

Back Talk



By Robert B. Adolph Jr.

When efficiency is less effective

I remember waiting in lines too numerous to list since entering the Army as a private 24 years ago. It is one of the few things I always hated about military life; the "system" seemingly does not value my time.

The finance clerk's time is important, as is that of the personnel specialist. The lines outside these important people's offices are often long. I don't know many of these people personally; they take care of so many soldiers there just isn't time to get to know them, nor them me. That's the way it is in today's Army, for privates as well as lieutenant colonels. It is, of course, wrong.

You may have noticed that many functions are being centralized these days in the name of efficiency. It is not a new trend. Although centralization may appear more efficient, it is not necessarily more effective, and this is something that should be reversed before it can do more damage than it has already done.

I remember a time when each company had a company clerk. The company first sergeant usually found a bright soldier who had promise and promoted him to this most critical of positions.

The company clerk was important, because he was the person most responsible for seeing that individual records were squared away for promotion boards; saw to it that leave and

pass documents were processed on time; and ensured that dozens of daily administrative chores were accomplished well. A bad clerk never held the position for long.

Then, one day over 20 years ago, some "bright boy" sold the Army on the idea that personnel administration is better consolidated at the battalion level and above — meaning with greater efficiency.

Personnel administration in the Army has been getting worse ever since. Now appointments have to be made at centralized facilities, and we still often wait in lines.

When I was commanding a company in the early 1980s, it seemed that, too often, whenever one of my soldiers needed a personnel or finance action processed, the one person capable of performing that task was on leave, at school or on sick call.

Unfortunately, centralization breeds specialization, making an already bad situation worse. Centralized functions are nearly always impersonal. I have heard credible stories of cases where soldiers, enlisted and officer, have been shunted from desk to desk for sometimes as much as an entire day without having their problem addressed. Nobody in that centralized and faceless consolidated facility wanted to take responsibility.

When serving as a battalion executive offi-

cer a few years ago, I spoke to many dozens of soldiers about reenlisting. Some genuinely fine young men and women passed on the opportunity of continuing service, because they felt their time was not valued by the Army — so much of it had been wasted during their initial terms of enlistment.

Although many could not easily articulate their sentiments, centralization and depersonalization seemed to be at the heart of much of their discontent.

With the Army's downsizing today, I often hear demands for greater efficiencies. What I suspect is really meant is: find ways to cut more people. Efficiency experts roam freely through the bowels of large Army organizations, making recommendations to senior officers where cuts might be made. Human beings, and the needs of human beings, don't fit in their equations.

Unfortunately, that anti-human methodology has the upper hand with the bureaucracy. Morale issues seldom occupy center stage for long these days. Efficiency and effectiveness are not synonymous. Perhaps we should be concentrating more of our time on trying to be effective.

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