



By Chris Melendez

Former officer and scholar [James Joyner](#) critiqued anti-intellectualism within the U.S. military. Opinions will diverge on Joyner's assessment on whether such bias exists or whether an ideal balance can be struck between the classroom and "muddy boots." The problem is not that we debate such things, but that we practically exclude enlisted service members from the discussion. [Cue the eye rolling; I'll wait.]

One paragraph into this piece and you are already thinking, "Come on! Everyone knows that officers are responsible for the 'what and why.' Of course they need education. Noncommissioned officers (NCOs) *simply* translate those orders into 'the how' of action." If only execution was that simple. Yet, therein lies the misconception. Many of us refuse to acknowledge that conditions have changed not only the operating environment, but also in officer/NCO relations and the complexity of their roles in profound ways.

To belabor an obvious but easily overlooked point, technological capabilities create a near-insatiable demand for information and instantaneous feedback. They also require a level of expertise to leverage them. Julius Caesar and Napoleon Bonaparte never dreamed of such information advantages; however, globalization was not a significant factor and the speed of ideas was considerably slower.

Technological advance and the ensuing information overload require an NCO corps that is capable of carrying the proverbial intellectual water. No amount of commissioned PhDs or [School of Advanced Military Studies](#) graduates can replace the critical theory/practice gap filled by NCOs. Still, enlisted leaders must have the requisite preparation to understand the orders, communicate them effectively to others, and then oversee their translation into physical action. Such preparation demands both training and education. The force at-large can train repetitive tasks (i.e., react to contact) but critical thinking, grammar and syntax, and subject knowledge are different matters.

At this point, you may think that I am ignoring the long-running discussion about college education (eArmyU, anyone?) as well as recent advances in enlisted professional military education. Those discussions and advancements are tangible and important at an individual level, and my goal is not to address the relative value of vocational training and/or professional certifications. My more specific aim is to ask and enjoin others to consider, “Why does an educated NCO corps matter at an institutional level?” When you say it aloud, the answer seems obvious, but I would argue that there is a prevalent subtext of anti-intellectual bias within enlisted culture. This bias, in turn, prevents us from asking difficult questions of ourselves. Subsequently, we overemphasize react-to-contact training and undervalue — or even denigrate — academic pursuits.

Both education and training are essential, but their relative importance shifts in scope and magnitude throughout a career. It is always wise to be in the right place on time and in the correct uniform, but squad level competencies differ significantly from those of a four-star headquarters. Enlisted members of all grades serve at both organizational extremes and the entire spectrum in between, so it is fair to identify and assess points of both commonality and divergence. One size training does not fit all the functions we expect our enlisted members to execute. As an enlisted member progresses into roles of broader decision-making and management, the training must also bias towards preparation that cultivates those skills. In many cases, academia provides useful pathways to such preparation.

There will always be an important place for battlefield leadership and raw physicality. Still, NCOs’ requirements far surpass “keeping the line and holding fire until you see the whites of their eyes.” Presently, we are asking more of our NCOs and enlisted service members than at any time in our history. In senior grades and higher headquarters, NCOs are fulfilling the yeomen’s work of an “Iron Major.” Perhaps it is time to rethink how institutional culture potentially inhibits preparation for present and future enlisted roles.

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