Cultural barriers to organisational unlearning: The US army, the ‘zero-defects’ culture and operations in the post-cold war world

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Much intellectual effort in the post-Cold War US Army has been put into examinations of how best to conduct MOOTW and urban warfare. One of the main problems for the Army in this respect is the fact that these operations require a good deal of initiative to be displayed by troops at the lowest command levels. This has not normally been forthcoming. There is, in the Army, a ‘zero-defects’ culture that is stymying the necessary initiative. Only when this culture has been properly appreciated and tackled will the Army that has proved itself so adept at the ‘big war’ be able to conclusively tackle the ‘small war’.

A British Army officer working alongside US Army personnel in Bosnia was alarmed about a specific aspect of their behaviour. He remarked that, ‘generations of US officers are growing up without being encouraged to exercise any autonomous authority and with little instruction in how to assess and be prepared to take risks in pursuance of a military objective. Thus there is an erosion of the key virtue which underpins every military organisation: the moral courage to take risks.’ In a separate article he also bemoans the fact that, in the US Army, ‘independent thought and formal debate is the exception rather than the rule and, in public, a bland and rather unhealthy consensus prevails’.

This officer summed up his feelings by recognising three overlapping aspects of what has become known in the US Army as the ‘zero-defects’ culture: first, an extreme reluctance to countenance casualties leading to an abnormal stress on force protection; second, risk aversion, and third, a lack of initiative. These aspects are damaging enough in themselves – ‘a policy of no risk-taking and no initiative can only detract from the [US] military’s ability to exercise its prime warfighting function’ – but they will have a particularly deleterious effect on the US Army’s ability to conduct low-intensity conflict and military operations other than war (MOOTW).

This article will examine this ‘zero-defects’ culture, point out why it is particularly troublesome for MOOTW, look at the ways in which the US Army has tried to get rid of it, and finally point out the almost hopeless nature of this latter task.
The ‘Zero-Defects’ Culture

‘Zero-defects’ is basically a laudable but misguided desire to strive for the faultless performance of organisational tasks. Within the culture, task completion is guided by and measured against quantifiable standards – be they numerical (e.g. body count, casualties incurred) or a set of firm guiding principles (e.g. doctrine, plans). The firm guiding principles are almost, in effect, rules. Doctrine is a general rule-book and the plan is a task-specific rule-book. These rules provide a comfort zone. If an officer or enlisted man sticks to them then any mistakes that result cannot be their fault and they cannot be criticised. If they try and apply solutions to problems that are not in the rule-book – if they apply initiative – they run the risk of failure where blame can be apportioned to them.

Defects are always the result of individual action and never of the system. There is thus a fear of failure. As one junior officer relates, ‘This fear is generated by a pervasive attitude that for every infraction a nail must be driven home. Fear destroys confidence and eliminates initiative. Fear also induces hesitation and promotes stagnation.’

A risk-averse organisation is created. This organisation is one policed by authority and figures of authority are the rule-book personified. Senior ranks must therefore always be obeyed without demur and juniors must not suggest alternative courses of action. There must be none of what Eccles calls ‘debate’. The ‘zero-defects’ army is one, therefore, that is centralised and hierarchical. It is an army seemingly populated by officers and soldiers who are inflexible and cowed and who, out of fear of failure, remain wedded to doctrinal solutions and plans even when such doctrine and plans prove inappropriate. Adaptability is forsworn and initiative forsaken.

A History of ‘Zero-Defects’

The ‘zero-defects’ culture has been recognised for a long time. It came to notice in the Second World War and to prominence in Vietnam. Michael Doubler, in his book *Closing with the Enemy: How GIs Fought the War in Europe, 1944–45*, refers to mistakes being made by the Army during the early North African campaigns because doctrine was looked to as the answer to all problems. It was not. The Army’s later successes in Northern Europe were seen, by Doubler, to result from the fact that doctrinal solutions were rejected and initiative applied.

In Vietnam, as James Kitfield makes clear, a good measure of the problems of that war were due to the insidious desire of officers, with a limited time to prove themselves in theatre, to gain successes. In so doing they renounced creativity and concentrated on the tried and trusted method of producing statistical results. The preferred method was the body count – a measure whose quantifiability ‘had almost nothing to do with winning a war, yet had
come to mean everything in terms of getting an officer promoted to his next whirlwind assignment'. It was during the Vietnam War that the term 'zero-defects' first appeared. A 1970 War College report, Study on Military Professionalism, by two lieutenant colonels, pointed to the archetypal officer being 'engulfed in producing statistical results, fearful of personal failure, too busy to talk with or listen to his subordinates, and determined to submit acceptably optimistic reports which reflect faultless completion of a variety of tasks'. The study went on, 'it should be recognised that performance is not necessarily susceptible to statistical measurement; and initiative and learning by mistake should be encouraged rather than a “zero-defects” mentality'.

While the problem was thus recognised by this and other reports in various post-Vietnam post-mortems, it did not disappear. In 1985, as the newly established National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California received its first units for evaluation, ‘zero-defects’ was again evident. These units found out they were not as good as they thought they were and, moreover, refused to accept the fact that they were not. Initiative and creativity were lacking, but there was no recognition by these units that they were indeed lacking. ‘In truth’, remarks Kitfield, ‘for all the strides the Army had made [post-Vietnam], it was still uncomfortable with self criticism ... Though the Army had lost the arrogance of the perennial winner in Vietnam, it had yet to divest itself of the ‘zero defects’ mentality that admitted no mistakes.’

The Return of ‘Zero-Defects’

While in the post-Vietnam period there was a background recognition in some quarters that the Army had a problem with ‘zero-defects’, it was not until the 1990s that it began to receive special attention. One who did accord it attention was the Army’s Chief of Staff, General Dennis Reimer (1995–99) who stated in 1996 that the ‘zero-defects’ mindset was ‘creeping back’ into the Army.

Several points need to be noted to understand why it was returning and why it has latterly been thrown into such sharp relief. The first point is that the Army, in the 1990s, had begun to undertake more MOOTW (e.g. Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo) and to think more about low-intensity, especially urban, conflict. Commanders on such missions have to be adaptable and flexible. The nature of peace operations (and other forms of low-intensity conflict) is such that they are inevitably subject to at least a modicum of mission creep and fluid tactical situations. And MOOTW calls for the same basic skills as those required for urban combat. The exigencies of urban combat are well described by Anatol Lieven:

Urban fighting shows up cruelly the shortcomings of an army used to relying on major units acting together in accordance with a rigid
hierarchy of command, because even more than modern warfare in general, it inevitably tends to break units down to section [squad] and even subsectional level, throwing tremendous responsibility not just on junior officers and NCOs, but on the individual soldier.11

In such operations, therefore, at the lower end of the conflict spectrum, there must be, throughout all ranks, the ability to react to fluid situations and to show the nerve to adapt or change original plans, mission statements and doctrinal solutions. It must be constantly born in mind that it is not just officers and the more senior ranks who have to display the requisite qualities. As the British brigadier, Michael Harbottle, wrote over 30 years ago: ‘Success [in operations at the lower end of the conflict spectrum] depends more than anything else on the vigilance and mental alertness of the most junior soldier and his non-commissioned leader for it is on their reaction and immediate response that the success of the operation rests.’ 12 An army that is suffering from a ‘zero-defects’ mentality will find itself in tremendous difficulties in such low-intensity and urban scenarios.

The second reason ‘zero-defects’ has received such attention recently is due to the question of casualties. In the contemporary US Army there is a tremendous pressure on commanders to avoid casualties on operations. As one US officer puts it, ‘Arguably, the imperative to minimise casualties to US forces has come to be a principal, if not overriding, factor in a commander’s warfighting [and peacekeeping] deliberations.’ 13 Casualties are naturally a fault. Somebody must be making mistakes for them to accrue. There is, therefore, great stress in the US Army on force protection. On operations, troops are housed in fortresses, clad in body armour—even at times of minimal tension—and emerge infrequently to patrol.14 Officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) are extremely reluctant to do anything that might risk their soldiers’ lives.

However, while avoiding casualties is commendable, the yardstick of success in military operations of all kinds can never be allowed to be the number of casualties incurred. Edward Luttwak, perhaps overstating the case, has argued that one of the tacitly agreed qualities of a great power is a ‘readiness to use force whenever it was advantageous to do so and an acceptance of the resulting combat casualties with equanimity’. 15

And while it would be difficult for any army to accept casualties on MOOTW with ‘equanimity’, such operations, by their very nature, do involve elements of risk. One of the principles of MOOTW is that the peace support troops in situ must engender a degree of confidence. The creation of this confidence may involve an exposure to danger that a ‘zero-defects’ army would find uncomfortable. As Eccles puts it, ‘Whilst not wearing helmets and body armour routinely in Bosnia may be marginally less safe than doing so,
it does suggest to the local people that the situation is returning to normal."\textsuperscript{16}

Confidence is also lost and a distance created between those local people when troops ensconce themselves in camps that resemble forts rather than places to live. On MOOTW the demands of force protection have to take second place to the demands of the mission. Moreover, what is also created in the stress on force protection is a loss of respect from allies. The word 'paranoid' is one often heard in today's descriptions of the American military by outsiders. If respect is lost it becomes far more difficult for allies to work together, not just on MOOTW but also in possible future wars.\textsuperscript{17}

The third point to note about the return of 'zero-defects' is that it is a phenomenon exacerbated latterly by the sheer success of the US Army. The demise of the Soviet Army as a viable threat and the victory over the Iraqi forces in 1990–91 in such a spectacular fashion allows the Pentagon, not without cause, to be triumphalist: the United States has the world's best army. The problem with such a presentation is that it can create what might be called an 'infallibility trap'. How can soldiers of the most powerful army in the world be killed by opponents from distinctly less powerful nations, groups, bands and gangs? If this Army begins to take casualties, as it will in any conflict situation, it makes it appear that something must have gone wrong; somebody must have made a mistake. There is thus a tendency to be more risk-averse the less powerful the opposition appears to be.

Fourth, as the US military establishment is downsized so the 'zero-defects' culture is strengthened. As the journalist David McCormick points out, 'Research on downsizing in industry indicates that low morale, unhealthy competitiveness, and reduced initiative are common during and after downsizing, often resulting in diminished organisational effectiveness or productivity.' It seems to be the same in the Army. In order to get promoted in such an environment of shrinking posts, officers must have a spotless record. To keep such a record officers must not make mistakes. If they stick to the rules, they cannot make mistakes and they cannot harm their careers. They do not display initiative.\textsuperscript{18}

In the striving for promotion an increase in competitiveness is evident between officers pushing for the available posts - 'officers are forced to compete with one another to continually get the right jobs'.\textsuperscript{19} Officers thus concentrate on their own careers and not on the betterment of the Army - the 'team'. General Reimer has also pointed to the consequences of downsizing. There is, he says, an 'up or out' mentality - if officers do not get promoted then they must leave. 'The net result', he goes on, is that, 'Many officers appear more committed to promotion (or job security) than to the Army itself and are unwilling to display initiative for fear that honest mistakes will be "career-busters".'\textsuperscript{20}

A fifth reason why 'zero-defects' is becoming more acute and is destroying
initiative is the advent of new technology. The Army is striving – through the ‘digitisation’ offered by the so-called Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) – to create the ability to disseminate more detailed information more swiftly. The twin aim is to give the squad/section commander the overall battle picture while giving more senior commanders a squad/section-eye view of the battlefield. Although the idea of more information being disseminated further seems a worthy concept, the fact that senior commanders are cognisant of events in the bailiwick of platoon and squad/section leaders cannot but fail to stifle initiative at those levels. ‘Leaders’, as Martin Libicki says, ‘who grow up expecting an omnipotent boss to be watching over their shoulders every minute can scarcely be expected to exercise much initiative, nor will ambitious people stay long in such an environment.’

Furthermore, the actual modalities of MOOTW are not served by the RMA. Libicki points out that the RMA can be of little service in places like Bosnia: ‘Messy situations, by nature disorganised, often call for a capacity for context-related situational awareness and operational planning at the company level or lower.’ Part of the problem, and certainly not part of the solution, in the Mogadishu debacle of October 1993 was the fact that there were too many ‘chiefs’ knowing too much. The troops on the ground knew they that knew and were waiting, mostly in vain, for direction.

A sixth explanation for why ‘zero-defects’ is more prominent now lies with the increasingly ubiquitous nature of the modern press corps. The Army’s way of doing business is more in the public consciousness now than ever before – in part due to the same technological advances that the military so relish themselves. And being in the public consciousness leads to wariness: ‘In today’s global fish bowl’, as Libicki puts it, ‘every mistake is liable to be widely broadcast.’ Given all these reasons why the ‘zero-defects’ problem has become so pronounced in recent years it is no surprise that US military journals have included many articles that have put the problem into relief and in so doing engendered a strong debate.

The Current Debate

The pages of military journals are currently filled with analysis of the effects of ‘zero-defects’. From academia, a professor of entrepreneurship has railed against ‘the prevailing emphasis for junior officers to conform and obey’. The military historian, Trevor Dupuy, bemoans the fact that, ‘Unfortunately, in my opinion, creativity in our military is not encouraged nor is it rewarded.’ Two recent Chiefs of Staff have also tried to weed it out. General Reimer treated it as a ‘cancer’, and as ‘one of the scourges of the Army in the late twentieth century’. His predecessor, General Gordon Sullivan, asked, ‘How
do we find and tap creative resources, encourage creative officers and non-coms? From my perspective, the problem is creating a military organisation which stimulates and encourages creative thought and action."30 Another senior officer summed the situation up less prosaically, 'Creativity in the military? New idea, new way of looking at something? We all know that can mean kissing your shot at a star goodbye ... the “zero-defects” crowd can’t handle creativity because it risks mistakes.'31

The importance of ‘zero-defects’ has certainly been recognised. It seems to be the case that ‘the central operational issue facing the Army today [is] the question of centralisation versus decentralisation of control’.32 The ‘centralisers’ wanting the Army to remain hierarchical and bound by doctrine and planning, while the ‘decentralisers’ seek more creativity, initiative and risk. The points at issue can be characterised by looking at two particular facets of the debate. Both have at their core an appreciation of the central fault of the ‘zero-defects’ culture – the lack of initiative. If initiative is allowed free rein then the whole culture should break down.

The first point concerns the worth of an essay written over a hundred years ago, and the second the value of pre-Second World War German Army tactics. The essay, *A Message to Garcia*, by Elbert Hubbard and a 40-million-copy bestseller,33 tells the story of a man called Rowan who, in 1898, during the Cuban insurrection, was called upon by President William McKinley to deliver a message to a Cuban guerrilla leader, General Calixto Garcia. Rowan delivered the message despite, it seems, only being told by McKinley to present it to a ‘Garcia’ on the island of Cuba. The whole story has for many years been seen within the US Army as a prime example of initiative. It teaches, according to one member of the ‘decentralisers’ point of view, the ‘basic precepts of leadership, that is, take the ball, run with it and win, and when given a duty, carry it out without asking why, when, where and how’.34

This view, however, according to those – the majority it seems – on the other side of the debate, ‘has been taken to heart by too many in the Army today’.35 Robert Leonhard, a former lieutenant colonel and now professor of military science at West Virginia University, regards the whole idea as ‘hogwash’.36 His, the ‘centralisers’, point is that Rowan did not have enough guidance: ‘When did it become an honorable trait of leadership to leave subordinates guessing at what they are supposed to accomplish? Why is being mysterious a virtue? It is not. Part of leadership is crystal-clear communication of intent.’37 Leonhard sums up by calling on today’s officers to ‘Learn to ask who, what, when, where, how, why and even what if.’38 Leonhard is certainly someone who seems not believe in delegation or initiative.

The other main facet of the debate concerns whether the centralised US Army should try to imitate the de-centralised pre-Second World War German Army. There is a good deal of support for the idea of adopting the German
ideas of Auftragstaktik. This is basically low-level commanders, confident of superiors’ overall intent, deciding, without consultation with superiors, the best means of achieving objectives. Those on the ground have the immediate intelligence and knowledge of the battle situation and should act on it. They should not waste time reporting back an account of the situation and then await orders from higher echelons. This general concept of encouraging greater initiative has great support; Leonhard says that the US Army has come ‘to deify the German Army’.

But, he says, the Auftragstaktik concept is undermined by the advance of technology and is thus ‘total nonsense’. He goes on ‘When the tempo of information flow gives subordinates a more accurate and timely view of the battlefield, then they should have decision-making authority that is commensurate with that information.’ However, if ‘the higher headquarters has the information faster, decision-making authority should be centralised’.

The debate has been reflected in the reactions to doctrinal changes that have taken place in the 1990s. Such changes seemed to actually reinforce the ‘zero-defects’ culture. The 1993 version of FM 100-5, Operations, did appear to be accommodating MOOTW and the demands of other low-intensity operations. A new battle tenet – versatility – was added to the four of previous FM 100-5s – initiative, agility, depth and synchronisation. Versatility was added, according to the new FM 100-5, to foster the ‘ability of tactical units to adapt to different missions and tasks, some of which may not be on unit mission essential task lists (METL)’.

Since MOOTW were not on the METL, versatility seemed to be aimed at these types of operation. A step towards the thinking needed for peace operations it might be thought. FM 100-5, however, seemed to be a little contradictory. On the one hand, there were the battle tenets of versatility, initiative and agility, but on the other a new stress on planning had appeared. The result was somewhat opaque.

Colonel Steven Schook, who as Chief, Conventional War Plans, Joint Chiefs of Staff, was a supporter of a greater appreciation by the Army of MOOTW actually criticised the stress on versatility saying, ‘FM 100-5’s greatest flaw resides in the added battle tenet, versatility, which is really no more than a hiding place for a less than total commitment to OOTW [the earlier acronym for MOOTW]. This is not surprising, considering the continuous debate, politically and within DoD, surrounding OOTW. Our doctrine simply reflects that debate’s uncertainties.’ To Schook it seemed as if only lip service was being paid to peace operations. Schook wanted a total embracing of OOTW so that it would become part of the METL and then part of training rotations and thus ‘locked in stone’.

The professor and ex-officer, Frederick Kagan, sees FM 100-5/1993 as a retrenchment of a culture that seemed deliberately to be out of kilter with the
demands of MOOTW. The ‘zero-defects’ mentality runs through it. He considered that while the 1986 version of FM 100-5 was good, the FM 100-5 of 1993 went backwards; ‘Unfortunately, FM 100-5/1993 [is] a confused mass of contradictory operational prescriptions which add up to a determination to move slowly and cautiously, avoid casualties at all costs, and achieve victory through planning.’

According to Kagan, FM 100-5/1986 stressed ‘audacity which will involve risk-taking’ while FM 100-5/1993 does not. ‘The largest single change’, noted Kagan, ‘in the tone of FM 100-5 in 1993 was the incredible emphasis on planning as the route to all military benefits.’

There also seemed to be something amiss with the concepts behind the Army’s actual MOOTW doctrine, FM 100-23, Peace Operations. Brigadier Morris Boyd, in a review of the doctrine, picked out but did not criticise the stress, again, on planning. He approves of the fact that, ‘Given the multinational and political dynamics of peace operations, FM 100-23 emphasises thorough, detailed planning’ where ‘a clearly defined mission is the key to successful planning and execution’. But he then goes on to say that peace operations ‘require skill, imagination, flexibility, adaptability and patience’. Stressing thorough, detailed planning, though, hardly squares with the later application of imagination, flexibility and adaptability. The two, in the end, are mutually exclusive in peace operations.

This point is taken up by Lieutenant Colonel Douglas Scalard, the then head of the team at the Command and Staff College at Fort Leavenworth looking at peace operations from an historical perspective. He saw FM 100-23 (and FM 100-5) as creating even further barriers to the employability of the Army on MOOTW tasks. Cultural attributes that would hinder the proper fulfilment of such tasks were being yet more firmly institutionalised in the new doctrines. He sees ‘mission fixation’ where the initial plan derived from the mission statement becomes all-important and the only guide to action. ‘We try to define’ says Scalard, ‘as narrowly as possible, those tasks we must perform in order to succeed, and we actively resist efforts to change a mission once it is defined.’ But this takes no account of inevitable mission creep and Scalard warns that, while officers disdain mission creep, ‘unfortunately, in the ambiguous and often fluid conditions of peace operations, the commander who embraces an outdated mission too tightly puts his command and the operation itself at risk’. Scalard notes that he, like many of his colleagues involved in the development of ‘proper’ MOOTW doctrine, laments the inherent reliance on doctrine; ‘familiarity with doctrine ... is not sufficient preparation for the unexpected ... For one thing, proper application of doctrine often demands intuition, originality and moral courage from the leader’.

The debate shows that there is, in individual units, doctrinal centres and among the most senior officers, a desire to tackle ‘zero-defects’. But how can a desire to get rid of a damaging tendency in an organisation like the US Army
actually be turned into concrete change? To see how an organisation normally divests itself of damaging tendencies it is possible to turn to the literature concerned with organisations for some answers.\textsuperscript{49}

**Organisational Unlearning and Tackling the ‘Zero-Defects’ Culture**

Organisations learn; they pick up on their mistakes and, to preserve the health of the organisation, rectify them. ‘Organisational learning’, as Bo Hedberg says, ‘is typically problem-triggered. Funds shortages, falling revenues, actual losses, diminishing popular support, or public criticism from evaluators are some examples.’\textsuperscript{50} But rectifying mistakes relies on something else: an appreciation that current practices are wrong. This can be difficult. Paul Nystrom and William Starbuck in their work on organisational learning stress that an organisation’s very success at one moment can prove its later undoing: ‘As their successes accumulate, organisations emphasise efficiency, grow complacent and learn too little.’ To correct this an organisation, according to Nystrom and Starbuck, ‘must also unlearn’: ‘Before organisations will try new ideas they must unlearn old ones by discovering their inadequacies and then discarding them.’

The authors identify three main planks of the unlearning process: first, experience in the form of ‘unlearning opportunities’; second, imitating other, more successful organisations, and third, removing organisational leaders. The leaders, Nystrom and Starbuck make clear, will preserve outdated habits: ‘the ideas of “Top managers” dominate organisational learning, but they also prevent unlearning [and] organisations succumb to crises largely because their top managers, bolstered by recollections of past success, live in worlds circumscribed by their cognitive structures’. Thus, ‘Organisations ... remove their top managers as a way to erase the dominating ideas, to disconfirm past programs, to become receptive to new ideas, and to symbolise change’.\textsuperscript{51}

For the US Army to be truly successful in the future it needs to unlearn its ‘zero-defects’ culture. The first point to note here is that military organisations are not like other organisations. The cultures of military organisations are stronger; due principally to the more enclosed nature of military life and the temper of the work they do. Unlearning in military organisations is thus more difficult than it is in civilian ones. This is exacerbated by the fact that militaries are never under the pressures that businesses are under to survive (only 10 per cent of US companies survive more than 20 years),\textsuperscript{52} and that commercial organisations looking for profit have no problems in observing damaging tendencies since they will show up in balance sheets. In the case of bureaucracies, they look for efficiencies and these, too, can be noted if they are looked for with sufficient zeal. Civilian organisations are thus under constant pressure to unlearn old habits and can easily see why they should be
unlearning. In the military sphere, however, success or failure – unlearning opportunities – are only really apparent, and thus rarely, on the battlefield.

Unlearning opportunities, though, have been presented to the US Army. ‘Zero-defects’ has been tackled before with, however, only partial success. The battles of the Second World War were clearly learning experiences. Doubler describes such experiences. He goes into detail about how the Army tried to shake off the straitjacketing effect of doctrine that it had brought into the conflict. He saw the initial failures of the Army in that war as being due to an over-reliance on doctrinal solutions: ‘Failures in early battles were [partly] credited to … attempts to adhere to doctrine too stringently in situations that demanded creative solutions’. In order to instil greater creativeness, the Army during the war looked to identify ‘three essential qualities for successful leadership: initiative, responsibility, and resourcefulness’. And, says Doubler, once the Army had applied these tenets – mostly at a fairly low level – in the later battles across northern Europe ultimate success was achieved.

The Army was able to adapt after it became obvious that the rules of doctrine did not provide all the answers. The habit of referring and deferring to doctrine had to be unlearnt. Moreover, the unlearning process was made easier by the fact that there was not an accumulated history of battle victories prior to the Second World War that might have hindered unlearning. There was nothing really to unlearn.

Post-war, however, the victorious and confident Army reverted to its old ways and forgot about ‘initiative, responsibility and resourcefulness’. Such was obvious from behaviour in Korea and Vietnam. After Vietnam, as has been indicated, there was some desire to unlearn the ‘zero-defect’ habits evident there. However, any post-conflict studies that did point to the lack of creativity and to the inappropriateness of the number-crunching mentality were given scant attention. The Study on Military Professionalism mentioned earlier was swept under the carpet by an Army that was not ready to be critical of itself: ‘Inside the Army any suggestion that the Army’s performance was less than sterling was viewed as rank disloyalty.’

It was, though, prepared to criticise others. While the unlearning process should have been given impetus by the fact that the war was lost, the Army did not see Vietnam in this light. It was the politicians, in the view of senior (and not so senior) officers, who had denied the Army overall victory and it was they who should unlearn. On the ground, the body counts showed that the Army had been a success; a success which would have been greater had the Army, in its view, been allowed greater scope to create greater counts of bodies. By such scapegoating the Army did not become introspective, did not discover its own inadequacies, and abjured any process of unlearning.

The 1991 Gulf War did not create the type of unlearning experience that
it might have if the war had not ended so swiftly and so, apparently, victoriously. An immense amount of pre-planning (courtesy of the time allowed by Saddam Hussein) and the use of doctrinal solutions (courtesy mostly of ground and clement weather) paid off. If the Army had become involved in the nitty-gritty of urban combat in Iraqi cities then the picture might not have been quite so rosy. The success in the war merely reinforced the worth of the US Army that had developed during the Cold War. Buried within that ‘worth’, of course, was the ‘zero-defects’ culture.

What was more alarming, and which should have produced a learning experience far more fundamental than it actually turned out to be, was the expedition to Somalia in 1992–93. The aspects of ‘zero-defects’ which brought about the debacle of the ‘Ranger Incident’ were not analysed properly – because, again, the politicians got the blame. The Army’s senior officers pointed to the main failing in the debacle as being the fact that no US armoured vehicles were on hand to bail out the trapped Ranger and Delta Force personnel. That there were none was the fault, said senior officers, of the politicians who had not allowed their initial deployment. Once more, we see scapegoating.58

The Army, however, is here being disingenuous in ignoring the fact that tanks, virtually since their first use on the battlefield, have been seen as vulnerable in urban and wooded areas. The US Army’s own doctrine (FM100-5) from as early as 1941 stressed that mechanised forces were of ‘little value’ in street fighting and their use could result in ‘excessive casualties, both in personnel and vehicles’.59 This was a fact reinforced by later Russian experience in Grozny: ‘Tanks and infantry fighting vehicles were... helpless on the streets’.60 They also ignore the fact that Pakistani M-60 tanks were available to US forces in Mogadishu. The Pakistanis, however, knowing the problems facing armour in built-up areas, refused to take them into the city to help the trapped US soldiers. The lack of armoured vehicles was a side issue.

Many of the reasons for the ‘Incident’ lie in the fact that ‘zero-defects’ was at work: the many levels of command viewing the situation left officers on the ground waiting for orders that never came; original orders were not changed despite the fluid situation, and quite senior ranks were, erroneously, trying to do the jobs of junior ranks.61

The prime unlearning experiences for military organizations are the defeats in all-out war. Defeats in small-scale conflicts seldom provide the requisite power to illuminate ‘inadequacies’ to ‘discover’ and ‘discard’. Moreover, the Army’s inadequacies seem to be often laid at other doors. But what is interesting about the whole process of discovering inadequacies in the organisation that is the US Army is that it is the top managers, rather than preventing unlearning – as Nystrom and Starbuck aver would be the case – who are the ones actually encouraging it. It is the imbedded nature of ‘zero-
defects’ within the organisational culture that is hindering change. As John Gooch and Eliot Cohen relate, ‘a commander can be and often is ... at the mercy of organisations not under his control, of organisational subcultures so deeply ingrained that they are oblivious to his influence’.

It is not the top managers who are ‘living in worlds circumscribed by their cognitive structures’, rather it is the majority of officers below them. And it is a majority that seems to be increasing. Generals Sullivan and Reimer are having to deal with the fact that officers who might be their natural allies in tackling ‘zero-defects’ are those very officers who would be leaving the Army because they feel they cannot operate within such an environment. The officers that are left are the ones who can work within and gain from the ‘zero-defects’ culture. And they are poorer officers because of it.

‘Zero-Defects’ and American Society

Sullivan and Reimer, moreover, are not merely dealing with an organisational problem. And this is where it becomes well-nigh impossible for the US Army to shake off its ‘zero-defects’ culture. For the problem is not merely organisational, it is societal. To illustrate this point it is necessary to illuminate some distinctly American characteristics. The first is that Americans are winners. US Army generals, like most Americans, are happy to quote Vince Lombardi; ‘Winning isn’t the most important thing – it’s the only thing.’

This desire to prevail seems to be a philosophy derived from the Manichean Protestant moralism of the Founding Fathers and early settlers. In such a tradition there was ‘good’ and ‘evil’ and good must always triumph over evil – there can be no equivocation. Thus in America there has developed ‘an extremely competitive society, where victory is widely seen as the ultimate determinant of what is right, just and good, [and where] defeat is tantamount to evil’.

Being first is always stressed while being second best is barely tolerated. Here lies the capstone for the Army’s ‘zero-defects’ – the risk of not being a winner.

It seems to be a truism that the characteristics of a particular society are most evident in the way in which it conducts its sporting rituals. In looking for distinctly American character traits it seems not unreasonable to look at the way some distinctly American sports are played. Richard Payne is right to assert that, ‘Virtually all facets of American life ... are influenced by sports and understood through sports metaphors’.

Such an examination should thus help with an understanding of the facet of American military life that is ‘zero-defects’.

The first point to note is that American sport reflects the desire to ‘win’. It does not recognise the draw and must always have a winner and loser. As Payne puts it, ‘defeat in America is made more painful because so many of our competitive sports are zero-sum ... Most sports in the United States ensure
that only one clearly defined victor emerges, by the use of overtime periods, 
extra innings and sudden death.’ The Manichean nature allows the positive – the 
victor – to be lauded, but also it seems, perversely to non-Americans, to want 
the negative to be stressed as well: for every winner there must be seen to 
be the ‘evil’ failure.

The stress on failure can be seen in baseball – truly a metaphor for the 
American psyche: a game that is ‘something grand...which reinforces
[America’s] national experience and its sense of national exceptionalism’. A 
casual foreign observer of the game would note quizzically the recording of 
fielding ‘errors’. Newspapers, in fact, in their post-match statistics, will head 
their lists with the ‘errors’ (E) above more positive criteria such as ‘runners 
batted in’ (RBI). While there may be alphabetical reasons for this, it can be, 
to the foreign observer, striking. And while the negative, the defect, is stressed, 
the positive is not. Fielders are expected to catch balls so catches – no matter 
how brilliant – pass without recording. Drop a catch and your name – in stadia, 
literally – appears in lights. One lesson from baseball seems to be: ‘do not 
err’.

There is, however, something else about baseball which is shared by all 
uniquely American sports: they do not favour displays of initiative. American 
sport, like American life, is very ordered. The order of American society is 
described by the former US ambassador to London, Raymond Seitz: ‘we 
[Americans] insist on spelling out all the rules in black and white’. This sense 
of writing down how life should be conducted can be traced back a long way;
the ‘emphasis on documentary guidance goes back to the founding of the 
Republic when diverse and distrustful sections based their new polity on a 
written constitution ... [and] since then ... the rapid intake and movement of 
population, and general expectations of flux [has made] custom and word-of-
mouth...inadequate for passing on vital precepts [and] stimulated the 
production of manuals for almost everything’.

This is seen in the sports: ‘Baseball is a conservative, rule-governed game. 
Fielders have allotted jobs ... and room to excel but not improvise at the task.’ Improvisation is rare in football as well. The players there also have allotted 
jobs and it is a game dominated by pre-planning with little spontaneity on the 
field. The quarterback controls and directs according to pre-recorded routines. 
The game, indeed, represents a paradox; ‘supposedly individualist yet flour-
ishing under tight discipline and command’. Other games, too, have ‘time-
outs’ when direction from coaches can take place. The games are thus 
hierarchical; initiative on the field seems to be denied to the players them-
sele; ‘the playbook restricts the average player’s autonomy’ and ‘as with 
much expert professionalism in the larger society, the differentiated roles [in 
sports] are largely prescribed; they do not provide great opportunities for 
spontaneous invention and versatility’.
The Manichaen nature of American society is clearly displayed in the domination again of statistics in sports. Every possible quantifiable variable is recorded and results must be quantifiably visible—thus the winner and loser, the ‘good’ and ‘evil’ is also visible. As Rupert Wilkinson puts it, ‘The very standardization of the statistical ratings used to measure a player’s contribution to the game ... stresses individual performance by providing stark comparisons with other players.’ Sombody looks good, but somebody also has to look bad. Statistics create a hierarchy of worth. This inevitably creates competition to be the best individual. That is all very well; but striving to be the best individual does not necessarily lead to the creation of the best team.

Americans have inordinate respect for hierarchies. Few sportsmen dare to go against the wishes of the coach or quarterback. This points to another aspect of the American psyche that allows ‘zero-defects’ to flourish. Americans are not naturally, even though it may seem perverse, disputatious—they respect order. Several writers have referred to the way in which Americans respect order and hierarchies and often fail to speak their mind because of it. That most famous observer of national traits, Alexis de Tocqueville, whose insightfulness remains timeless, opined that, ‘I know no country in which, speaking generally, there is less independence of mind and true freedom of discussion than in America.’ This seems to be just as true today. A British newspaper columnist referred recently to the fact that her brother, living in America, was very glad she visited him because he then had someone he could argue with: ‘Americans, by and large, do not share the British enthusiasm for dispute.’ Wilkinson, indeed, adds that, ‘Americans tend to talk a lot, [but] within the talk individual assertion shades into seemingly endless collective planning, commentary rearrangements.’ This recalls the comments noted earlier of Lieutenant-Colonel Eccles concerning the prevalence of a ‘bland and rather unhealthy consensus’.

But there seems to be a contradiction here. How can such order, control and hierarchies exist in the oft-portrayed America of the individual, where initiative and entrepreneurship supposedly thrive? Payne, indeed, talks of an American culture whose ‘cornerstones’ are ‘individualism ... willingness to take risks ... a clear sense of personal identity, self-assurance’. Seymour Lipset sees an ‘American disdain of authority’. Doubler refers to the adaptiveness of the US Army being a product of the ‘American values of individual freedom, free speech, and the entrepreneurial spirit’. He goes on, ‘Coming from a society that tends to resist centralised control, it was natural for American soldiers to use a collective, decentralised approach to problem solving. The army’s permissive attitude towards change in established doctrine reflects the values of a society that often questions higher authority.’ And today, US general officers can say, ‘By nature, our soldier is inquisitive, initiative-taking, independent.’
From such assertions it might be expected that the US Army would be considerably less centralised than it patently is. There should be an apparent willingness to accept risk, and encourage creativity and initiative. And this should certainly be the case in the 1990s. As Libicki points out, ‘Compared with their fathers, today’s entrants [to the Army] have greater access to information, broader familiarity with networked rather than hierarchical organisations, and hence greater resistance to rote discipline.’

However, in the US Army of today there is centralisation, a stress on doctrine, an abundance of planning, little initiative, a fierce competitiveness that stresses the individual over the collective, and, as Eccles puts it, a lack ‘of independent thought and formal debate’. It is an Army that has the rote discipline of men who play sport to a script. Like the sportsmen with their allotted tasks, US officers and soldiers stick to them and wait for new taskings, new directions. And, like the sportsmen who need to stress individual performance, the commander who wants to look ‘good’ tends to have an ‘overwhelming ambition to produce better visible results than the competition [and] will want to leave nothing to chance and will hold tight rein on the activities of his unit’. Thus the Army’s culture is shaped by officers stressing their positives (which must, as a corollary, stress others’ negatives), by centralising tendencies and by a fear of mistakes.

And it is a hierarchical, deferential Army. Thomas Mockaitis quotes British Army officers who were struck by the formality and lack of freedom of speech that existed in US Army officers’ messes where officers of different rank were not on first-name terms. Mockaitis explains this by saying that American society is inherently hierarchical. In an extremely egalitarian society like the United States, he says, there seems to be more respect for people who reach the top. As Lipset puts it, there is an ‘emphasis on achievement, on meritocracy’. A status consciousness develops that is not found in, for instance, most European countries.

The paradox that is clearly apparent in the American psyche between the two sets of contradictory characteristics has been pointed out by several authors. ‘American values’, says Lipset ‘are quite complex, particularly because of paradoxes within our culture that permit pernicious and beneficial social phenomena to arise simultaneously from the same basic beliefs. The American Creed is something of a double-edged sword: it fosters a high sense of moral responsibility, independent initiative, and voluntarism even as it also encourages self-serving behaviour, atomism, and a disregard for communal good.’ Wilkinson sees that, ‘America’s democratic and egalitarian traditions have had dual effects: they have sustained a belief in personal achievement, in standing out through success, but they have also supported the urge to be like others, to conform with common tastes and standards.’ Wilkinson explains thus duality by saying that ‘Americans have been pulled toward
conformity and toward joining as a reactions against the potential for anarchy and isolation in this individualist tradition." C.W. Van Aller is right when he argues that, 'The military must reflect the strengths and minimise the weaknesses of its parent society.' Unfortunately, the US Army now reflects the weaknesses (in terms of what successful armies of the post-Cold War era demand) of the parent society and not its strengths. In the era of MOOTW and of urban warfare which demand the skills of teamwork, initiative and improvisation, being self-serving, dominated by hierarchies and acting to scripts will not work. And the Army will have great difficulty inculcating the requisite skills. When the US Army attempts to instil the initiative of Hubbard's Rowan or tries to encourage the Auftragstaktik of a foreign power it will be thwarted. This will happen because Americans, and not just Americans within the Army, seem to have a problem understanding the full measure of what the concept of initiative actually entails. In America there is too much respect for order and direction from above.

An examination of articles in military journals discussing initiative leaves the impression, indeed, that their authors assume that Americans have initiative in abundance when in fact they do not. Says one, 'We must take advantage of our uniquely American characteristics. And initiative is one of those.' And Lieutenant Colonel Jeffrey Leser seems totally to miss the point of initiative. He says in an article that 'initiative can simply be defined as “making decisions outside of one’s authority”.' This seems to imply that the decision is illegal; hence initiative is impossibly daring. A dictionary would see initiative as acts performed ‘without being prompted by others’. This is the true nature of initiative – acting without guidance, not without authority.

Initiative, moreover, seems to be discussed in journals as something to be displayed only by officers, and mostly senior officers at that. Again, the hierarchical nature is evident. Leser talks of initiative as something that would only be required at brigade and division level. And Lieutenant General Joe Kinzer, who led the UN peacekeeping operation in Haiti says, ‘The key to training for peace operations is to teach senior leaders to be flexible, mentally agile, and able to adapt their learnings to the new environment in which they find themselves.’ (Moreover, surely it is better to 'encourage' initiative rather than to 'teach' it?)

And even those whose who are immensely critical of the fact that the whole Army is hierarchical and doctrine-dominated are wont to describe ‘the lowest competent level’ as being ‘the “Strategic” Sergeant or 2LT’. Initiative needs to go further than this in low-intensity conflict scenarios – someone else rather than the coach or quarterback can and must display initiative.

Without an understanding, let alone an encouragement, of initiative at all rank levels it thus becomes very hard for the US Army to copy other armies
who do display more initiative. Developing *Aufstragstaktik* seems to be a definite non-starter. Nystrom and Starbuck, indeed, warn about the process of imitation in organizations where, ‘Managers often get into trouble by trying to follow prescriptions that have been formulated by someone else in a different situation. For one thing, obeying someone else’s prescriptions requires a partial substitution of one’s best judgement.’ 96 The best judgement of Americans does not naturally include the characteristics necessary to pursue the imitation of *Aufstragstaktik*. As Vandergriff correctly points out, the US Army ‘cannot exercise the type of warfare defined by the pre-WW2 German army because our army does not possess a military culture that embraces the type of foundation needed to nurture the kinds of soldiers/leaders maneuver warfare calls for’. 97

**Conclusion**

The US Army will have great difficulty learning the skills required for post-Cold War operations because it has so much difficulty unlearning. The traits responsible for ‘zero-defects’ are buried deep within the American psyche. The inadequacies inherent in that culture are thus difficult to recognise as inadequacies. What can be seen by many – especially outsiders – as deleterious to the proper functioning of a military organisation do not register as such to the majority of the personnel of the Army. This fact is, of course, ultimately dangerous. The Chinese philosopher Sun-Tzu neatly expressed the problem 2,500 years ago: ‘One who knows the enemy and knows himself will not be endangered in a hundred engagements. One who does not know the enemy but knows himself will sometimes be victorious, sometimes meet with defeat. One who knows neither the enemy nor himself will invariably be defeated in every engagement.’

There are, however, some hopeful signs for the US Army. There is a tremendous willingness to discuss the problem and many fora for officers and enlisted men so to do. As one particular young officer puts it, ‘we must look at our basic selves and come to terms with our shortcomings and faults’.99 If the Army does not, in the words of another young officer, the Army’s best will find careers elsewhere, leaving the service with only the ‘marginal to submarginal [and] the yes men [and thus] mediocrity will become the norm’.100

**NOTES**

2. Ibid. p.115. It is not only the British who have registered concerns about US actions in Bosnia.
Russians, among others, were surprised at US Army levels of force protection and the Swedes think that the US Army is preparing at too high a level and losing initiative at lower levels. See B. Starr, ‘Poland Poised for NORDPOL Leadership’, Jane’s Defense Weekly (27 May 1998) p.26.


7. This was considered to be a ‘damning study’. Henry Cole, ‘Leadership in Literature’, Parameters 24/3 (Autumn 1999) p.135.


9. Ibid. p.310.


17. The word has been used, for instance, by Eccles (note 2) and by a French soldier commenting on US soldiers in Albania. Kosovo, TV programme, BBC TV (7 April 1999).


24. See Bowden (note 16).


28. Roos (note 10).


31. Ibid. p.29.

32. Killebrew (note 22) pp.70–2.

33. Translations were even made for the Imperial Japanese Army and Russian Railways.


36. Ibid. p.48.
37. Ibid. p.46.
38. Ibid.
43. Ibid. p.21.
45. Ibid. p.140.
52. Ibid. p.57.
53. Doubler (note 5) p.12.
54. Ibid. p.22.
58. See Bowden (note 16).
59. FM 100-5 1941 quoted in Doubler (note 5) p.89
61. See Bowden (note 16).
65. Ibid. p.61.
66. Ibid.
68. Give or take some Central American republics and Japan in the case of baseball.
69. Seitz (note 67) p.83.
By way of comparison to the US Army, the British Army is a much less centralised organisation—worships neither doctrine nor planning. Doctrine and planning meant, to the British, that it would be difficult ‘to resolve each problem on its own terms’. The British Army, according to Maj.-Gen. John Kiszely, ‘had a strong antipathy for doctrine’. See Kiszely, ‘The British Army and Approaches to Warfare Since 1945’, Strategic and Combat Studies Occasional Paper, No.26, p.10. As Colin McInnes says, this ‘reflects a distinctive approach to war which emphasises flexibility rather than pre-planning, adaptability rather than specialisation’. See Colin McInnes, Hot War, Cold War: The British Army’s Way in Warfare, 1945–95 (London: Brassey’s 1996) p.87. Lt.-Gen. Sir Richard Lawson, for instance, when General Officer Commanding, Northern Ireland, advised newly arrived brigadiers not to have ‘a plan’, because he did not have one nor wanted one. See Desmond Hamill, Pig in the Middle: The British Army in Northern Ireland, 1969–1984 (London: Methuen 1985) p.264. And, in the 1991 Gulf War, the then Maj.-Gen. Rupert Smith, before ordering his division into battle, ‘refused to let himself do an appreciation until the last moment so as to avoid the mistake of making a plan and not realising that it should be changed because the enemy were not doing what he hoped’. McInnes (above) p.96