

## NEATNESS DOESN'T COUNT

*Donald Chisholm*

Williams, Cindy, ed. *Filling the Ranks: Transforming the U.S. Military System*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004. 376pp. \$50

*Cold steel isn't worth a damn in an emergency. You need men to direct it.*

FREDERICK BRITTEN, U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, 15 MAY 1934

*The road to hell is paved with good intentions.*

MARY KATHERINE CHISHOLM (VARIOUS DATES)

To date, transformation debates have ranged widely over force structures, command and control, networked warfare, rapid decisive operations, and their associated processes and technologies, not to mention privatization. It remains personnel, however, that give life and shape to organizations, and there is precious little informed discussion of the critical problems of military personnel in the contemporary setting. As part of a fine MIT publication series on national security issues, *Filling the Ranks* might have done much to overcome that lacuna, but unfortunately, it falls short in several respects; to follow its well-intentioned policy recommendations would produce serious harm to a system that, judged by its accomplishments, is already extraordinarily effective.

*Filling the Ranks* comprises twelve essays by different authors (two-thirds are economists, several having political science or government backgrounds, with one each from mathematics and business administration, and only a couple with professional military experience), framed by introductory and concluding chapters by its editor. Its self-proclaimed mission is to present “assessments of U.S. military pay and personnel policies in light of the strategic, demographic,

economic, and labor realities of the future. It identifies specific problems that today’s military career patterns, training, pay, and benefits pose for officers and enlisted men and women in both active duty and reserve forces, discussing such issues as competition with the private sector for talent, the need to restructure compensation, and provision of family support. It offers recommendations for more flexible, adaptive, and effective policies and a blueprint for achieving them.”<sup>1</sup>

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This reviewer offers a dissenting perspective. In so doing, I restrict my attention to two principal problems of the work, constraints of space precluding both wider-ranging evaluation and differentiated attention to its individual essays.

#### WHERE IS “SERVICE”?

This book’s component essays focus almost exclusively on manipulating “tangible inducements” to produce desired results. Frederick Winslow Taylor famously believed that people were at once inherently lazy *and* sorely greedy for material goods.<sup>2</sup> To overcome the former in the manufactory setting, to ensure that workers would not “soldier,” Taylor disdained hourly or salaried pay and devised a system of compensation directly tying individual pay to individual productivity—the so-called piece-rate system, which was, in turn, contrived by means of an empirical analysis of work processes. Scientific management would thus improve productivity and eliminate the principal impetus for management-labor discord by irrefutably establishing those production levels that were actually possible—management could not then ask for more, and workers could not then perform less. Indeed, Taylor and his acolytes did bring a certain order to the workplace and improved the efficiency of large industrial enterprises.<sup>3</sup>

Within less than two decades of Taylorism’s acme, however, pioneering empirical studies by other students of organization and management, notably F. J. Roethlisberger, demonstrated that organization of work processes and production levels, far from being determined by scientific analysis and implemented by management, were largely set and enforced through a complex informal social organization of the workers.<sup>4</sup>

Shortly thereafter, a vastly experienced corporate executive, in residence for a time at Harvard, observed that all organizations employ complex economies of incentives to attract and retain workers and to secure from them the necessary services.<sup>5</sup> Chester I. Barnard concluded that although an *objective* economy of incentives (pay and other material emoluments) was essential, no organization ever possessed sufficient resources to secure required contributions solely by objective means. Consequently, all organizations also employed *subjective* economies of incentives appealing to other than purely material motivations (working conditions, symbolic rewards, socialization to organizational values, and the like), both as a matter of constrained resources and as practical recognition of powerful human motivations that could be effectively manipulated by organizations for their own purposes.

It is mildly astonishing, therefore, that any serious discussion of military personnel “transformation” could be undertaken absent systematic consideration of the subjective economy of incentives. Nonetheless, Taylor’s dogma, however discredited, apparently constituted the alpha and omega of individual human

motivation for the authors of this collection of essays. They seek to manipulate those aspects susceptible of manipulation and measurement, irrespective of their practical relevance to the problems at hand.<sup>6</sup> Even this assumption is suspect—efforts to structure naval officers' pay to encourage willingness to go to sea began in the early nineteenth century, meeting with only partial success. Tying promotion to sea duty performed proved far more effective as an incentive. Moreover, if the precise amounts of pay, allowances, incentives, and benefits actually received by service members remain somewhat opaque and difficult to sum, it is likely because such opacity serves a function in the larger polity.<sup>7</sup>

The military's commissioned officer corps developed as a distinct profession very early in its history, with internally derived performance standards and enforcement.<sup>8</sup> For officers, and now increasingly senior enlisted personnel as well, the subjective economy of incentives has elaborated to an effective complex of mechanisms: the intrinsic value of service to and sacrifice for country; opportunity for promotion through the grades; assignment to duty in which service members can actively practice their profession, carry responsibility, and exercise discretion, to include, ultimately, command; overseas travel and residence; access to training and educational opportunities; decorations for valor and extraordinary accomplishment; and opportunity to join a tradition of excellence and achievement. Everyone has to pay the rent, but professional officers have always been more highly motivated by the subjective economy of incentives than their civilian counterparts, now made easier by very decent pay, the best retirement program bar none, and other benefits. For good reason, service in the military has been a calling sometimes likened to life in a monastery.

#### FALSE ECONOMY

There is another, troubling myopia common to these essays. In devising their personnel systems, all organizations must attend to both *economy*—that is, cost—and *equity* for individual members. First and foremost, however, we need our organizations to be *effective* and *reliable*.<sup>9</sup> We create and maintain public organizations to provide vital goods and services—external security primary among them—that the market is unwilling or unable to provide reliably in desired ways at appropriate levels, often because they cannot be generated at a profit; that is, they are inherently inefficient. It is a perilous misdirection to be efficiently ineffective, but especially so for public organizations, which need to be assessed for accomplishment far more than cost. In fact, in the face of the uncertainty and danger characteristic of turbulent environments, hard experience shows us that effectiveness and reliability are rarely achieved absent organizational redundancy, even though this runs precisely opposite to the efficiency assumptions and theorems of theoretical economics.<sup>10</sup>

In the military context, effectiveness translates to war-fighting ability. One searches in vain, however, for close attention to war fighting and military effectiveness by the authors of *Filling the Ranks*. Rather, consistent with broader efforts to bring the ethos of private business to the military over the past decade or so, these essays focus on economic efficiency, with attention to equity as it appears to play in incentives for performance. Thus, one learns that because computer specialists are worth more in the private market than they are currently paid in the military, to improve their retention rates they should be paid more in equivalent grades than the infantryman whose combat skills find little demand in the private sector. Aside from its implicit dismissal of the vital importance of the lowly grunt, especially in counterinsurgency and similar operations, and bearing in mind the importance of technical knowledge in the modern U.S. military, this recommendation ignores the fact that the military has long provided social mobility by means of access to stable income, education, and training, with the expectation that military personnel will move to the private sector—a historically extraordinary and effective subsidy of industry. Comparisons of the military services with private labor markets need to be undertaken advisedly and only with careful qualification. Defense, is, after all, a public good and is likely to remain so. As General Dwight D. Eisenhower once said to his subordinates: “Now boys, let’s not make our mistakes in a hurry.”

Few would question that the military personnel system is now under great stress. Let me suggest, however, that this strain has been produced not by difficulties of the objective economy of incentives to which these essays address themselves but by the post-Vietnam War shift to an all-volunteer force, the post-Cold War drawdown in military strength, a world suffused with failing states and the troubles they breed, unrealistic assumptions about the use of conventional military force to produce desired results in this environment, intentional Department of Defense policies that for reasons of economy have stripped virtually all slack from the military services, an ongoing real shooting war, and the resulting sustained high operational tempo (and concomitant personnel tempo) that shows little sign of abating any time soon.<sup>11</sup> Relieving this stress hinges on addressing the underlying problems described immediately above, the scope of which vastly exceeds those aspects of the personnel system considered in *Filling the Ranks*.

In the end, these essays are not really about personnel reform and combat effectiveness. Rather, they are about two other, lesser objectives: making the system more penetrable and rendering military personnel themselves more malleable by their civilian masters; and reducing costs. That a personnel system is cumbersome or difficult to manage presents no justification for reorganization if it is already effective. Neatness doesn’t count; outcome counts. Institutions

cumulate their structures and processes over decades and centuries of trial-and-error response to practical problems and, although sometimes appearing byzantine and arcane, usually have sound reasons for their particular configuration. The track record for sweeping reorganizations remains dismal.<sup>12</sup> These essays display poor historical grasp, suffering from casual, sometimes plain inaccurate, empirical assertions, combined with an alarming lack of understanding of the military profession and the factors that motivate its members. Finally, these essays define the problem in terms of a preferred, a priori solution: instead of working regressively from a carefully structured problem, they begin with a set of untested assumptions and work forward, leading, fundamentally, to trying to solve the wrong problem.<sup>13</sup> This reviewer does not share the optimism of the authors of *Filling the Ranks*; at the macro level, their policy recommendations do not address the most serious military personnel problems but rather, if followed, will produce myriad unintended consequences, some of which will be profoundly negative.<sup>14</sup>

The military personnel system *can* benefit from careful *empirical* analysis to produce an accurate image of its problems' structures, accompanied by a systematic process of generating appropriate alternatives to the status quo, to be treated as empirically testable hypotheses intended to produce incremental adaptations. Also, notwithstanding contemporary urges to centralize, consolidate, and standardize (often under the mystical guise of enhanced "jointness"), any analysis must take account of the fundamentally different histories, missions, and operating environments of the several services. *Filling the Ranks* does not provide such an analysis.

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#### NOTES

1. Available at [mitpress.mit.edu/catalog/author/default.asp?aid=192](http://mitpress.mit.edu/catalog/author/default.asp?aid=192).
2. See Frederick W. Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (New York: Harper, 1911; repr. Norton, 1967). See also Judith Merkle, *Management and Ideology: The Legacy of the International Scientific Management Movement* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1980). Taylor's aim was to decompose given work processes into their smallest components, define the levels and optimum method for each, train workers to those components, establish normative production levels, and, finally, pay any given worker only for that level of skill required and for his actual production. This diminished labor's
- power by making any one worker readily replaceable by any other suitably trained worker.
3. Scientific management was implemented over a vast olio of enterprises, including an ill-fated experiment in Navy-owned shipyards that was quickly abandoned.
4. Along with Elton Mayo, George Homans, and others, F. J. Roethlisberger conducted the famous "Hawthorne Studies" over several years, beginning in the mid-1920s, reported in *Management and Morale* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1941).
5. Chester I. Barnard gave a series of management lectures at Harvard in 1937, published

- as *Functions of the Executive* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1938), still in print in many languages. This reviewer considers it among the several best books on management ever written. Among his many accomplishments in both private and public sectors, Barnard established and ran the United Services Organization (USO) during World War II.
6. Elizabeth A. Stanley-Mitchell's "The Military Profession and Intangible Rewards for Service," pp. 93–118, is the sole exception to this generalization.
  7. Congressional efforts to nail down exactly the pay received by naval officers dates to at least the mid-nineteenth century. The short-lived reforms included discontinuance of fuel allowances and rations, with increased pay to compensate for same. Opacity also helps to mask the inevitable inequalities and inequities in any system of compensation, thereby reducing heartburn. See Donald Chisholm, *Waiting for Dead Men's Shoes: Origins and Development of the U.S. Navy's Officer Personnel System, 1793–1941* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 2001), chaps. 7–11, 23.
  8. See Christopher McKee, *A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession: The Creation of the U.S. Naval Officer Corps, 1794–1815* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1991); Peter Karsten, *The Naval Aristocracy: The Golden Age of Annapolis and the Emergence of Navalism* (New York: Free Press, 1972); and Chisholm, *Waiting for Dead Men's Shoes*.
  9. See Chisholm, *Waiting for Dead Men's Shoes*, chap. 1.
  10. See Martin Landau, "Redundancy, Reliability, and the Problem of Duplication and Overlap," *Public Administration Review* 29 (1972), pp. 346–58.
  11. The military faces well documented recruitment and retention problems, which the reviewer believes resulted primarily from a post–Cold War military that was structured and sized to fight conventional conflicts of the preferred American type but that now is and will be called upon for the foreseeable future to fight low-intensity conflicts that are enormously consumptive of personnel over long periods of time.
  12. Abysmally unsuccessful Western efforts to "develop" third world countries by means of large-scale projects that ignore local history and institutions are instructive on this point. See, for example, J. Stephen Lansing, "Balinese 'Water Temples' and the Management of Irrigation," *American Anthropologist* 89 (1987), pp. 326–41.
  13. Economists have largely remained indifferent to the practical problems of searching for and generating alternatives because it assumes that the market will present alternatives to the decision maker. Notable exceptions include Wesley C. Mitchell and Herbert A. Simon.
  14. See Robert K. Merton, "The Unanticipated Consequences of Social Action," *American Sociological Review* 1 (1936), pp. 894–904. Unintended and unanticipated consequences are *not* the same as the economist's "negative externalities," about which, by definition, the individual decision maker, the firm, does not care. Responsible public policy makers, in contrast, must be concerned with unanticipated consequences.