



Talent management is a hot topic today, and we increasingly read articles and blog posts that are very critical of the military's management of its personnel. However, the tension between talent management and our promotion system is not a new one. If one studies the history of our military or reads biographies of those who've been labeled as "reformers" or "intellectuals", we find that the institution is not always kind to those who think outside the box or push the boundaries of intellectual thought in the Profession of Arms.

In the late 1800s, a young company grade officer by the name of Arthur Wagner was a member of a network of military leaders who were labeled as the Young Turks. He and his compatriots were intellectuals and reformers. They were not happy with the status quo, and they sought to bring about change by writing in journals such as the *Army and Navy Journal*, *Journal of Military Service Institution*, and the *Journal of United States Cavalry Association*. They pushed the Army to think more deeply about war, develop tough realistic training practices, and create a professional military education system that better prepared leaders for the realities of combat. If Arthur Wagner were around today, he would probably be a member of the [Defense Entrepreneurs Forum](#), the [Military Writer's Guild](#), and a frequent contributor to sites like [From the Green Notebook](#), [The Strategy Bridge](#), [The Military Leader](#), [Ricks' Best Defense](#), [Small Wars Journal](#), and [War on the Rocks](#).



Like many past reformers and forward thinkers, Wagner's pursuit of improving the Profession of Arms came into direct conflict with his desire for promotion. In 1904, Colonel Wagner wrote a letter to his good friend General Franklin J. Bell after hearing a rumor that his chances of being promoted to Brigadier General were slim because he had the reputation of being an intellectual. Below are excerpts of his letter, and I ask readers to consider the culture of the military today while reading it. Have we improved as an organization? In today's military, can "intellectuals" wear muddy boots? Can "muddy boots leaders" carry books in their rucksack? Or do we still feel the need to distinguish between "muddy boots leaders" and "intellectuals"?

My Dear Bell:

April 28, 1904

I have reflected a great deal upon the matter which you recently mentioned; namely, that you had heard an objection made to my promotion on the ground that while I am acknowledged to be well versed- even "deeply versed"- in the theory of my profession, I am not "practical." On what this statement is founded, unless it is based merely upon prejudice or ignorance of facts, I am at a loss to know.

Even my enemies- and though I am fond of believing that my friends in the service are legion, I have some enemies-acknowledge that the part I have taken in military education

has been of great benefit to the Army; but granting this, they proceed to damn me as a "theorist." They can not deny that my theories have been the basis of practical work on the part of the Army in time of war, and that such work being good the theories must have been sound, and that theory to be sound must be practical. They can not (or at least, do not) point definitely to a single thing which my theories or my personal work have been impractical, but simply assert that I am a "theorist," presumably because I devoted myself to the good of the service-work to which I have given all the intelligence with which the Almighty has seen fit to endow me and all the industry of which my physical powers are capable- has been turned to my detriment, instead of my advantage. Surely it is not calculated to inspire young officers with a desire to cultivate their profession when they find a man's reputation as a military student used as a weapon against him.

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If anybody can demonstrate that I have shown in post of field a want of practical qualifications, I shall have nothing to say; but I should like them to specify instances in support of their claim that I am not "practical." When, years ago, General Hazen relieved my first lieutenant from duty in order that I (then a young second lieutenant) might take the company in charge of a large convoy through hostile Indian country, he did not deem me a mere theorist. When General Terry detailed me to take a large wagon-train to General Miles's command, through swollen streams and "bottomless" alkali flats, during the "spring break up," when it was necessary to push supply through to the front, it did not occur to him that I was not practical. When later I was detailed to construct a military telegraph line, there does not seem to have been any lack of practical qualifications on my part. When General Mackenzie placed me in command of his advance guard to prepare a ferry crossing for his force a the Gunnison River, he had no idea that he was intrusting this work to a mere theorist, nor had he any such idea when he selected me for duty as depot quartermaster at Gunnison. I might, as you personally know, mention a score of similar instances during my service as a young lieutenant. I am at a loss to know just when I ceased to be "practical"....

Assuming in the face of facts and my actual record that I am only a "theorist" (which I do not grant), is not the servant worthy of his hire? If my theories are of value to the country ought I to be damned for possessing them, and not rewarded for the good they have done are supposed to do? Is it not inconsistent on the part of my superiors to continue making use of my work if such work deserves to be characterized as impractical? If this is to be the

case, let us come out frankly and say that military study is prejudicial to an officer. Let us warn young officers to avoid study and caution them never to put pen to paper. Then, being devoid of all evidence of a studious interest in their profession, they may possibly, be recognized as “practical” men, and escape being stigmatized as “theorists” ...

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But while I acknowledge that I desire promotion and intend to strive for it so far as may be proper, you know (whether anyone else does or not) that I would not ask for anything for which I did not honestly believe myself to be fitted...I am not alone in the belief-that certain people, unable to deny my actual record, have attributed to me a lack of “practical” qualifications, though such imputation is belied by my career and is apparently based solely on the assumption that an officer who has devoted his life to the study of his profession must be lacking in the power to apply practically his own deductions, though they are practically applied by others...

But though I find myself shut out from the head of my own my own corps and find the brigadier generalcies of the line rapidly filling up with my juniors, I am not yet ready to quote Woolsey and say, “Had I but served my God,” and all that dismal sort of thing. I know that I have the endorsement of our best and ablest soldiers; and if (as I believe will be the case) we shall have war within the next decade, and I get half a chance, I will endeavor to demonstrate that a man can be a practical soldier even if he has not allowed his intellect to go to seed.

With cordial regards and best wishes, I am,

Sincerely yours,

Arthur L. Wagner

To read this letter in its entirety or to read more about Arthur L. Wagner, I encourage you to pick up a copy of [*Educating the U.S. Army: Arthur L. Wagner and Reform, 1875-1905*](#) by T.R. Brereton.

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