

GENERATIONS APART:  
XERS AND BOOMERS  
IN THE OFFICER CORPS

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October 2000

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## FOREWORD

The junior officer attrition problem has grown in importance and urgency to reach the levels of the Secretary and Chief of Staff of the Army. They have instituted pay raises, pay table reform, and improved retirement benefits to stem the flow of captains and others from the Army. At the same time, the Army's senior leadership has sensitized battalion commanders throughout the force to the issue and is trying to convince captains to continue in the Army. Yet attitudinal surveys predict and exit numbers verify that the exodus of junior officers has not abated.

In the following monograph, Leonard Wong mines the generational differences literature for insights. Organizations in the civilian sector have been forced to deal with conflict between the Baby Boomer generation and Generation X and the Army is now discovering that it is no different.

The analysis in this monograph goes beyond anecdotes, e-mails, and editorials to describe the situation the Army finds itself in today. It is at times an uncomfortable and difficult process to objectively examine our perspectives in relation to others. The key point is that today's junior officers think differently than junior officers in the past and hence solutions to the attrition problem cannot come from the traditional menu of conventional fixes.

Retaining our junior officers will require policy changes and critical leadership actions. This monograph convincingly makes the case for both.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

LEONARD WONG joined the Strategic Studies Institute in July 2000 after serving 20 years in the U.S. Army. His time in the Army included teaching leadership at the U.S. Military Academy, serving as an analyst in the Program Analysis and Evaluation Directorate and later in the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, and serving as the Director of the Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis. He has authored several articles, chapters, and papers on organizational issues in the Army such as downsizing, leadership, and junior officer retention. He is a registered Professional Engineer and holds a B.S. from the U.S. Military Academy, and an M.S.B.A. and Ph.D. from Texas Tech University.

## SUMMARY

This monograph addresses the junior officer attrition problem by identifying and discussing the disparity between senior and junior officers in terms of generational differences. Officers from the Baby Boom Generation think and perceive things differently than officers from Generation X. Using empirical evidence to support the generational differences literature, the author points out that Generation X officers are more confident in their abilities, perceive loyalty differently, want more balance between work and family, and are not intimidated by rank. Additionally, while pay is important to Generation X officers, it alone will not keep junior officers from leaving. The solutions presented in the monograph range from strategic policies changing the Army as an organization to operational leadership actions affecting the face-to-face interaction between senior and junior officers.

## GENERATIONS APART: XERS AND BOOMERS IN THE OFFICER CORPS

### Introduction.

In July of 1998, the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel (ODCSPER) released a message addressing the growing concern of junior officers departing the Army. The message stated that,

ODCSPER analysts confirm that officer retention is down slightly for all grades except lieutenant and major. However, the downturn in retention is not significant, and rates remain within bounds of pre-drawdown rates.<sup>1</sup>

Less than 2 years later, the Vice Chief of Staff of the Army (VCSA) sent another message on the same topic. This time, however, the message stated that,

...in the last 10 years, the voluntary attrition rate for captains has risen from 6.7% to an all-time high of 10.6%. If we, as senior leaders, don't take action now to turn this around, we may not be able to meet our future requirements.<sup>2</sup>

Shortly after the VCSA's message was sent to commanders, the Secretary of the Army and the Chief of Staff of the Army set up a Blue Ribbon panel tasked with developing specific recommendations on how the Army could stop the exodus of junior officers in the near, mid, and long-term future.<sup>3</sup>

In less than 2 years, the Army shifted from denial of a junior officer retention problem to a situation where the most senior Army leadership became involved in seeking help to staunch the flow of captains out of the Army. How could Army senior leaders miss the signals of an attrition problem? How could the Army's senior leadership not see junior officer resignation numbers increasing or hear the growing discontent at the junior officer level?

One answer is that the Army's downsizing masked the increasing departure of junior officers. In the process of drawing down a force of 780,000 to an Army of 480,000, so many junior officers were enticed, encouraged, or induced to leave that the resignation of junior officers became routine and viewed as generally good for the organization. Downsizing was painful, but the huge number of junior officers that left the Army was viewed as an expected and accepted consequence. The continued attrition that occurred after the conclusion of the downsizing was thought to be a temporary state while the organization recovered from the drawdown.

In addition to desensitizing the force to junior officers leaving, the downsizing had a far more subtle effect. Eight years of downsizing affected the attitudes of the survivors—those officers left behind. Research in organizational behavior had well documented the detrimental effects on survivors as a consequence of drawing down an organization.<sup>4</sup> The Army as an organization was no exception. The psychological bond between officer survivors and the Army was weakened and redefined.<sup>5</sup> As competition in the now trimmer Army became keener, a stifling atmosphere of perfection known as the "zero defects mentality" along with notions of careerism emerged.<sup>6</sup> This is the environment encountered by today's junior officers soon after commissioning.

The attitudinal effects of the downsizing were overshadowed, however, by reduced budgets and increased operating tempo (OPTEMPO). With the Army's attention focused on adjusting to a post-Cold War period, the attitudinal changes in the junior officer population largely escaped the notice of the senior Army leadership. Instead, debate arose over the role of peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, a shrinking labor market from which to recruit, a rush to digitization, and the need for a larger budget slice. Thus, in addition to the numbing effects of forced attrition due to downsizing, the changing roles and missions of the Army after the fall of the Berlin Wall shifted the Army

leadership's attention away from monitoring its people to reevaluating the Army's relevance in a post-Cold War world.<sup>7</sup>

#### The Generational Divide.

Now that the junior officer attrition crisis has the attention of the Army leadership, it seems plausible that the problem may now be analyzed and remedied, assuming adequate resources are available. One factor, however, that contributed to the senior Army leadership overlooking the attrition problem in the first place will continue to hamper efforts to overcome it. Simply put, today's senior officers do not understand today's junior officers or their perspectives. Senior officers *think* they understand the world of lieutenants and captains, but many junior officers and others are convinced that they do not. Junior officers have become persuaded in increasing numbers that the Army's senior leadership is not connected to the reality of the trenches.

This monograph identifies and discusses the disparity between senior and junior officers in terms of generational differences. The objective of this monograph is to inform senior officers about captains and their perspectives during a time when many junior officers believe that senior officers "just don't get it." The analysis is at times stereotypical and over-generalizing, but it addresses a disturbing message that is growing in intensity in the junior officer ranks of the Army.

For example, in the spring of 1999 in the Sample Survey of Military Personnel administered by the Army Research Institute, sample comments concerning senior officers included a major commenting that the problem is, "Trust in senior leadership. My personal opinion is that they are out of touch with what is happening, where the rubber meets the road." A colonel remarked,



I talk to a lot of young officers. They have lost faith with the senior leadership of the Army. They believe they [senior leaders] are either out of touch with reality or liars. We're losing a generation of good leaders.

A lieutenant added,

The largest problem affecting retention of junior officers is the perception that the senior leadership (LTC+) is completely out of touch with soldiers and their needs.<sup>8</sup>

A study on military culture conducted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) reiterated the theme of mistrust and differing perceptions across ranks. In that study, focus group participants believed, "that senior leaders were out of touch with conditions in the field and fleet."<sup>9</sup> The researchers found differing perceptions across the junior and senior ranks, noting that issues ranged from,

. . . agreement by senior leaders to take on missions that have stressed their forces beyond what some think are prudent limits to assessments of readiness that did not match perceptions at lower levels.<sup>10</sup>

The CSIS findings were echoed in a widely distributed e-mail containing Command and General Staff College focus group responses. In that study, one officer noted that,

Young officers are getting out because they feel out of touch with leadership; the Army [that young officers] are experiencing is not the same Army [that] general officers experienced as lieutenants and captains.<sup>11</sup>

Junior officers wince when senior officers assume they are familiar with the plight of today's junior officers. Yet, well-meaning policies are created and admirable mentoring sessions are conducted by senior officers who inadvertently exacerbate the gap between the ranks by assuming today's junior officers think the same as junior officers of yore. For example, in the VCSA's message to field commanders concerning the exodus of captains, the VCSA stated:

I need your help in convincing these young warriors that there is a bright light at the end of the tunnel. Listen to their concerns, and let them know what we are doing to address them. *We know that many of their concerns are similar to those we had as junior officers; so share with them what it was like when you were a captain—when you stood in their shoes and faced similar hard career decisions.*<sup>12</sup> (emphasis added)

Rather than telling captains of the *similarities* of then and now, it may be prudent to first examine the *differences* between junior officers of then and now. Senior officers need to understand who today's junior officers are and how they may differ from junior officers in previous decades.

Of course, some will be quick to point out that there has always been a rift between older, senior officers at higher echelons and younger, junior officers on the front line. Two key aspects make today's situation much different, however. First, in the past, communication between ranks was much less frequent due to the hierarchical nature of the Army structure. A captain used to be merely a small cog of a much larger wheel and contact with a senior officer was rare. Today, a captain can be the pseudo-mayor of a town in Bosnia or the only U.S. representative in a potential flash point in Latin America. E-mail and the Internet keep these junior officers well informed of issues and well connected with peers and senior officers. As a result, junior officers now interact much more with senior officers because the unstable world situation demands it and advances in technology allow it. This increased interaction serves to highlight any generational differences between the ranks and oftentimes results in debilitating conflict within the Army.<sup>13</sup>

A less subtle difference of today's situation is the simple fact that today's junior officers are leaving, and many are blaming their departure on senior officer lack of understanding. Commanders have always reassured themselves with the adage, "A happy soldier is a complaining soldier," but now the complaining soldiers are acting on their grievances. Simply stated, the Army's

current readiness and the future leadership of the Army are in jeopardy. Ignoring or misinterpreting the increasingly louder voices of disgruntled junior officers only serves to kick the can down the road.

Boomers and Xers.

To understand the gap between senior and junior officers, it is helpful to examine the research done on generational differences. The following paragraphs briefly summarize the two generations dominating the officer corps—the Baby Boomers and Generation Xers.<sup>14</sup> Extensive research in demographics has yielded a wealth of knowledge concerning generational characteristics of Boomers and Xers. The emphasis in this monograph is on Generation X, however, since the junior officer population is predominantly Generation X.

The Baby Boom Generation was born between 1943 and 1960 and Generation X was born between 1960 and 1980. Different researchers have adjusted these dates 5 or 6 years in either direction, but the important point is to realize that there are two distinct generations in the officer ranks. Generational differences emerge as cohorts experience defining moments in history which shape their attitudes and perspectives.

Baby Boomers grew up during a time of economic prosperity against a backdrop of rebellion and indulgence.<sup>15</sup> Their views were shaped by events such as Vietnam, Woodstock, the Kennedy assassination, and Kent State. A Boomer childhood consisted of a nuclear family where Dad worked and Mom stayed at home. These parents doted on the young Boomers and viewed them as the generation that was going to change the world. At school, they learned to “work well with others” since the sheer numbers of their generation overwhelmed school systems and necessitated teamwork and collaboration. They entered adulthood optimistic and driven.

In the workforce, Boomers worked relentlessly in pursuit of goals, often at the expense of marriages, family, and personal lives. Boomer women began to enter the workforce as the influence of the feminist movement grew and reinforced the independence characterized by Boomers. Day care and nannies allowed both Boomer parents to work tiring, yet supposedly fulfilling, 60-hour workweeks. Work became more than just putting food on the table; it became their *raison d'être*.

In contrast to all the attention heaped on the Baby Boomers as they grew up, Generation X arrived on the scene unnoticed. Sometimes called the Slackers, Baby Busters, Twenty-somethings, or the MTV generation, Generation X developed a cynical, pragmatic, survivor mentality as they experienced a world much less idyllic than their Boomer predecessors.<sup>16</sup> Watergate, Three Mile Island, Operation DESERT STORM, and Rodney King shaped their thinking in their early years. With Boomer parents overworked and focused on accomplishing personal goals, Generation X children were often neglected and overlooked.<sup>17</sup>

Two factors heavily impacted the childhood years of Xers. First, soaring Boomer divorce rates meant Xers did not have the nurturing environment enjoyed by the Boomers. Instead, visitation rights and joint custody became the norm as over 40 percent of the Xers spent time in a single-parent home by age 16.<sup>18</sup> Second, as women entered the workforce in increasing numbers, Xers became the ultimate latchkey children. Being alone and fending on their own, the young Xers learned to rely on themselves and developed a confidence often misinterpreted as arrogance. Yearning for the bonds normally found in a family, Xers learned to seek out a circle of friends for relationships.

Xers developed a skeptical nature about authority as people and institutions around them let them down repeatedly.<sup>19</sup> They watched one president resign in disgrace and another defend himself by examining the definition of "is." Whereas the Boomers' hopes soared eternal with the

first lunar landing, Xers hopes were shattered as they watched the Challenger explode on their schoolroom TV screens. They waited for the “quality time” with their parents that seldom came and learned to trust only themselves. To the Xer, authority was to be earned, not declared by position or fiat.

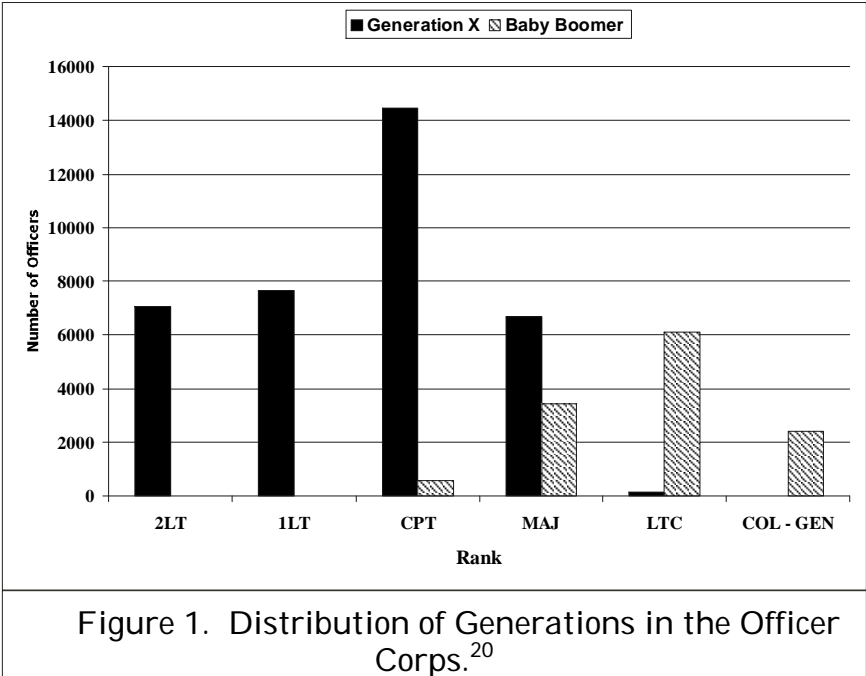
Education became more and more important to Generation X with record numbers of its members entering college. In college, they were not given the approved solutions, but instead were encouraged to think critically and challenge whoever thought they had the right answer. This pragmatism borne from memories of an austere childhood led many Xers to choose business majors such as economics instead of the traditional liberal arts degree.

As Xers entered the workforce, they remembered the workaholic tendencies of their Boomer parents and responded with an intense pursuit of balance in their lives. Work became just a means to earn a living. Life included work, but also family, spouse, friends, and personal time. The psychological bond with the organization where they worked weakened even more as Xers watched downsizing reward hardworking Boomers with pink slips and early retirements. The “Work is Life” motto of the Boomers was replaced by “Get a Life” as Xers brought a sense of informality and balance to the workplace.

Boomers and Xers in the Army.

In the Army, the distinctions between Baby Boomers and Generation Xers are not as glaring because self-selection into the Army serves to homogenize the population. Nevertheless, generational differences still emerge. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of the two generations in the officer corps. Note that lieutenants and captains are almost exclusively Generation Xers, while lieutenant colonel and above are almost all Baby Boomers. While self-selection and the socialization process of the Army soften many potential aspects of generational conflict,

the hierarchical nature of the Army puts Boomers clearly in the “senior” ranks and Xers in the “junior” ranks. This is in contrast to many civilian corporations where Xers are increasingly entering the workforce in more senior positions due to entrepreneurial and technological skills. With all the Boomers in the key decision and policymaking positions in the Army, it is easier for Xers to place the blame for Army problems on generational differences rather than the classic line versus staff tension.



As the first of the Baby Boomer generation of officers entered the Army, they encountered the disillusionment of the Vietnam War. Vietnam shaped the minds of the early Boomers who used their zeal and enthusiasm for hard work to later produce the AirLand Battle doctrine and the National Training Center.<sup>21</sup> Boomer officers squirmed under the Carter administration and the frustration of the Hollow Army, but came into their own under the Reagan build-up. Boomer officers were the commanders who helped

transform the Army from failures in Vietnam and mistakes in Grenada to victories in the streets of Panama and the dunes of Operation DESERT STORM. It was the hardworking Boomers who won the Cold War and saved our way of life from the Evil Empire, but it was also the overworking Boomers who brought zero defects, careerism, and new accusations of micromanagement to the Army. As Boomers moved into the senior ranks of the officer corps, their driven nature flourished in the post-Cold war environment. "24/7" became the norm and bigger and better QTBs<sup>22</sup> became commonplace. Today, Baby Boomers dominate nearly all the leadership positions in the Army ranging from battalion commander to Chief of Staff. When junior officers complain about the Army's senior leaders, they are talking about the Boomers.

Generation Xers entered the Army as the reform of the Army was nearing its completion. Xers were the platoon leaders in Operation DESERT STORM and company commanders in Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo. They can remember the Cold War in a historical sense, but their time in uniform has been dominated by peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief. Events such as the Army's downsizing, Somalia, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," and Aberdeen shape the attitudes and views of Generation X officers. Their skeptical attitudes toward authority, already influenced by events prior to entering the Army, were further affected by the court martial of the Sergeant Major of the Army, the reprimand of Major General Hale, and general-on-general sexual harassment.

Xers were deployed more often than their Boomer counterparts,<sup>23</sup> but their absence did not lessen their interconnectedness with others. Instead, Xers grew up in a deployed Army where phones, e-mail, and the Internet kept them linked with their family, peers, and the outside world.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, Generation X officers tend to be more current in issues and also more aware of the situation outside the military than junior officers had in the past. They know about the outside job market, housing trends,

technological advances, and the nuances of the New Economy, often more than their Boomer bosses.

Captain Boomer and Captain Xer.

In order to gain a better understanding of today's captains, it is useful to contrast Baby Boomers and Generation Xers in the Army. Instead of comparing how attitudes of older Boomers contrast with younger Xers, however, the following analysis compares Baby Boomer captains with Generation X captains. Specifically, the focus is on captains with about 7 years' time in service. For the Boomers, data collected in 1988 concerning year group 1981 officers is used. Year group 1981 officers were born in the late 1950's. They are the later Baby Boomers who remember the Vietnam War growing up, but really entered the Army during the height of the Cold War. For Generation Xers, data gathered in 1998 concerning year group 1991 officers is used. Year group 1991 officers were born in the late 1960's and entered the Army at the early stages of the downsizing.

Longitudinal databases allow the contrast of two cohorts at similar points of time in their careers. The comparison of historical Boomer captain attitudes with those of current Xer captains helps determine if senior officers really did have the same experiences and thoughts as today's junior officers.

Although much smaller in numbers, Generation X captains are demographically almost identical to Baby Boomers when they were captains—about 89 percent male, about 80 percent white, and about 92 percent married.<sup>25</sup> As we examine their attitudes, however, we see many trends already identified in the Baby Boomer/Generation X literature on differing attitudes.

*Xer Captains are more confident in their abilities.* Because of the lack of attention showered on them as children, Xers learned to rely mainly on themselves. The hardiness developed by austere conditions manifested itself



in a belief held by Xers that they will succeed, regardless of the circumstances. Xer captains believe that they will flourish in the Army or wherever they are planted. Figure 2 shows the attitudes of captains in 1988 and in 1998.<sup>26</sup> Notice how Generation X captains are more confident in their abilities and their capacity to succeed both in the Army and in the civilian world.

	Percentage of officers agreeing	
	Boomer CPTs (1988)	Xer CPTs (1998)
I am confident I will be promoted as high as my ability and interest warrant if I stay in the Army.	59.8 %	67.8 %
	Percentage of officers answering "Easy" or "Very Easy"	
	Boomer CPTs	Xer CPTs
How difficult do you think it would be for you to find a good civilian job right now, considering both your own qualifications and current labor market conditions?	52.4 %	75.1 %
How difficult would it be for you to leave the Army in the next year or so given your current personal or family situation?	45.2 %	51.1 %

**Figure 2. Confidence of Generation X Captains Compared to Boomer Captains.**

Of course, fueling this belief is the sustained growth of the New Economy. Xer captains have not experienced a recession. In their minds, the current economic boom is normal and expected to continue. In January 2000, the U.S. economy entered into the longest official peacetime expansion with 92 straight months of expanding Gross Domestic Product—and this while unemployment rates remained at record lows.<sup>27</sup> As the economy continues to grow, the Xer captains' perceived risk in leaving the Army continues to shrink.

What does this mean to senior officers? It means that Xers are not in the Army for job security. They know they can make it on the outside, and they see few obstacles if they choose to leave. It means that policymakers should not assume that the junior officers are a free good. They are a valuable commodity and very hard to replace. For an Xer, seriously exploring career options other than the Army is not a momentous decision.

*Generation X officers see loyalty differently.* But even if Xer officers can do well on the outside, what about their selfless service? Where is the loyalty in our junior officers? Keep in mind that Generation X officers grew up in a society replete with downsizing and restructuring. As a *Fortune* magazine pointed out:

Loyalty. Gratitude. Fortitude. They're dead, man. And who's the culprit? Maybe corporate America. After all, it was big companies that in the late 1980s and early 1990s ended the traditional employment contract. That whole loyalty-in-exchange-for-lifetime-employment-and-a-gold-watch thing no longer made sense. So they got rid of it.<sup>28</sup>

Generation X junior officers are loyal, but their loyalty is based on a bond of trust between the Army and the officer—not on the promise of lifelong employment. While the impact of the civilian downsizing is significant on the attitudes of the Generation X cohort in general, Generation X Army officers are intimately familiar with the strain on organizational commitment from downsizing. Figure 3 shows the magnitude of policies and programs designed to coax or force officers to leave the Army as seen by Generation X officers. With junior officers witnessing such an array of policies designed to entice or force over 23,000 of their peers and role models to leave, it is not surprising that their loyalty to the military has been redefined with a healthy dose of skepticism.

*Xer Captains want more balance between life and work.* Ask a Baby Boomer captain to define who they are and they will usually answer that they are an Army officer. Ask a

Policy	Years	Total Number of Officers Downsized
Selective Early Retirement (Involuntary)	FY92--FY95	3,393
Early Retirement (Voluntary)	FY93--FY97	3,387
Reduction in Force (Involuntary)	FY92	244
Voluntary Separation Initiatives	FY92--FY97	11,439
Captain/Lieutenant Retention Board (Involuntary)	FY92--FY94	1,681
Voluntary Early Release and Retirement Program	FY92--FY95, FY97	3,480
<b>TOTAL OFFICERS</b>		<b>23,624</b>

Source: Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, Army

**Figure 3. Officer Drawdown Witnessed by Year Group 1991 from FY92 to FY97.**

Generation X captain who they are, and they will also answer that they are an Army officer, but in addition will mention their family and occasionally their hobbies. Baby Boomer captains admired and respected families, but families were usually placed in the background and existed mainly to support the role of the Army officer. Likewise, hobbies and personal time were luxuries not afforded to a Boomer Army officer who devoted every ounce of energy and attention to the job.

To a Generation Xer, being an Army officer is a noble profession. Nevertheless, to an Xer, it is not an all-consuming source of self-identity. Of course, job satisfaction is still important as evidenced by 26 percent of Xer captains putting "Opportunities for Job Satisfaction" as one of their top three factors in their career decision. But contrast this with over 42 percent of Boomer captains who placed Job Satisfaction in the top three considerations back in 1988. Xers want more than just satisfaction at work for their career in the Army.

Xer captains, like their civilian counterparts, are yearning for balance in their lives. The job is still central, but they want family time and personal time too. They have watched their Boomer predecessors throw themselves into

the profession, and they are now resetting the boundaries of what exactly it means to be in the Army. Figure 4 shows the drastic attitudinal changes that have occurred in the officer ranks in just 10 years. Notice how less than a quarter of Gen X officers (compared with nearly half of Baby Boomer officers) believe work/life balance is compatible with an Army career. This is a significant attitudinal shift to take place in only 10 years.

	<i>Percentage of officers answering "Agree" or "Strongly Agree"</i>	
	Boomer CPTs (1988)	Xer CPTs (1998)
The demands of an Army career would/does make it difficult to have the kind of family life I would like.	48.7 %	65.3 %
For me, a rewarding career can compensate for limited personal /family time.	38.4 %	22.4 %
An Army career would allow/allows me to maintain the kind of balance I want between my work and personal life.	47.4 %	21.3 %

**Figure 4. Work/Life Balance of Generation X Captains versus Boomer Captains.**

The shifting emphasis on work/life balance is a troublesome trend for many Boomers since it implies a lesser sense of duty. Yet today even many Boomers are questioning the insatiable appetite that an Army career has for family or personal time. It is no longer uncommon to hear of Boomer colonels turning down coveted Brigade-level command positions because of "family reasons." Indeed, the same Boomer sample that as captains had over 38 percent agreeing that a rewarding career can compensate for limited personal and family time had only 24.2 percent agree when asked the identical question as lieutenant colonels.

*Pay is important to Xer captains, but more money won't hold them in.* Boomer policymakers often mischaracterize Generation Xers as materialistic and consumed by higher

paychecks. Pay, indeed, is more important to captains today than in the past. Nearly 37 percent of Xer captains listed pay as one of the top three factors in the career decision, while only 25.7 percent of Boomer captains placed pay in the top three issues. But while compensation is important to Xers and retention, it is not the primary reason why captains are leaving. When asked about their current compensation package of pay, allowances, and benefits, 57 percent of Boomer captains in 1988 and 56.3 percent of Xer captains in 1998 said they were satisfied. The exodus of Xer captains despite nearly identical levels of satisfied Boomer and Xer captains indicates that the Xer captains are not leaving in pursuit of better salaries. Pay is a critical issue and must be adequate, but more money alone will not keep the Xer captains from resigning.

*Xer captains are not impressed by rank.* Any senior officer who has recently faced an auditorium full of junior officers knows that Xer officers have a different attitude towards authority. In those situations, someone will inevitably ask a piercing, pointed question that, in years past, would have evoked gasps from the audience. It's not that Generation X officers are disrespectful; it is just that they are not impressed by rank or hierarchical position. They have been let down by too many authority figures ranging from their overworked parents to their Commander-in-Chief. As a result, they are extremely skeptical towards authority. This attitude is reflected in the questions in Figure 5.

Note that despite the possibility of a baseline level of dissatisfaction towards superiors that may exist in all organizations, Generation X captains are clearly more critical of senior officers than captains in the past. This was a major finding in the CSIS study that continues to be echoed in every study of junior officers.

	<i>Percentage of officers expressing dissatisfaction</i>	
	Boomer CPTs (1988)	Xer CPTs (1998)
How satisfied are you with relationships with superior/senior officers?	5.7 %	17.8 %
	<i>Percentage of officers responding with "Poor" or "Very Poor"</i>	
	Boomer CPTs	Xer CPTs
Overall leadership effectiveness of supervisor/rater	9.3 %	16.6 %

**Figure 5. Attitudes Towards Senior Officers and Superiors.**

### So Now What?

Before moving onto the implications of the generation divide, it is important to note that just as senior officers should not assume that Boomer captains and Xer captains think alike, they should also not assume that they are totally different either. Indeed, there are some enduring attitudes spanning both generations in the officer corps that point to the overarching culture found in the Army. Figure 6 illustrates with similar responses by both Boomer and Xer captains that pride in the Army, camaraderie, and professionalism are still alive and well in the Army. (Notice how in the second and third survey questions Xer officers, true to their generation, are drawn more toward peer relationships than Boomers to fill the vacuum of familial bonds.)

With an understanding of the nuances of Generation X officers, senior leaders can address the junior officer retention problem by altering the organization or effecting a change in the attitudes and perspectives of Xer officers. Changing the organization may include policies at the strategic level to reflect the reality of Generation X attitudes

and also senior officer leadership and actions at the operational level directly affecting Generation X officers. Likewise, influencing the viewpoints of Xer captains may require emphasis at both the strategic and operational levels. The following section examines some possible policy and leadership implications of the generational gap in the officer corps.

	<i>Percentage of officers answering "Agree" or "Strongly Agree"</i>	
	Boomer CPTs (1988)	Xer CPTs (1998)
I am quite proud to tell people that I am in the Army.	92.2 %	90.8 %
One of the things that I value most about the Army is the sense of community or camaraderie I feel.	72.5 %	76.4 %
I can count on Army people to help out when needed.	72.7 %	75.9 %
	<i>Percentage of officers who agreed</i>	
	Boomer CPTs	Xer CPTs
When I think of myself as a professional, I compare myself most often with Army leaders whom I know and respect.	77.8 %	75.0 %

Figure 6. Enduring Attitudes Across Generations.

*Instill work/family/personal time balance.* This is easy to say, yet hard to do given the Army's lack of control in determining its own workload. Cutting back on deployment tempo (DEPTempo) and personnel tempo (PERSTEMPO) may appear out of the realm of the possible, but the first step is to establish a metric and then work towards reducing it to acceptable levels. The goal is not to move to an 8-to-5 Army, but rather to bring the life of a junior officer back into balance. It is not just about getting more "time off" for Xers, but also creating family and personal time activities that work toward creating more commitment to the Army. Once

some breathing room has been established, then policies and actions emphasizing balance can be put into place. Examples include:

- Make the Army community a fun place to work and live. Revamp the Morale, Welfare, and Recreation (MWR) program to include more activities amenable to Xers. Remember that Xers gravitate to “extreme” sports, so the frame shop may have to give way to the mountain biking club. Army posts should rival every nearby community in the quantity and quality of activities and special events. If family and personal time can be freed up, then make the Army an attractive place to spend it.
- Do not measure quality of life in square footage. To Boomer officers, taking care of families was constructing state-of-the-art day care facilities for the kids and building big PXs<sup>29</sup> for the spouses. To Xers, taking care of families is giving officers time to nurture relationships with children and spouses.
- Commanders must avoid the temptation to fill every minute of the training schedule. Cut back on mandatory training, especially the classes viewed as “politically correct.”<sup>30</sup> There will certainly be peak times when long hours are necessary for mission accomplishment, but there should also be some valley times when it is acceptable to give everyone time off.
- Senior leaders must model work/family balance themselves. Many junior officers are leaving because they do not want the life of their superiors. It is not good enough to make a policy sending everyone home at 1700 if the commander is seen carrying several hours’ worth of work home every night. Show junior officers that senior officers don’t have to sacrifice family and personal time to be successful in the Army (e.g., what message is sent when junior officers find



out that the incoming commander will be a geographical bachelor?).

- Give officers a chance to reflect. Allow harried junior officers to step off the fast moving train by encouraging advanced civil schooling, training with industry, or sabbaticals. Make the officer advance course, Combined Arms and Services Staff School (CAS3), and Command and General Staff College (CGSC) times where officers can restore mental, physical, and spiritual balance.

*Appeal to the Xer desire for relationships.* Generation X officers crave close relationships to make up for the family life they never had. As a result, a circle of close friends is a valuable commodity to a Generation X officer. If the Army can become the source of social relationships in addition to a place of employment, it will be possible to improve Generation X commitment to the Army. The goal would be to emphasize the *institutional* aspects of the Army instead of the *occupational*.<sup>31</sup> A focus on reinforcing the institutional aspects encourages junior officers to find their reference group internal to the Army. The Army becomes not so much the work involved, but the people and shared experiences it includes. If the Army can offer the camaraderie and cohesion desired by Generation X officers (and often lacking in the civilian world), then Xers will stay regardless of the economic situation.

The objective here is to preserve aspects of one of the Army's intangible, yet extremely powerful, retention tools—the Army's culture. Of course, some critics are already questioning the "gap" between the military and society<sup>32</sup> and will point out that making the boundary between society and officers less permeable only serves to widen the gap. The intent of these policies and actions is not to distance Army officers from society, but rather to provide more opportunities for Generation X officers to find satisfying bonds of friendship within the Army.

Policies and actions to improve junior officer retention that address the Generation X search for meaningful relationships include:

- Resurrect officer calls. When the Army got rid of Happy Hour in order to de-glamorize alcohol, an unintended side effect was the removal of an organizational ritual that served to strengthen the bonds between officers in a unit. Bring back “mandatory” social gatherings such as prop blasts, spur ceremonies, and dinings-in, but keep alcohol consumption in check. Events do not have to be restricted to the club, but can also include staff rides, outdoor extreme sports, trips, or anything that allows friendships to flourish. These events do not have to be after work hours (when they would conflict with family and personal time), but could be scheduled during the workday. Rituals and traditions are often viewed suspiciously by outsiders as frivolous, but they serve the important purpose of strengthening the bonds within a unit.
- Proceed cautiously with privatization. While economic rationale points us down the path to privatization, it must be done carefully. Activities such as officer clubs, housing, bowling alleys, commissaries, and post exchanges provide services that may be acquired more economically through privatization, but recognize that these agencies also serve to define the Army’s culture. They provide a platform for building relationships other than the workplace. Economic efficiency is important, but maintaining our culture of camaraderie is priceless.
- Maximize opportunities during key career milestones. The officer basic and advance courses, CAS3, and CGSC all provide opportunities for officers to establish lasting friendships with other officers. Place exercises, activities, and events into the

curriculum that foster close interaction and teamwork. Use the time wisely since these are rare moments in an officer's career when large groups of officers are gathered in an environment generally void of the pressures of leading troops.

- Really mentor junior officers. Senior officers need to pull in junior officers and talk *with* (not to) them. This is not performance counseling; this is not quarterly counseling. This is a senior officer (not necessarily the rater or senior rater) taking an interest in the life of a junior officer. Spend 95 percent of the time listening and 5 percent of the time giving advice. Of course, junior officers will be guarded at first, but once they see that the senior officer is not doing this out of concern for the mission or even the unit, they will begin searching out mentors.

*Rely less on traditional hierarchical leadership.* The Army is the epitome of hierarchical leadership. Unfortunately, Generation X officers, who are unimpressed by position and leery of authority, reside at the lower rungs of the Army structure. While it would be ludicrous to suggest that we abandon all notions of hierarchical leadership in the Army profession just to accommodate Generation Xers, it may be feasible to alter the process through which leadership is applied via the hierarchy. Note however, that few policies can address this issue. Similarly, speeches, posters, and articles will not change the way the Army does business. Instead, direct leadership by senior leaders is the main means to mitigate the Xer aversion to hierarchical leadership. Xer officers are not naïve. They understand the need for some hierarchy. Yet they will greatly appreciate genuine attempts to reduce the dependence on rank or position whenever possible.

Some possible actions to reduce the undesirable aspects of hierarchy for Generation X officers include:

- Make the Officer Professional Management System (OPMS XXI) work. Generation X officers love development and the option of switching to a career field other than Operations may open the door to sought-after training and development. More importantly, the role of hierarchy is downplayed in the technical career fields as the role of knowledge becomes more salient. Of course, if the training for career fields is “dumbed down,” Xer officers will see through the façade quickly.
- Stop micromanagement and the “zero-defects” mentality. This is something that everyone knows, but nobody does simply because senior leaders are too concerned about the performance of their unit during their watch.<sup>33</sup> Senior leaders must learn to give Xers a task and then avoid the temptation to tell them how to do it or require them to check in constantly with a status report. Unfortunately, it will take much more than this paragraph to change this well-engrained aspect of the Army. Interestingly, as promotion rates rise due to dwindling numbers of promotable officers, the intense inter-officer competition caused by the downsizing may subside. This in turn may lead to more freedom to make mistakes and a decrease in levels of micromanagement. By then, however, it might be too late.
- Include Xers in the decisionmaking process. When possible and appropriate, increase junior officer input into key decisions. This is not to undermine the chain of command, but rather to broaden the base of knowledge and expertise supporting the decision.

*Highlight technology.* In the 1998 survey, less than 3 percent of Generation X officers believed that it would be difficult to adapt personally to the high-tech demands of the future Army. Not surprisingly, Xer officers are quite comfortable with technology. Interestingly, however, close

to 40 percent of Generation X officers responded that they did not believe that their particular job in the future Army would be high-tech. In order to retain junior officers, the Army must be technologically relevant. This does not imply that somehow technology will replace boots on the ground; it does suggest that the Army should not lag behind society in the everyday use of technology.

Boomer officers can remember the days when the Army was at the forefront of high-tech equipment, e.g., global positioning systems, laser rangefinders, and night vision devices. The rapidity of development in the commercial world has left the Army behind.<sup>34</sup> Today, it is not uncommon for Xer officers to have more up-to-date technology at home than they do at work.

Some possible actions to leverage the use of technology include:

- Keep Army technology current. Upgrade computers in units every 2 years. Install the latest software versions as they come out. Being able to brag that they are fluent in using the latest hardware and software will pay big dividends in retaining Xers.
- Issue PDAs (personal data assistants). PDAs (e.g, Palm Pilot, Visor, Pocket PC) are not only effective in improving productivity, but also provide tangible evidence that the Army is forward thinking in technology. Offer them to officers who want them and watch how quickly free application programs written by Xer officers appear on websites such as CompanyCommand.com. Within a year, key field and training manuals will be available for download as well as programs helping junior officers with maintenance, supply, and administrative tasks. It is a small investment (about \$150 for each PDA) for a very valuable benefit. Note how this differs from issuing every officer a laptop computer. Laptops are clunky

and geared more for business travelers on airplanes than Army captains in TOCs.<sup>35</sup>

- Continue to exploit the Internet. The Army is making great strides in providing junior officers choices via the Web (e.g., the career field designation process), and it is time for other parts of the Army to catch up. Junior officers should be able to schedule appointments online instead of waiting endlessly on the phone. Interactive training courses need to be widely available on the Net—and these courses should not be just documents posted on a server, but also video and audio clips. Everything from receiving an RFO<sup>36</sup> to submitting a household goods claim should be made available via the Internet. One caution, though. Junior officers are already decrying the substitution of e-mail for face-to-face interaction. Care must be taken to automate administration, not leadership.

#### Conclusion.

The trends in junior officer attrition continue to point to a worsening situation. Early indications from year group 1995 retention statistics show no let up in the exodus. Two additional factors complicate the situation. First, attrition for Baby Boomer officers is on the rise, too. As retention rates for lieutenant colonels and colonels drop and continue to decline, the officer corps inventory is starting to look more like a trapezoid than the traditional pyramid. Second, the newly-minted second lieutenants that will enter the Army this year are not Generation X. Instead, they are Generation Y—the Nintendo Generation, Generation 2001, or Generation Next. Nexters bring a totally different perspective than Xers or Boomers. While it is too early to tell how they will approach the workplace, our experience with Generation X tells us that we had better be ready. Understanding generational differences will become even

more critical with three unique generations in the officer corps.

Generation X officers are different. They are not slackers, but are extremely competent and willing to work hard. They are, however, voicing their opinions and leaving the Army. This monograph will fall short of its objectives if battalion commanders nod their heads in agreement with the previous paragraphs, yet convince themselves that the situation can only be remedied through policies at the Department of the Army level. Likewise, if policymakers defer to direct leadership as the sole solution to the junior officer attrition problem, the intent of this monograph will not be fulfilled either. It will take both policy and leadership working in concert to keep our captains.

One common reaction to the junior officer exodus is to call for calm and assume that this crisis, like all previous ones, will also eventually pass. Somehow we convince ourselves that, because the Army is a big enough organization with a history of weathering all sorts of crises, it can absorb this one too. Realistically, the Army *will* survive through this crisis—the Army always goes rolling along. But like a family who loses a child at an early age, there will always be a sense of loss over the potential that is never realized. Our captains are leaving and that says something about who they are and what the Army has become. It is time we took notice and did something about it.

## ENDNOTES

1. Message from Office of Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, Headquarters, Department of the Army, July 28, 1998. The message was in response to concerns over the increasing attrition rates of junior officers. Notice that the message focuses on the static attrition rates in 1998 rather than the dynamic trend of junior officer attrition rates overall.

2. Message from the Vice Chief of Staff, Army, Headquarters, Department of the Army, February 15, 2000.

3. "Blue Ribbon Panels To Study Leadership And Training," Army Public Affairs Press Release #00—024, April 17, 2000.

4. For example, see David Noer, *Healing the Wounds: Overcoming the Trauma of Layoffs and Revitalizing Downsized Organizations*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993.

5. For an analysis of the effects of the Army downsizing on those left behind, see Leonard Wong and Jeffrey McNally, "Downsizing the Army: Some Policy Implications Affecting the Survivors," *Armed Forces and Society*, Vol. 20, Winter 1994, pp. 199-216.

6. A reduction in command positions and the departure of many officers with low promotion potential left the relatively "high-quality" survivors competing for advancement. See General Dennis Reimer, "Leadership for the 21st Century: Empowerment, Environment and the Golden Rule," *Military Review*, Vol. 76, January-February 1996, pp. 5-9.

7. For example, the Army's main research engine for leadership, the Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, was downsized of nearly all of its leadership research capability in 1996.

8. Spring 1999 Sample Survey of Military Personnel Written Comments, Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, November 1999. The term "senior leader" is not well defined. In this monograph, it refers to those officers in the older generation, or generally in the rank of lieutenant colonel and higher.

9. *American Military Culture in the Twenty-first Century*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2000.

10. *Ibid.*

11. CGSC Student Perceptions on Army Retention & Leadership, E-mail, April 2000.

12. VCSA message, February 2000.

13. There have been efforts to explore the impact of generational differences in the Army such as the research done by Peter J. Legree, *Generation X: Motivation, Morals, and Values*, Army Research Institute Special Report, June 1997. Additionally, Generation X expert Bruce Tulgan spoke at the Spring 1998 TRADOC Commanders/Division Commanders Conference (TCDC) about Generation X characteristics.

14. For a good description of all generations, see Ron Zemke, Claire Raines, and Bob Filipczak, *Generations at Work: Managing the Clash of*



*Veterans, Boomers, Xers, and Nexters in Your Workplace*, New York: American Management Association, 2000; Neil Howe and William Strauss, *13th Gen*, New York: Vintage Press, 1993, or Bruce Tulgan, *The Manager's Pocket Guide to Generation X*, Minneapolis: Lakewood Publications, 1997.

15. For an interesting look at Baby Boomers, see The Boomer Institute on the Internet at <http://www.boomerpower.net/>.

16. See discussion on the independence of Generation Xers by Jay A. Conger, *Winning 'Em Over: A New Model for Managing in the Age of Persuasion*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998.

17. See Legree, p. 3, or Geoffrey T. Holtz, *Welcome to the Jungle*, New York: St. Martin Press, 1995.

18. N. Zill and J. Robinson, "The Generation X," *American Demographics*, April 1995, pp. 24-33.

19. See Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak for a good account of the Generation X skeptical nature towards authority.

20. Data includes Army Competitive Category officers only. Source: Officer Master File, September 1999.

21. For a thorough discussion of how many of the successes demonstrated in Operation DESERT STORM were shaped by experiences in Vietnam, see Edward C. Meyer and R. Manning Ancell with Jane Mahaffey, *Who Will Lead?: Senior Leadership in the United States Army*, Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995; or James Kitfield, *Prodigal Soldiers: How the Generation of Officers Born of Vietnam Revolutionized the American Style of War*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995.

22. The Quarterly Training Brief (QTB) is a planning session that has increasingly become a major production with exacting detail and complicated PowerPoint slides.

23. While Boomer deployments were longer (e.g., a 1-year Vietnam tour), today's deployments are more unpredictable and often occur nearly back-to-back.

24. See Morten. G. Ender, "E-Mail to Somalia: New Communication Media Between Home and War Fronts," in J. E. Behar, ed., *Mapping Cyberspace: Social Research on the Electronic Frontier*, Oakdale, NY: Dowling College Press, 1997, pp. 27-52.

25. Baby Boom and Generation X officer data are taken from the 1988 Officer Master File using Year Group 1981 and the 1998 Officer Master File using Year Group 1991. The Generation X cohort did have more U.S. Military Academy graduates (22 percent versus 17 percent) and slightly more Asians (3 percent versus 1 percent) and Hispanics (3 percent versus 2 percent) than the Baby Boomers when they were captains.

26. Attitudes of Baby Boomer captains are taken from year group 1981 responses to the 1988 Longitudinal Research on Officer Careers (LROC) survey administered by the Army Research Institute (ARI). Attitudes of Generation X captains are taken from year group 1991 responses to the 1998 Survey of Officer Careers (SOC) survey also administered by ARI. Sample size of the LROC survey is 513 out of a population of 3,478 year group 1981, Army Competitive Category captains. Sample size of the SOC survey is 176 out of a population of 1,864 year group 1991, Army Competitive Category captains. Because both the LROC and SOC surveys oversampled U.S. Military Academy graduates, the samples used in this analysis were adjusted to reflect the population's proportion of Military Academy graduates. Thus the samples used in this analysis mirror the demographics of the population.

27. See Christopher Chambers, "The New Economy Shifts Soldiers' Expectations," *Army*, April 2000, Vol. 50, No. 4, p. 9.

28. Nina Munk, "The New Organization Man," *Fortune* 137, No. 5, March 16, 1998, pp. 62-74.

29. Post Exchanges.

30. Junior officers may perceive that training, while worthwhile, is "politically correct" if it is not directly related to warfighting tasks.

31. See Charles C. Moskos, "Institutional and Occupational Trends in Armed Forces," in Charles C. Moskos and Frank R. Wood, eds., *The Military: More Than Just a Job?*, New York: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1988, pp. 15-26.

32. For example, see Thomas Ricks, *Making the Corps*, New York: Scribner, 1997.

33. Micromanagement or a zero-defects mentality is usually considered to be the result of a self-interested commander. It may, however, also stem from a well-intentioned senior leader.

34. Compare Moore's law that states that silicon chips double in complexity every 2 years, with Army acquisition cycles that are typically much longer.

35. Tactical Operation Centers.

36. Request for Orders.

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