



By: Joe Byerly

We have all been there at some point in our military careers. We have woken up in the morning, looked into the mirror, and asked ourselves “Is serving my country worth all the avoidable headaches that comes along with wearing the uniform?” This inner monologue that takes place around 5 o’clock in the morning could be the result of fatigue from navigating what seems like the mazelike bureaucratic minutia of our daily jobs, or a single event at the unit that disrupted our lives. It is usually within these moments that we feel the tension between our professional calling and the possibilities that await us in the civilian world.

In 1970, [Albert O. Hirschman](#) published a treatise titled, “[Exit, Voice, and Loyalty](#).” While the essay falls within the area of economics, it offers some food for thought to leaders serving in the military today. Hirschman compares two competing paths that members of an organization can take when the organization isn’t performing to a preferred standard. The first is a passive route, with people showing their displeasure by exiting the organization, hoping that their “exit” will send the message that there is a problem and someone else needs to fix it. The next route is using their “voice,” which is the tougher of the two; a path that means staying and fighting to change whatever is broken within the organization.

This idea of choosing “exit” or “voice” has relevance for those of us who are passionate about being a member of the profession of arms, while at the same time wishing that aspects of the system could be better. Our military is not perfect. Whether it’s the professional education system, the promotion process, or a certain bureaucratic function, we all have things that bother us. I’ve seen many great officers “exit” because they felt like their particular grievance was unchangeable, and that the path of “voice” had way too many insurmountable obstacles standing in the way. They have a point. The reluctance of the system to change can take its toll, especially when we try to exercise our “voice” as individuals. This is why in order to make “voice” work, we can’t go at it alone. Belonging to a community of other military professionals who share our ideas and values about making positive change, can sustain us when it seems the organization isn’t listening. These connections can also encourage and inspire us, when their “voice” is heard.

Last year, I decided to invest not only in my personal growth, but also in my professional “voice” by attending the [Defense Entrepreneur’s Forum](#) (DEF) in Chicago. Due to the costs and timing, I could not get any of my peers to make the trek with me, so I flew solo, not really knowing anyone at the forum. The fact that I went alone did not matter. In addition to being, hands down, the [best military conference](#) I have ever attended, the connections I made in Chicago are still going strong almost a year later. It is in these relationships, that I’ve been afforded opportunities to make impacts that I would have never been able to accomplish alone. As Curtis Taylor and Nathan Finney pointed out in their recent *Military Review* [article](#), “DEF is about developing a culture of innovation in the military, so it’s the perfect breeding ground for change”.

[Research](#) has shown that if a small group can get the larger organization or society to think about an issue, then the minority stands a good chance of influencing the larger organization. One of the ways in which the DEF community has influenced the greater discussions is through collaborative writing and publishing. Earlier this year, several of the DEF participants, many who connected for the first time at the conference, published a

thought provoking series on [Personal Theories of Power](#), which continues to shape discussions in our professional military education and even [young professional forums](#).

Another way in which DEF is making a difference is by serving as a catalyst for initiatives that would not have been possible without the relationships formed in Chicago. At Annapolis, then-midshipman Michael Madrid wanted to introduce future naval officers to innovation right out of the gate, so he teamed up with some of the field grade officers he met at DEF [and organized a smaller version of the conference called a DEF\[x\]](#). In June of this year, [Nate Finney](#) and [I](#) launched “A Summer with Grant,” an [online community-based self-development program](#). We saw an opportunity to improve self development in the military, so embracing a theme that resonates throughout the DEF community, we did something about it. We had nearly two hundred apply, from which we chose eighty participants made up of leaders of all ranks, representing all the services. Over the course of eight weeks we dove into General U.S. Grant’s *Memoirs*, discussing applicable lessons for own careers. We even brought in guest speakers to impart their perspectives, including General David Perkins, Admiral (ret) Stavridis, and Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster. I would have never attempted anything of this magnitude if it had not been for the connections and insights gained from attending DEF last year.

Now, let us return to that inner monologue that takes place in front of the bathroom mirror. Even with the current drawdown of U.S. forces, shrinking budgets, and a perception that we are becoming a garrison military, we must strive to overcome the urge to hang up the uniform and choose “exit” over “voice”. Our military organizations are not perfect, but they are also not so rigid that they cannot be improved. For those who are passionate about serving the nation, the current environment presents us with ample opportunity to make a positive impact on the military and shape the profession of arms. Additionally, the challenges that lay ahead will require innovators, thinkers, and risk takers within our ranks. Why not choose “voice”? Why not connect with others who wish to have a similar “voice”? [Check out DEF 2.0 on October 24-26 in Chicago and register today.](#)

Share this:

- [Email](#)
- [Twitter](#)
- [Facebook](#)
- [LinkedIn](#)
- [Pinterest](#)