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THE ARMY AND THE PUBLIC -- HOW THE ARMY CAN MAKE ITSELF UNDERSTOOD

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31 October 1972

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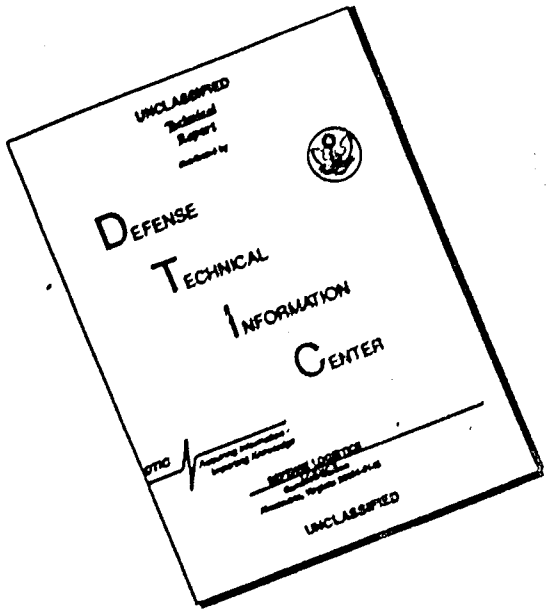

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(Essay)

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by

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ABSTRACT

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TITLE: The Army and the Public -- How the Army Can Make Itself Understood
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At a time of its greatest need for public understanding and support, the Army faces an array of circumstances which challenge its basic professionalism. The Army is moving vigorously to meet the challenge by giving top priority to enhanced professionalism, but this effort is not widely perceived. Maintenance of public respect for the basic integrity of the Army is absolutely essential to the maintenance of national security, but all established institutions of society are being challenged. Analysis of developments causing these misperceptions shows that current priority goal of professionalism is on target and can provide a basis to build better public understanding through both public information and command information channels. A systematized program of command emphasis at all levels on public affairs planning and professionalism in the entire information program of the Army can meet the challenge. Self-examination by the news media of their own performance is at its highest level, affording opportunity to the Army at a time when public support was never more essential to the Army to achieve a volunteer Army in an environment of social unrest.

INTRODUCTION

"I just don't want to be a part of an unpopular profession."

Those words were spoken by a young West Point graduate resigning his commission despite an enviable record. They epitomize the Army's most troublesome problem today -- its urgent need for public understanding of the Army and the professionalism of its officer corps.

At the time of its greatest need for public support, the Army faces an array of circumstances, not entirely of its own making, which tempt one to a pessimistic view. The temptation must be resisted for duty, honor and country demand professionalism in meeting the challenge to the Army's own professionalism.

BACKGROUND

In the long sweep of American history, public attitudes toward the Army, indeed toward all military services, have reflected as many low points as high. This is well known to all military men but not so well known, not recognized or not placed in perspective today by the Army's critics or most of the public.

A well known history of the U.S. Army points out that in 1926 many people "persisted in confusing the military man with militarism, and training with desire for war" and that many "went so far as to strive to do away with the R.O.T.C. in colleges."[1]

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[1]William A. Ganoe, The History of the United States Army (1943), p. 490.

It is undisputed fact that post-war periods in American history have been difficult times for the Army, as public support quickly evaporated after the need for national defense had been satisfied. Even the Army's severest critics in the public media today recognize these facts of history. Yet the intensity of the public criticism today is so great that it is having unprecedented effects on the Army. Many theses and essays in the U.S. Army War College library comment on the "frustrations" of career Army officers stemming from the fact that their professionalism is constantly under attack.

When 33 young officers on the U.S. Military Academy faculty resigned their commissions in 1972, one of their chief complaints was that senior Army officers regarded their current problems as "just another post-war period" and adopted a "business as usual" attitude instead of seeking innovative solutions to problems which concern all of young America.[2] That they were totally mistaken in their assessment of the attitudes of the Army's top command is itself indication of the seriousness of the challenge. It is the Army's professionalism which is under attack and which is literally at stake.

The warning was clear at least eight years ago, before any significant Vietnam buildup. In a widely quoted Foreign Affairs article in 1964, Col Robert N. Ginsburgh traced the growing challenges to military professionalism in the post-war era.

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[2]Seymour M. Hersh, "33 Teachers at West Point Leave Army in 18 Months," The New York Times, 25 June 1972, p..42

Adopting Samuel P. Huntington's "essential characteristics" as a definition of a profession -- corporateness, responsibility and expertise -- it is apparent that the Army's professionalism is under severe attack in all three of its essentials. It is equally apparent, as will be developed later, that the Army is moving vigorously to meet the challenge in all three areas but this effort is not widely perceived.

In the post-war era the Army's corporateness has evolved from typical isolation on military posts to closer intermingling with the civilian world. This has a positive side in broadening the Army officer's appreciation of the society he serves but it creates new and severe challenges in such areas as pay and allowances, living conditions and public respect.

The division of responsibility between military and civilian authority has become blurred in the post-war era as national security issues brought the State Department and the military services into closer relationships throughout the world. Ginsburgh concludes that "the responsibility of the military has clearly increased, but their authority has been progressively eroded."[3]

As the Army officer was thrust into more and more positions of quasi-military responsibility, he found his professional expertise subject to increasing challenge, not only in the non-

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[3]Robert N. Ginsburgh, "The Challenge to Military Professionalism," Foreign Affairs, (January 1964), p. 257.

military areas but even on military grounds. A new breed of academic expert captured the fancy of civilian authority and of the public. In fields of both natural sciences and political sciences, these academic experts succeeded in challenging the professional views of the military officer.

As Chief of Staff of the Army, Gen William C. Westmoreland assigned top priority to "improving the professionalism of the Army" in the decade of the 1970's. He put it plainly in a speech in May 1972:

> Of all the actions being taken by the Army, the most important ones are those which are devoted to improving the professionalism -- the quality, the motivation and the skill -- of our people. The achievement of the highest standards of professionalism is our overriding concern. All else is secondary.[4]

Gen Westmoreland's three elements of professionalism -- quality, motivation and skill -- equate neatly with Huntington's definition. In another speech, Gen Westmoreland described the Army's professionalism as "the bedrock -- the foundation -- upon which the security of our Nation has been based throughout our history."[5] He could hardly have given it a higher priority.

Actions taken throughout the Army to deal with "personnel turbulence" which stemmed in large part from the Vietnam war have had as their overriding goal the attainment of higher standards of

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[4]William C. Westmoreland, Address before Department of New Hampshire, Reserve Officers Association, Newington, N.Y., 20 May 1972.

[5]William C. Westmoreland, "Army Professionalism," Address before Association of the United States Army, Washington, D.C., 12 October 1971.

professionalism which, in turn, would bring into the Modern Volunteer Army the bright young minds needed to cope with 20th Century problems of national security.

None of the above can be accomplished without public support which, in turn, depends on public understanding. Where then do we stand today?

A CURRENT ASSESSMENT

In recent years the term "credibility gap" has been popularized in many contexts and applied often to the relationship between the news media and the military, particularly the Army. To keep this analysis in perspective, it is pertinent to note that the term "credibility gap" has also been applied to the press itself in its relationships to the public it serves. For example, a 1969 survey by the Associated Press Managing Editors Association produced results which caused the trade magazine Editor & Publisher to conclude that U.S. newspapers "are widely suspected of being neither true nor free" and that they are "under siege because of their own credibility gap."[6]

The survey showed that 64% of the editors and 65% of the public believed that "half-told or misleading stories resulting

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[6]"APME Survey Shows Why Papers Are Beset," Editor & Publisher, 30 August 1969.

from lax standards for reportorial research and background of news stories" was a "major cause" of the credibility gap. On the other hand, 56% of the editors thought "inaccuracies in elementary facts" were a major cause but only 10% of the public thought so. This told the press that the problem was much more serious than many editors had realized.

The same conclusion can be drawn from the fact that 65% of the public thought another major cause was "evidence of editorial prejudice by placement of stories in paper, size of headlines, unbalanced story content, and length of stories."

Evidence that the same shoe fits the broadcast news media can be seen in the widespread public agreement with Vice President Agnew's attacks on objectivity of television news reporting. This agreement was evident in subsequent public opinion polls, letters to newspaper editors, and public comments through many channels.

There is ample evidence that the press recognizes its problem and is exploring ways to deal with it through various channels, such as the "ombudsman" idea, advisory committees of local citizens and systematic follow-ups with news sources to check accuracy of coverage and publish corrections where appropriate. These developments are noteworthy to the Army which has been a conspicuous victim of inaccurate or incomplete coverage, particularly by television which is subject to such severe time constraints. The concern of news media top management for the fundamental credibility of its institutions opens new avenues for the Army to counteract the stereo-

typed opinions of some young reporters, particularly those who have not themselves had military service. The problem with middle and higher level media management is simply a lack of information about the Army. This can be remedied in the long run.

Of course, the Army's credibility problem is not confined to the news media. That the Army has a credibility problem with many segments of the public seems indisputable. Some of the Army's critics, duly reported in the press, are persons of national reputation including some former military personnel of high and low rank.

John Kenneth Galbraith has been in the forefront of prominent persons warning of the need to "regain control" (which had never really been lost) of "the military and its industrial allies" which he says is exemplified by the Association of the U.S. Army and the Air Force Association. In 1969 he saw a "drastic change" in public attitudes and warned that "politicians who are sensitive to the public mood" would respond and reassert control.[7] This kind of criticism feeds on itself and many public officeholders have responded with severe criticism of the military, particularly the Army which is the most visible of the services. Senators Fulbright, McGovern and Proxmire have been particularly critical of military spending and of Army public information activities which they describe as self-serving propaganda.

Retired Marine Gen David M. Shoup started an article in The

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[7]John Kenneth Galbraith, "How to Control the Military, Harper's, (June 1969).

Atlantic in 1969 with the flat statement "America has become a militaristic and aggressive nation." He contended that an "influential nucleus of aggressive, ambitious professional military leaders" are the "root of America's evolving militarism."[8]

Also in the year 1969 television commentator Eric Savareid, writing in the now defunct Look magazine, acknowledged that "throughout our history, we have adored our soldiery when we needed them, disliked them when the need has passed." But speaking of military officers he wrote that "It remains eternally true that professional soldiers say they hate war but hate it no more than does a trained surgeon hate his often tragic trade."[9]

All these attacks center on the professional military man. They are difficult to refute because it is nearly impossible to disprove a negative. At the very least these attacks place roadblocks in the way of attainment of the Army's goals of the highest standards of professionalism, the very goals which the critics should join in espousing.

Here then is the Army's problem. Its professionalism and credibility are under attack at a time when all the established institutions of society are being challenged. But the Army's credibility problem is not quite so simple, nor would it be accurate to accept such extreme criticism of the Army as a valid assessment of the Army's current credibility or lack thereof. Some of the

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[8]David M. Shoup, "The New American Militarism," The Atlantic, (April 1969).

[9]Eric Savareid, "American Militarism: What Is It Doing to Us?" Look, (12 August 1969).

criticism is valid. No amount of public information effort can overcome the consequences of inept or corrupt actions.

The NCO Club investigation and hearings damaged the Army as an institution when statements by Army personnel at public hearings were not credible to members of the public who witnessed on television.

The sheep deaths at Dugway Proving Ground caused a former editor of Nation's Business to write about "the outright lying practiced by the Army for more than a year in an attempt to cover up responsibility for the mysterious deaths of 6,000 sheep."[10] The importance of this incident from the standpoint of the relationship of the Army to the public should have dictated top level public affairs handling from the moment it occurred and certainly before any denials were issued. Department of the Army could have avoided many of the problems if the Chief of Information had been immediately informed so that his office could direct appropriate handling. Mistakes can be explained and understood, false statements never.

The Army's investigation of the murder of Captain Jeffrey MacDonald's wife was a difficult public information problem because of the rights of the subject of the investigation. But the fact that at one point the Army physically detained Captain MacDonald to cut a lock of his hair gave an impression of petty and inept handling of the action, not just a public information problem.

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[10]Alden H. Sypher, "Open Season," Nation's Business, (August 1969), p. 24.

The case of Lt Col Herbert was another in which the Army had difficulty getting its story across because of constraints under the code of military justice. The officer himself felt no restraints and kept up a barrage of criticism against the Army as an institution. The incident in which he was lectured and required to practice the hand salute gave another impression of pettiness and inept handling. Such petty actions seriously detract from the effort to convey public understanding of Army professionalism.

Abraham Lincoln said: "Let the people know the facts and the country will be safe." An intelligent and fully informed public is the foundation of our whole political system. The military establishment exists to protect the rights of all our citizens to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" under our system of freedom. Maintenance of public respect for the basic integrity of the military establishment is absolutely essential to the maintenance of national security. The Army and the news media have a common stake in preservation of our system of freedom and must find ways to solve the credibility problem.

The Army is largely dependent on the news media to get its story to the public. This is widely recognized. Secretary Laird told the nation's newspaper publishers in April 1971 that the Department of Defense must have the trust and confidence of members of the press because "it is through the press that we must seek the understanding and support of the American people." Without

that support, he said, the Department would have "no chance for success."[11]

Gen Ralph E. Haines, commanding general of CONARC, has called the press the "guardian of the public trust." He, too, acknowledged that a few "unhappy instances" had brought valid criticism of the Army but he urged that these examples be placed in proper perspective.[12]

Gen Westmoreland placed a premium on professionalism in the smaller Army of the seventies which must be a "qualitatively improved force." He acknowledged that "We cannot expect to achieve our goal... unless the Army is presented as a necessary, highly respectable profession. Public support must be visible, audible and tangible."[13]

Standing in the way of this goal is the temper of the times. Louis Harris, the public opinion expert, describes it this way: "Rarely has there been a time in recent history when so much of the establishment has been under attack on so broad a front." Speaking to newspaper publishers in April 1972, Harris compared public attitudes in 1972 and 1966. He cited dramatic declines in public esteem for the press, the military, educators, scientists, business leaders and the U.S. Supreme Court. He said the military was "highly respected" by 62% of the public in 1966 and "now by no more than 27%, a fall from grace of 35 points." The other institu-

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[11]Melvin R. Laird, "Beyond Vietnam," Address before American Newspaper Publishers Association, New York, N.Y. 21 April 1971.

[12]Norman M. Covert, "Mutual Confidence Needed--Army Must Alter Opinion of Public, Haines Asserts," The Daily Press (Newport News, Va.), 17 March 1971, p. 1.

[13]W. C. Westmoreland, "The Army in Transition," Ordnance Magazine, (July-August 1971).

tions suffered similar, if less spectacular, declines.[14]

In a volunteer Army environment the attitudes of young people are the key to Army success. Opinion Research Corporation of Princeton, N.J., made a survey for the Army in 1971 to measure the attitudes of 17-21 year old males who are not in college. This survey produced a great amount of information, much of it discouraging. In general, it told us that young men lack information about many of the attractive features of Army service. The Army does much more for its personnel than these young people realize in the areas they consider important. Opinion Research Corporation unhesitatingly concluded that "The Army deserves more credit than it is getting."

Somewhat surprisingly the news media (TV, radio, newspapers and magazines) provide a favorable influence on young people's attitudes toward the Army (by a margin of 56% to 42%). Their unfavorable attitudes are derived largely from members of their own age group who are now in service (unfavorable by 66% to 31%) and from members of their own age group who have recently been in service (unfavorable by 68% to 29%).[15]

Something can be done about this through a vigorous command information program at all levels of the Army.

What about current active duty personnel? A profile of the U.S. Serviceman prepared by the Office of Information for the

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[14]Louis Harris, Address before American Newspaper Publishers Association, 25 April 1972.

[15]Opinion Research Corporation, "Reaction of 17 to 21 Year Old Males, Not in College, to Enlistment in the Army and Its Combat Branches," Princeton, N.J., July 1971, p. 101.

Armed Forces, OASD (M & RA) with data up to April 1972 identified "civilian attitude toward the Army" as the "least desirable career feature" among Regular Army personnel.[16] The most favorable features were the retirement system, opportunity for specialized education and training, and adventure, travel and new experiences. The reason most often given for use of drugs was "boredom, something to do, too much free time with nothing to do."[17]

These findings indicate that current Army emphasis on professionalism in such areas as quality of Army life, adventure type training and community service or domestic action projects are right on target. The audience should be more receptive, too, for the profile shows that 85.6% of enlisted men today are high school graduates, compared with 62.1% in 1958.[18] With higher educational levels, Army personnel should be better able to comprehend the significance of the drive for higher professionalism. A more vigorous command information program is again clearly indicated.

In the field of public information, many writings by Army officers urge an aggressive program to tell the Army's story to the public. These writings are an obvious reflection of the inherent need of any professional for public understanding of his profession. The signposts are everywhere. The Army professional must develop an attitude which seeks to close the credibility gap

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[16] US Department of Defense, Office of Information for the Armed Forces, Memorandum Subject: Evaluation Staff Report 72-5: Updated Profile of U.S. Serviceman, Washington, D.C., 24 May 1972, p.6.

[17] Ibid, p. 3.

[18] Ibid, p. 2.

by bridging the communications gap. Efforts are being made in this direction at several levels.

At Department of Defense level, two conferences have been held with senior executives of newspaper organizations and the wire services at which senior DOD Public Affairs officials and the Service information chiefs frankly discussed common problems of the Services and the news media.[19] The value of these conferences is illustrated in this comment in a report by the American Society of Newspaper Editors:

> All hands agreed that the conference had been most enlightening and that both sides had learned a great deal about the problems of the other side during our discussions. It was agreed that future meetings should be held to discuss differences but in the meantime the Pentagon officials urged the press to inquire when in doubt about any matter affecting the military.[20]

These conferences developed several areas of mutual interest, such as more frequent exchange of speakers, military before press audiences and newspaper people before military audiences. The newspaper people expressed concern that budget cuts not reduce the ability of the Services to respond to press queries. The press representatives also expressed their need that information officers be highly professional and have the support of and access to their commanders.

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[19]In his civilian capacity as President and General Manager of American Newspaper Publishers Association, the author arranged these conferences, set up the agenda and personally participated.

[20]American Society of Newspaper Editors, Report of Military Subcommittee of the Freedom of Information Committee, April 1971, p. 11.

CONCLUSIONS[21]

1. The Army's credibility prolems with the public media are considerable but not as great as they are so often painted. The problems are more severe with some opinion leaders whose attacks on the Army are merely reported by the media without sufficient rebuttal by the Army of errors of fact.

2. The most common complaint is that the Army is too slow to react, needlessly secretive and sometimes inept in its handling of the action as well as the news.

3. With the media the Army's credibility problems are greatest with the young reporters who have formed fixed opinions, particularly those who have not themselves had military service. The Army is simply not well understood by middle level news managers and sometimes gets blamed in headlines or articles for actions for which the Army is not responsible.

4. The Army's credibility with the public is harmed by the television medium which has such severe time limitations it almost invariably omits the explanation which the Army considers vital to understanding of an Army problem.

5. The Army's credibility and its basic support is highest with the senior executives of the news media, particularly those who lived through World War II either as servicemen or as newsmen and

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[21]Some of the conclusions and recommendations in part have previously appeared in memoranda and other working papers prepared by the author in his capacity as a Mobilization Designee to the Office of the Chief of Information, Department of the Army. This essay greatly expands on these previous documents.

saw an effective teamwork to keep the people informed without jeopardizing security. With this group communications can more easily build understanding and support for fundamental goals.

6. Failures of the command information program have led to widespread misunderstanding of the Army among young people who get misinformation from former members of the Army who never got the message.

7. The Army's current priority goal of professionalism is on target and can provide a basis to build better public understanding through both public information and command information channels.

8. In an era when all institutions, including the press itself, are being challenged, attitudes of media executives were never more conducive to self-examination and intensive efforts to build better understanding between the media and news sources such as the Army.

9. The lesson of professionalism must be applied just as much to the Army's information effort as to its military proficiency goals.

10. Public support was never more essential to the Army than in the current effort to achieve a volunteer Army in an environment of social unrest.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the foregoing, the following checklist of recommendations

utilizing presently available resources is offered for consideration:

1. Public affairs planning must be assigned a priority which will assure that it is given specific attention at all levels as an essential element of the planning process for all Army actions. This can only be accomplished through directives in the command channels. Planning which omits public affairs considerations should be rejected as incomplete staff work.

2. The information concept as an essential part of command responsibility must be implanted in the minds of all senior officers and commanders at all levels. Both public information and command information responsibilities need to be stressed through all possible channels. This concept is now included in briefings for new brigadier generals. The same message needs to be imparted in formal instruction in all Army service schools, particularly the Command and General Staff College.

3. The message about Army professionalism must be conveyed to opinion leaders throughout the country. Army members and friends talking to each other, as often occurs in military organizations, is not enough. Civic, academic, business and labor leaders need to be told what the Army is doing to upgrade its professionalism and why. This can be done through such channels as the civilian aides to the Secretary of the Army, local chapters of the Association of the U.S. Army and Army Reserve and National Guard leaders at the local levels.

4. The essential messages about Army professionalism, the quality of Army life and career satisfactions must be repeated more

often to match troop turnover and get accurate information to all members of the Army. Statistical proof of misinformation in the minds of the troops provides ample evidence of the need for increased stress on command information through all available channels.

5. The systematized program in the Office of the Chief of Information to identify and disseminate important messages through both public information and command information channels needs renewed command emphasis. Many interesting and important stories have yet to be exploited. All Army staff agencies and commands should participate.

6. Students in the Army service schools should be given increased encouragement to write for publication in journals of all types, not only military but other publications which will reach academic and other opinion leaders. Army students are just as capable of such academic writing as students in civilian graduate schools, but Army students are not exploiting this useful avenue of communications.

7. More meetings with leaders of the news media, not only at the national level but also at the regional level, should be encouraged as an important method of bridging the communications gap with the media. The obvious success of such meetings at the national level indicates a high potential. Invitations can easily be stimulated through friends of the Army such as Reserve personnel, AUSA chapters and others.

8. More invitations to media representatives to speak or participate in panel discussions at Army service schools should materially assist in two-way communications. Army officers need exposure to the thinking of media leaders such as those who have participated in the DOD conferences. Media executives in turn learn much about Army professionalism through exposure to faculty and student officers.

9. Senior Army officers and commanders at all levels must be given official encouragement to accept requests for interviews. Despite some opinions to the contrary, interviews almost always turn out more favorable than unfavorable. The exposure is beneficial to the officer as well as the Army.

10. Acceptance of speaking invitations before civilian audiences must be given a priority which will assure that this vital method of reaching the public, particularly opinion leaders, will be effectively utilized. Speakers bureaus at large unit and post levels are comparatively easy to operate. Information officers must keep their lists of available speakers and subjects up to date at all times.

11. New communications technology must enter into the thinking of information officers and commanders. The burgeoning growth of Community Antenna Television (CATV) systems opens up new opportunities to get the Army story before important segments of the public. As the so-called "public access" channels grow in number, their need for programming will grow in geometric proportions.

Live dialogue on these channels can present Army representatives in an environment where there is usually adequate time for useful discussion. The high cost of filming is avoided.

12. The continued growth of specialized publications serving audiences of people with common interests in business, hobby or regional subjects offers a broad opportunity. Many Army activities would fit the subject and format of many of these publications. Individual members of the Army should be encouraged to write for these publications.

13. Army Reserve and National Guard commanders and senior officers provide an important asset which can be tapped for speeches before civilian audiences or to write articles for civilian or military publications. To facilitate this the Speech File Service and Command Comment could be sent to selected Reserve Component senior officers and commanders and point credit could be awarded for making speeches or writing articles.

14. The annual active duty period of Army Reserve and National Guard units affords another opportunity for information effort which is not uniformly exploited. A systematized Army-wide program of information requirements at active duty training of units would pay dividends through the obvious advantage of local affiliations.

15. The Association of the United States Army offers an unique channel of communication. The current program of collaboration with AUSA must be continued and expanded at every opportunity. It requires continual reaffirmation of support from the Secretary of

the Army/Chief of Staff level.

16. Computerization of the U.S. Army Home Town News Center has greatly increased its capacity to exploit the sure-fire success of home town news items of all kinds. The ingenuity of information officers in the field should be challenged so that they provide a steady flow of release material, including innovative local story ideas.

17. Public service/community action projects now have a high level of public interest. To exploit this interest unit information officers must get the story of such projects to the media promptly, not days after they cease to be news. Such projects provide a good opportunity to demonstrate that the Army is an important element in the society which it serves with pride in its professionalism.

No single idea discussed above will convey to the public or to the Army's own membership the true story of Army professionalism and the role of the Army in a free society. Taken together they constitute part of a total program of emphasis on the Army and its relationship to the public, a communications gap that urgently needs to be bridged in the interest not only of the Army but of the country.

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