assignment in that category.

![Table 3: General officers by path taken to achieve 4-stars](image)

For example, the average number of command positions held by those reaching the 4-star rank is 5.99. Therefore any 4-star officer with more than 6 duty assignments as a Commander would be categorized in the “commander” path. The current Army Chief of Staff, GEN Milley, commanded nine different times during his career and would therefore be considered on the “command” path. GEN Milley has also performed in three joint assignments, which is above the .73 average and thus he would also fall on the “joint” path. GEN Milley is not alone in being categorized along more than one path. 36 of the 97 4-stars officers in this study are above average in duty positions held in multiple categories and can thus be placed into more than one path.

The results of this finding show that the Army has institutionally developed numerous paths to achieving the General rank. The Janowitzian claim

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63 See Appendix A for larger version of this table. Presented here as a visual representation of diversity among 4-star population.
that innovators will rise to the top is partially vindicated. If we categorize the “commander” category as the path Janowitz describes as the “prescribed” career path or the “operational” career path we can see that the average number of times this position is held is higher than the other paths. However, the fact that other paths exist gives credibility to Janowitz’s argument. The Army incentivizes the command path, yet allows for other paths to emerge. The data reveals much greater diversity, with respect to assignment history, among the Army’s senior leaders than Janowitz or Betts account for.

The remainder of this section will employ Janowitz’s model (an organization’s institutional values are based on its senior leaders) through the comparison of those who achieved the 4-stars rank with those who retired at the 3-star rank and thus were not selected to the highest level. The comparison’s results will offer additional insight into the selection process of the Army’s senior leaders over the past half century and shed light on what the Army institutionally values. In addition to the five paths listed above, the standardized resumes allow for comparison of the following variables: commissioning source, military and civilian education, valor medals earned, military badges earned, and branch type. Finally, a comparison of duty positions held at each rank from

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64 Active duty 3-stars are not included because they still have the potential to be selected to the 4-star grade.
Lieutenant to Lieutenant General can be made to determine trends among those who made it to the 4-star rank.

**Database Results – Path Comparison Between GEN and LTG Retired**

Figures 2 thru 5 represent a comparison between 4-star officers and 3-star officers who retired before achieving the General rank in the “path” categories. These figures visually highlight the differences among those selected to General, and thus reveal the Army’s institutional preferences.

Figure 2 reveals that in all but one instance, 4-star officers serve in a greater number of command positions than those not selected to 4-star.
Figure 3 reveals that those selected to the General rank serve in more duty positions with exposure to policy makers and general officers than do those who retire at the Lieutenant General rank.

Figure 4: Number of instructor positions performed by rank comparison

The data displayed in Figure 4 reveals that Generals have a slightly higher percentage of officers who serve in instructor positions than those who retire at Lieutenant General.
Figure 5 indicates Generals perform in slightly more joint positions overall than Lieutenant Generals not selected to the 4-star level.

In summary, differences between those selected to the General rank and those not selected (LTG Retired) do exist, however, they are not extreme differences. The “bench” of three-star officers available for selection to 4-star and those promoted to 4-star look very similar. The 3-stars not selected are thus following the same paths at the same rate as those selected to 4-star. This suggests further evidence of the five paths to promotion, as well as Army institutional preferences evidence.
Database Results – Other Variables

The resume database provides additional comparison variables to include: commissioning source, civilian and military education, valor medals, badges earned, and branch type. The comparisons’ results between those selected to General and those not selected using these variables provides additional evidence in determining the senior leaders’ characteristics that the Army institutionally values.

**Figure 6: Commissioning source by rank comparison**

The Figure 6 data indicates a higher United States Military Academy (USMA) graduates’ selection rate to the 4-star level. This confirms Janowitz’s finding that attendance at a service academy is critical and that this institutional preference is further magnified by observing the active component officers’ commissioning sources. Table 4 highlights the commissioning source by percentage and reveals that most officers (50.2%) are commissioned through the ROTC program. However, only 38.6% of 4-star officers are commissioned through ROTC. Those not selected to the 4-star level (LTG Retired) are much
closer to the ROTC commissioning source percentage at 51.7%. However, those who retire at Lieutenant General are more than twice as likely to be USMA graduates than the overall commissioning rate, thereby revealing an Army USMA graduates’ preference at the senior-most level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DA</th>
<th>OCS</th>
<th>OTHER</th>
<th>ROTC</th>
<th>SERVICE ACADEMY</th>
<th>UNK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>50.2%</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Active component commission source by percentage historical averages

Figures 7 and 8 both suggest minor differences between those selected to General and those who retire at the Lieutenant General rank with regard to military and civilian education.

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In summary, the 3-star bench, with regard to the “degree type” and “military schools” variables are essentially the same as those who advance to 4-stars. The degree type and military schools’ variables do however, reveal institutional preferences at an aggregate level for advancement to the senior leader ranks. For example, the majority of officers who rose to the 3 and 4-star ranks only have one advanced degree from a civilian institution. Another clear preference example is attendance at the Army Command and General Staff College (Army CGSC). There are multiple options for this education level, yet approximately 75% of all senior leaders (3 and 4-stars) attend CGSC. The next three variables reveal differences between the 3 and 4-star ranks.
The “valor medal” variable (Figure 9) highlights a preference in senior leader selection. 4-star officers have more valor medals than those who retire at the 3-star rank. This may indicate that those who have earned a valor medal are more likely to be selected to the 4-star rank from the available 3-star officers. While the medal itself might not be the cause, the associated combat and leadership experience that comes with earning such a medal certainly plays a role. The medal is likely a combat realm success indicator and that an officer has the personal values the Army wants. Thus, the valor medal variable is an indicator (albeit not the sole determinant) in the Army’s senior leaders’ institutional preference.

Like the valor medal variable, the “badges earned” variable likely represents character traits the Army prefers within the institution. Figure 10
shows those selected to General have higher Ranger, Special Forces, and Airborne qualifications percentages than those who retire at Lieutenant General.

Figure 10: Badges earned by rank comparison

For example, the data in Figure 10 indicates that 53% of 4-star officers are Ranger qualified. This is significant because only around 750 officers\(^{66}\) graduate Ranger school each year out of approximately 80,000 active duty officers\(^{67}\). It is unlikely an officer was selected to the senior leader level solely based on Ranger or Airborne qualifications, however, the data does indicate an institutional preference for certain badges and qualifications.


The “branch type” variable (Figure 11) suggests two additional Army institutional preferences. The first is that the Army prefers officers to have only one branch. The second is that the Army institutionally selects armor and infantry officers to senior leader more than any other branch.

**Figure 11: Branch type by rank comparison**

Several possible reasons exist for the combat arms branches’ selection over other branches. The most obvious reason being that 4-star billets are responsible for large combat formations with the primary purpose of fighting and winning the nation’s wars. It would seem obvious to place those with the most warfighting experience into General positions. Additionally, 3-star billets have a direct counterpart position for each respective branch. For example, the Army G2 (a 3-star billet) is the senior Army intelligence officer and is therefore normally filled by an officer with an intelligence background. Until recently, a 4-star billet
with a direct intelligence background application did not exist. Thus, the institutional preference for infantry and armor officers at the 4-star level is a recurring trend that exists in the contemporary environment.

It is important to highlight that those in infantry and armor branches attend certain schools such as Airborne, Ranger, and Special Forces at much greater percentages than other branches. If these two branches are selected at higher rates, then it would be natural for Figures 8, 9, and 10 to be skewed in favor of qualifications and experiences that infantry and armor officers would complete. This linkage between variables suggest that the Army’s institutional preferences are embedded across many avenues in the senior leaders’ selection process. The Army is incentivizing a particular career path (through advancement), but it is also hoping for those career paths because those are the skills and experiences it wants at the senior level.

**Database Results – GEN and LTG Retired Comparison at Each Rank**

The paths and variables compared above suggest that the Army has institutional preferences for its senior leaders and the officer population as a whole. This database result section will highlight differences at each rank (LT through LTG) between those selected to 4-star and those who retired at the 3-star

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68 GEN Keith Alexander, an intelligence officer, recently served as the first NSA/CYBERCOM Director, a 4-star billet.
level. These comparisons reveal additional information highlighting institutional
duty assignment preferences as well as variances between Generals and retired
Lieutenant Generals. To make the data manageable in graphic form, I will focus
only on those duty positions with a 4% or greater variance between Generals and
Retired Lieutenant Generals. Refer back to Table 1: Number of duty positions by
rank.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LT</th>
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<td>120</td>
<td>89</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>870</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Number of duty positions by rank
Duty positions with a high variance between the 3 and 4-star populations help reveal the Army’s preference for its senior most leaders (4-star officers). It is more efficient (and more preference revealing) to focus only on those duty positions that have a high variance between the 3 and 4-star ranks. For example, there are 62 different Lieutenant⁶⁹ duty positions performed by Generals and Lieutenant Generals in the database, yet only 5 of these positions have a 4% or greater variance between the two ranks (see Figure 12).

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⁶⁹ 2nd and 1st Lieutenant positions were not distinguished on the standardized resumes and have thus been consolidated.
Figure 12 reveals two insights about Army institutional preferences. The first are the duty positions it wants young officers to perform. These include the PL (Platoon Leader) and XO (Executive Officer) positions because historically a high percentage of both 3 and 4-star officers have served in these positions. The second insight reveals the differences between who was ultimately selected to the 4-star level and those who were not. For example, Figure 12 shows those selected to 4-star performed in the Army’s institutionally preferred positions at a higher rate. These two insights will recur for Figures 13 thru 19, showing the Army’s duty position preferences at each rank.
Figure 13: CPT duty positions with 4% or greater variance by rank comparison

Figure 14: MAJ duty positions with 4% or greater variance by rank comparison
Figure 15: LTC duty positions with 4% or greater variance by rank comparison

Figure 16: COL duty positions with 4% or greater variance by rank comparison
Figure 17: BG duty positions with 4% or greater variance by rank comparison

Figure 18: MG duty positions with 4% or greater variance by rank comparison
At each rank, the Army has preferences with respect to duty position. Figures 12 thru 19 indicate the specific positions the Army desires its senior leaders to have performed. While there are several “mandatory” positions, most notably battalion and brigade command, there is enough diversity to suggest multiple avenues (paths) to the highest levels.

**Database Results – Operational and Leadership Experience**

One of the overall findings of this study refutes Janowitz’s paradox that Army leaders “expose themselves to experiences outside their prescribed career” in order to advance to the senior leader level. The above Figures, derived from historical resume data, shows very clearly what the Army values: operational and leadership experience. While this is the primary prescribed career path, other options are still available as evidenced by the five paths to the 4-star rank.

To determine the path with the highest probability of attaining 4-stars we take the duty positions at each rank with the highest completion percentages.
(indicated in parenthesis), along with the analysis categories with the highest percentages. The results show the following:

Highest probability path to 4-stars: Commission from USMA (48.5%) → have only one branch (73%) → Preferably Armor (40%) or Infantry (63%) → As a Lieutenant, serve as a platoon leader (86.6%) and/or an executive officer (62.9%) → As a Captain, serve as a Company Commander (95.9%), Attend graduate school as a duty assignment (54.6%), and/or as an assistant operations officer (40.2%) → As a Major, serve as a Battalion Operations Officer (63.9%), Battalion Executive Officer (49.5%), and/or as a Brigade staff primary (40.2%) → As a Lieutenant Colonel, serve as a Battalion Commander (100%) and/or as a Division Operations Officer (27.6%) → as a Colonel, serve as a Brigade Commander (95.9%) and/or as a Deputy Chief of Staff (20%) → as a Major General, serve as a Division Commander (72%), and/or as a the Commander of a Center of Excellence (12%) → Finally, as a Lieutenant General, serve as a Corps Commander (33%), Deputy Chief of Staff (28%), and/or as the Deputy Commander of a Major Command (15%).

Additionally, the following factors are significant → have only one master degree (68%) preferably from a civilian school (86%) → Attend Army Command and General Staff College (74%) → Attend the Army War College (53%) → Serve on the Army Staff (65%) → and earn the Joint Chiefs of Staff Badge (53%), Ranger tab (53%), and airborne qualification (85%). Having the following may also contribute: Bronze Star with valor (36.7%), Silver star (33.7%) and the Purple Heart (29.6%).

The results of this “highest probability” path still leaves numerous other paths available. It is therefore reasonable to state that senior leader selection is really a combination of assignment diversity and strategic experience coupled with those characteristics deemed most critical to winning wars (Ranger

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70 Seventeen 4-star officers have served as both armor and infantry officers. The data does not factor out those who have served as both, rather it looks at each branch separately. The same is true for each of the subsequent ranks and associated positions.
qualified, infantry, battalion and brigade command, etc.). The database results developed here show that there is an institutional preference in how senior leaders are selected. We can thus conclude that the Army institutionally values operational and leadership experience, but not at the expense of teaching, joint, exposure to policymakers, or a balance of experiences.

4. Results Implications

As previously stated, the study cannot solely determine if the Army is producing the “optimal” senior leader. However, it can provide a historical baseline that can be used to help determine optimality. The study’s three central findings: The Army has preferences for selecting senior leaders, multiple paths are possible to the senior leader level, and the most preferred path is operational and command experience. These central findings provide a starting point for evaluating OPMS effectiveness. The implications of these findings can help pinpoint change implementation if required.

Changing policy within the Army is not an easy task. As Stephen Rosen argues, “military organizations innovate only in wartime after catastrophic failure,” and only in peacetime when “prompted by civilian intervention.”71 The Army readily admits that it must continue to transform and “modernize the Army’s assignment and professional management systems to meet the Army’s

71 Rosen, 7.
needs, now and as the Army adjusts to changing end strength and mission
demands,” yet, substantial changes have not occurred despite nearly fifteen
years of active conflict. If additional research, policymakers, or the Army itself,
determines it is producing sub-optimal senior leaders, then reform will be
necessary. The results of this study, along with continued research can bolster
reform efforts by validating current processes or highlighting areas of
improvement.

If changes do not occur, the Army will continue to generate senior leaders
based on a model developed a generation ago. The resulting “ingenuity gap”
could have catastrophic consequences for US national security. Steps must be
made to close the Army’s increasing “ingenuity gap” when it exists. Defined as
“a growing gulf between the need for increasingly creative, new ideas and their
likely supply;” the ingenuity gap is occurring because the Army is utilizing “an
officer management system optimized for static conditions.” This outdated
model, may not be designed to optimize Army senior leaders.

Competing and contradictory recommendations from think tanks and
academics have not helped the Army implement changes. A necessary first step

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72 DA Pamphlet 600-3, 3.
73 The phrase was coined by Thomas Homer-Dixon. See Homer-Dixon, Thomas. The Ingenuity Gap. New
York: Knopf, 2000. However, I use the version presented in The Ingenuity Gap CSIS study.
74 Maren Leed and David Sokolow, The ingenuity gap: Officer management for the 21st century,
CSIS, 2010.
is to accurately identify what type of senior leader the current system produces (this paper’s intent). Anecdotal evidence, survey data, and retired senior leaders’ opinions are inherently biased and limited in scope. Studies and reports conducted using this data type may thus produce insufficient or counterproductive recommendations. The Army cannot serve as a reform “test bed.” Shocks to the existing institution in the form of radical officer management can result in a less ready and less well-led force. Identifying where the Army currently exists and where it wants to be are the necessary first steps to understanding any policy recommendations impacts.

There are many factors that determine an officers’ success. Notably, performance in a certain position is critical for advancement. This study assumes that given two officers of equal talent, motivation, performance levels, and fitness, that the difference in their selection to higher ranks can be greatly influenced by duty assignment and the other variables previously mentioned. An officer can give themselves the best advancement probability by following the previous generations’ success formula. As shown, certain occupational specialties within the combat arena are also mandated for an officer to even be considered to rise to the senior leader level.

The Army exists to fight and win the nation’s wars. As an institution, it must have safeguards in place to prevent tampering with this fundamental
objective. The establishment of a universal officer development and selection pipeline up to the two-star rank allows the Army to maintain its core principles and institutional culture. The limited number of three and four-star generals at the very top become the stewards of this tradition and contribute to its survival.

An ideal civil-military balance is created when civilians grant military professionals with the autonomy necessary to create and select the institution’s preferred senior leaders. The current system does allow for civilians to have a vote in the process, but none that would radically alter the Army overnight. The Army protects itself by interpreting and adjusting gradually to the threats, both domestic and foreign, that it faces. Despite this balance, optimality may not be occurring. If an Army senior leader is determined to be suboptimal because they can’t win a war, can’t navigate the interagency, can’t effectively work with partnered nations, etc. this study can help determine why. It can isolate the “path” and the experiences that built a particular leader. Policymakers and other Army senior leaders can then alter a specific “failing” path, fine tune a trend in the senior leader selection process, or select leaders from the path most needed.

For example, if senior leaders are determined to be failing in the interagency process, this study can quickly highlight individuals from the “exposure” path.

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who may be better suited for the job. The study can also reveal that the average number of “exposure” positions held is 1.47. If navigating the interagency is determined to be a critical need, then targeted changes can be made to increase the average to ensure leaders who filter to the top will be better prepared.

Careful civil-military balance consideration must be given if changes are made. The system of selecting and developing a “bench” of Army senior leaders from which civilian leaders choose from will be a continuing requirement regardless of the OPMS internal structure. This study can provide a historical reference for evaluating how successful the civil-military relationships have been and it can pinpoint where to make necessary changes to increase optimality.

While not everyone can ascend to the organization’s top tier, the Army must be certain that it is not overly pre-selecting talent from a narrow slice of the overall officer population or that the current OPMS is inflexible and weeds out mavericks.76 The dataset developed here provides the Army an opportunity to grade itself. The implications of which can help bolster policy recommendations.

5. Policy Recommendations

Numerous competing policy recommendations have recently been published to address the Army’s outdated OPMS in an effort to develop senior

\[76\] See Rosen, 10-11 where he describes mavericks as officers “who provide civilians with the military expertise they lack.” Further, mavericks are those officers who can innovate due to their unique experiences.
leaders to meet current and future demands. This study’s results can assist in determining to what extent reform is required and the impact any reforms would have. If the Army is determined to be achieving low optimality, then major revisions to the existing system will be required. If, however, moderate optimality is being achieved then only minor changes within the existing structure will help achieve better results. Finally, if the dataset helps reveal that the Army is achieving high optimality, then change would only be required in response to a change in external conditions such as a revolution in military affairs (RMA) or an unforeseen wartime catastrophe. In summary, the following recommendations are tailorable based on the results’ significance -- the optimality level being achieved by the Army.

5.1. Recommendations for Low Optimality

If policymakers conclude that the Army is achieving low optimality in selecting its senior leaders, then major reforms will be necessary. Three such reforms include: the competency-based model, the two-track model, and the up-or-stay model.

A 2010 CSIS report suggests “fundamentally shift the basis for promotion eligibility from a system focused on time (in service or in grade) to one
predicated on competencies.” The competency-based model presented in *Challenging Time in DOPMA* provides a detailed alternative to the current model:

“The key distinctions between a competency-based system and today’s time-based system are the rules governing eligibility for promotion: Accumulated experience gained through jobs, education, and training would make officers eligible for promotion.”

This flexible system, based on officer competency rather than time, would require lengthening careers (and assignments) and widening promotion zones. The competency-based model aligns with the overall findings in this paper in that “a competency based system would allow for more varied career paths” and greater senior leader level expertise.

A competing policy recommendation to the idea of broadening officers was presented in *Building Better Generals*, a Center for A New American Security (CNAS) study. This study’s main conclusion is that senior leaders need to be placed into one of two tracks: warfighting (“operational”) and institutional (“enterprise”) and to be permitted to extend the length of their assignments to five years. The idea is that “flag officers selected for two-star rank to one of these tracks, would enable officers to optimize their development and education for

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77 Leed and Sokolow, VII. For a detailed analysis of the impacts and design of a competency-based OPMS see also Shirmer, et al, *Challenging Time In DOPMA*: Ch. 4-5.
78 Schirmer, et al in *Challenging Time in DOPMA*: XVI.
79 Leed and Sokolow, VIII.
the responsibilities of their assignment.” The report’s conclusion provides further evidence of an outdated OPMS that does not optimize senior leader development.

A third alternative to the Army’s current up-or-out model was proposed in *New Paths to Success: Determining Career Alternatives for Field Grade Officers.* The authors of this study argue that the current OPMS has created a “culture that defines success by promotion” rather than expertise or ability. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld made a similar argument that officers were “skipping along the tops of waves” because the OPMS does not allow adequate time for professional development or expertise in a given area. To solve this problem, the study recommends an “up-or-stay” policy. The transformation would reduce costs, lower officer turnover, increase career stability, and most importantly, create a more experienced workforce. The new method could be accomplished by broadening promotion zones, extending officer assignments, and extending officer’s careers.

81 Barno, 5.
5.2. **Recommendations for Moderate Optimality**

If policymakers conclude that the Army is achieving moderate optimality in selecting its senior leaders, then only minor reforms will be necessary. These reforms could be accomplished within the existing OPMS framework and would not require as much time to generate results as would the creation of an entirely new model (as suggested above). Again, these recommendations are tailorable based on the precise deficiencies identified in this study. The below discussion is a laundry list of options, not a comprehensive plan. These options are designed to steer senior leader development and selection towards the high optimality end of the spectrum.

In 2009, the House Armed Services Committee was grappling with this exact problem—how to make marginal changes within the existing structure to optimize PME. In Dr. Williamson Murray’s opening statement to the Committee he proposed that Congress “fund a significant overage of officers at all grades to allow time for serious study without penalty to either their careers or to operational requirements.”

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86 Williamson Murray, Opening Statement before U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations; hearing, Charting the Course for Effective Professional Military Education. Washington, DC, September 10, 2009: 9.
educational experiences. Meese and Calkins came to a similar conclusion by suggesting a reduction in key development-mandated assignments while simultaneously increasing graduate school programs and opportunities. Other studies suggest even bolder changes to include improving competencies and opportunities during accession and pre-commissioning or to directly hire experts through lateral entry. Similarly, Peter Rosen suggests “fast-track” flexibility to foster innovation and the ability to promote skills or talents that are required.

These recommendations would institutionally mandate the “paths” to senior leader level. The results would filter up to the three-star level and provide a “bench” that can readily be pulled from to the four-star level. This bench provides insurance against group think and unanticipated future threats. The “moderate optimality” suggestions could develop the 3-star bench along even more paths by incentivizing non-traditional career paths and experiences. At a minimum, officers would not be penalized for performing duties that don’t fit the current success model, or Army preferences. A possible approach to achieving this desired end state is to align career incentives with those character

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87 David Barno, Statement before U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations; hearing, Charting the Course for Effective Professional Military Education. Washington, DC, September 10, 2009: 47.
88 Meese and Calkins, “Back to the Future”: 10-11. See also Flowers, 42.
89 Flowers, 41.
90 Rosen, 87.
traits and skills most desired at the senior leader level. If senior leaders are expected to have strategic thinking and interagency skills, then junior officer positions that develop these skills must be favored over the more common tactical positions. If prioritizing these skills is too radical a shift, incremental steps can be made to ensure they eventually rise above the promotion cut line through explicit instructions to promotion boards and evaluators.

5.3. **Recommendations for High Optimality**

Finally, if policymakers conclude that the Army is achieving high optimality in selecting its senior leaders, then no change is required. It means the current OPMS has worked as intended and would only require continual refinements based on emerging threats and factors outside the Army’s control (budget allocation from Congress, RMA, etc.).

5.4. **Policy Recommendation Conclusion**

To prevent too radical a jolt to the current system, any new methods or changes should be limited to junior officers or specific functional areas and phased in slowly. Additional thought would need to be given to the repercussions from changing the underlying OPMS. A benefit of these proposals is the flexibility they allow the Army in choosing senior leaders while maintaining subject matter expertise. The Army could rapidly close the ingenuity gap if it needed to under any of the above changes to the current OPMS.
6. Conclusion

This study has primarily sought to determine how the Army institutionally selects its 3 and 4-star officers. The central focus, What patterns are evident in the output of the Army’s 3 and 4-star selection process? has three main findings:

- The Army has institutional preferences.
- Multiple paths are possible to the senior leader level.
- The Army’s most preferred path is operational and command experience.

These findings were the result of a comprehensive analysis of a database developed utilizing the standardized resumes of 3 and 4-star generals who have served or retired after 1985. The database, along with the results presented here can help determine if the Army is selecting the right senior leaders and meeting its senior leader development goals. In addition, by understanding the breadth of experience of the Army’s senior leaders, we can identify potential shortcomings in experience or skills required to meet current and future threats. The Army is tasked with defending the nation, we must therefore take seriously how it adapts and evolves with contemporary events and adversaries.

The study presented here employed Morris Janowitz’s method, a military organization can be assessed based on their senior leaders, to determine what the Army institutionally values. The results of which reveal that the Army institutionally values operational and leadership experience. These two
characteristics are critical to ensuring the core function of fighting and winning wars is maintained. However, the Army does not eliminate other paths to the senior leader level as suggested by Janowitz’s paradox that the best leaders perform in duty positions outside their prescribed career path. There is no current basis for comparison to measure the best, or optimal leader, however, the study determined multiple paths to senior leadership. This partially supports Janowitz’s paradox, but finds that following Army preferences has the highest probability of reaching the 4-star level.

Should the Army find itself lacking specific experience necessary to meet current or future security challenges, it can rely on its institutional mechanisms and a focus on leader development to close the gap. The Army’s strength continues to be its flexibility and continual adaptation over time. The foresight of the Army’s senior leaders to allow for broadening assignments, such as the attendance at graduate schools and service with industry will continue to add officer corps depth. These assignments and any that add diversity must supplement but never replace the central focus on warfighting. This study and the associated database can help evaluate future changes to the OPMS by pinpointing the path to promotion for officers. A “successful” senior leader’s path can be replicated, while a less successful leader’s path can be reformed to improve future generations.
My hope is that this is only the beginning of what the dataset developed in this study can help accomplish. The paper’s narrow scope could be expanded to include one and two-star generals and the other Armed Services branches. The model presented here, using standardized resume data, can reveal an institution’s heartbeat. It unequivocally demonstrates what an organization values and sustains. For example, future research could use the dataset and methods employed here to determine trends among senior leaders and the specific units they were in: Does 82nd Airborne Division command result in greater selection rates than 4th Infantry Division command? Does the length of time an officer spends in each assignment make a difference in selection rates to senior leader? Can we use this data to predict the next senior leader? Analyzing the data across time can also reveal institutional changes in response to outside variables (threats, civilian leadership change, etc.). Finally, the model can determine once-and-for-all the accuracy of prior literature on the subject including both Morris Janowitz and Samuel Huntington. The best evaluation method is an honest available facts assessment. This study provides the information necessary to grade the US Army’s choice of senior leadership.
Appendix A: General officers by path taken to achieve 4-stars

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Appendix B: Duty positions attributed to each path category

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Notes: NO = Not applicable, Stage = Staffing
Works Cited

*Authorized strength: General and Flag Officers on Active Duty*, U.S. Code 10 § 526.


*Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction (CJCSI) 1800.01D, Officer Professional Military Education Policy (OPMEP)*, September 15, 2011.


