BOOK REVIEW:
CRISIS IN COMMAND


Reviewed by Lieutenant Colonel John Schmidt III**

The United States Army in Vietnam was not a cohesive, functional organization, and most of its failures can be attributed to an abandonment of leadership responsibility by its officer corps. This lack of cohesiveness has carried over into the era of the all-volunteer Army of the 1970's, and places the Army in a situation of doubt as to its ability to function efficiently in peacetime, but more importantly, in the next war.

In Crisis in Command - Mismanagement in the Army, Professors Gabriel and Savage allege that the United States Army and its officer corps require significant reform. This is needed, say the authors, because the Army's leaders have forsaken traditional military ethical values in favor of the free-enterprise system's pursuit of individual values and goals. They believe the officer corps has lost its ability to inspire confidence, loyalty, and cohesiveness among the Army's soldiers. It is their position that strength of character, integrity, and honor have been replaced by a philosophy of managerial efficiency which emphasizes short-term goals at the expense of long-term efficiency.

The book focuses on the operational performance and behavior of the United States during the Vietnam years. According to the authors, two things became obvious during that time. First, despite ten years of efforts, the Army would not win the Vietnam war. Second, an internal decay of traditional military ethical values was taking place. Indicators of decay were the high drug use rate, refusal to execute combat orders, increased desertion rates, and at-
tempts to assassinate officers through “fragging” and misdirected fire while in combat. As Gabriel and Savage state, “the Army began to border on an undisciplined, ineffective, almost anomic mass of individuals who collectively had no goals and who, individually, sought only to survive the length of their tours.”

Those of us who served in Vietnam can agree with many of the assertions set forth in the book. We should understand, however, that, while the authors have assembled impressive data to support this thesis, they lay the blame for the state of the Army almost solely on the lack of leadership, integrity, and high ethical standards of the officer corps. In so doing, they have addressed only one aspect of the entire system and have failed to show that external forces played as much of a part, if not more, in any decline of quality of leadership within the officer corps. But even with this thought in mind, the book is an excellent analysis of many of the factors which drive our officer corps today. As one well-known sports announcer is prone to say, Gabriel and Savage “tell it like it is!”

Gabriel and Savage posit that the lack of an officers’ code or creed, such as that formulated by the U.S. Army War College study on military professionalism, has given rise to the problem. Because it has no such code, the officer corps has degenerated to the point that ethics and honor have given way to a philosophy of “don’t rock the boat,” “it all counts for twenty,” and “you can’t tell the general that,” to insure career enhancement. They claim that officers have become so concerned with pleasing their bosses and avoiding that one mistake which is career destroying, that they have subverted that ethical behavior which has been traditionally accepted as a pillar of strength for leaders. This managerial careerism, which has befallen the officer corps, has resulted in the prevalent practice of blocking, distorting and diluting almost any data that might result in personal performance being suspect of anything less than perfection. The practice of “ticket punching” and advancement at anyone’s expense is the norm rather than the exception.

Gabriel and Savage submit that this decay began immediately

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3 Id., at 99.
4 Id., at 61.
following the Second World War, as the Army adopted more and more corporate business practices. Internal control practices increased until, with the McNamara years, we had progressed to the point that the officer corps began not to lead but to manage the Army. The Army not only had adopted modern business corporation technology, but its language, style and ethics. The Army ceased to be a true military establishment in the historical and traditional sense.\(^5\)

How do we confront this dilemma? As implied above, the authors propose that an officer code or creed be adopted which exemplifies the virtues and ethics necessary for effective military leadership. Adoption and enforcement will be difficult, however, as those in power who could make the change are the same ones who have manipulated the system to advance to their current positions.\(^6\) An external force therefore is necessary to demand a return to, and instill in young officers, the traditional military ethical behavior, where the concept of "looking upward" is not the driving force in an officer's behavior. To this end, Savage and Gabriel propose that the "up or out" system be abolished. This system, they say, perpetuates the drive for career management at the expense of leadership, honesty, and integrity.

While we may agree with much of what the authors suggest, the fact remains that desirable changes will be difficult to implement in today's environment.

A brief note on the construction of the book: I personally found *Crisis in Command - Mismanagement in the Army* to be the finest examination and collection of data on contemporary officer corps behavior to be found anywhere. It is well researched and is documented with exceptional footnoting. The book also contains a splendid biographical essay. The biggest flaw in the work must be its length. Although relatively short in number of pages, the entire text could easily have been condensed to half their number. Repetition is the word in many cases; I found myself re-reading the same idea five or six times throughout the book. A little more editing and organization would have improved the message immensely.

Would I suggest this book for others to read? For an officer with...