

Toward a Superior Promotion System

Maj Kyle Byard, USAF, Retired

Ben Malisow

Col Martin E. B. France, USAF

No management action carries the impact of promotion. Whatever an organization's stated goals and performance criteria, employees note and emulate behaviors that lead to advancement. According to the *Officer Evaluation System: Training Guide*, "Throughout the history of the Air Force, there have been more than 8 different evaluation systems with 14 major variations, at a rate of a new version about every eight years."¹ The cycle of these changes follows a pattern: (1) a new system arises in response to dissatisfaction with the old one; (2) substantial flaws in the reformed system come to light; (3) attempts to correct these problems through formal and informal modifications make the functional process significantly different from the official one; and (4) failing to meet the needs of the service and officer corps, the system undergoes reform yet again. This article seeks to assess the current cycle of promotion procedures and propose an evaluation/promotion process for Air Force officers marked by stability, predictability, and transparency—one controlled by the actions of the officers it evaluates. Toward that end, it reviews the history and purpose of the current system, explores some of the latter's inherent challenges, and then proposes a series of

recommendations that might enhance the promotions process by ameliorating some of these issues.

History of the Current Promotion System

Evaluating military officers has never been an exact science. The British defeated Napoleon nearly two centuries ago and built an empire by allowing the aristocracy to buy its commissions and promotions. The purchase system ensured a homogeneous corps of commanders drawn from a common background and secured the army's loyalty because its officers had "a stake in the country."² However, the system failed to systematically reward ability, punish incompetence, or head off disastrous occurrences of "groupthink."

The American Continental Army "was initially led by men who had served in the British Army or colonial militias and who brought much of British military heritage with them."³ Of the 18 major and brigadier generals in that army, 16 had served as officers in the British Army or in the colonial militia attached to the British Army during the French and Indian Wars. In creating the Continental Army, the precursor to the United States Army, the Continental Congress deferred the determination of promotions to General Washington: "That General Washington be requested to fix upon that system of promotion in the continental army, which, in his opinion, and that of the general officers with him, will produce most general satisfaction; that it be suggested to him, whether a

promotion of field officers in the colonial line, and of captains and subalterns in the regimental line, would not be the most proper.”⁴

Subsequent systems were based upon seniority, giving officers in the upper echelons little incentive to retire and thus creating promotion stagnation due to the limited number of officer slots. Army officers remained in the junior ranks for as long as 20 years.⁵ Between the Civil War and the end of World War II, systems underwent modification to include retirement incentives, selection boards, and time limits for each grade; nevertheless, they remained seniority-driven.⁶

These oscillations reveal a basic conflict of officer evaluation: Americans embrace the egalitarian notion that officers not born to titled families can be effective leaders, but the entrenched belief remains that the qualities of a good officer lie beyond the quantitative testing and measuring used to evaluate noncommissioned officers. Officers receive promotions based upon the judgment of other officers within a set of guidelines.⁷ The fundamental struggle of officer evaluation entails finding a quantitative measure to compare the subjective judgments made about a large numbers of officers with many supervisors over a wide range of jobs.⁸

After World War II, the nation committed to more uniformity among the services and the development of a “young and vigorous officer corps.”⁹ Attempts at reaching these goals included establishing percentage quotas for each grade and “up or out” promotion

opportunities. In September 1974, the Air Force instituted the officer effectiveness report (OER) and divided the service into about 300 review groups, in each of which raters could award officers numerical designations of 1, 2, or 3. However, only 22 percent of them could receive a 1, the highest promotion recommendation; 28 percent, a 2; and the remaining half received a 3.¹⁰

By May 1977, there were indications of improper manipulation of the controlled OER system. A year later, Air Force personnel overseeing the promotion board process concluded that the system was distorting evaluation and promotion. Test scorings of records revealed that hundreds of officers who should have received promotions did not because of the structure of the OER process. Congressional inquiries and internal Air Force investigations followed, culminating in the removal of the rating controls by order of Gen Lew Allen, the Air Force chief of staff, in October 1978.¹¹

Over the next 10 years, the uncontrolled OERs developed their own rating scale. Since all officers could now be awarded the top rating of 1, most of them were. Soon, a rating of 2 or 3 became a clear signal to the promotion board that the officer should not advance. Rating all officers at the top created a “Lake Wobegon effect”: according to their OERs, “all of the children are above average.” To compensate for this nullification of the numerical system, raters sought higher-ranking additional raters to set their officers apart. Commands soon developed guidelines regarding

what officers could expect for endorsement levels, given their rank and position.¹²

On 12 December 1980, Congress enacted the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act, which standardized regulations governing promotion, with the intent to “maintain a high-quality, numerically sufficient officer corps [that] provided career opportunity that would attract and retain the numbers of high-caliber officers needed [and] provide reasonably consistent career opportunity among the services.”¹³ In 1988 the Air Force initiated the Officer Evaluation System (OES), replacing the OER with three separate documents: Air Force (AF) Form 707A, Officer Performance Report (OPR), which evaluates the officer’s current job performance; AF Form 707B, Promotion Recommendation Form (PRF), which rates his or her potential for higher rank; and AF Form 724A, Field Grade Officer Performance Feedback Worksheet, which provides confidential feedback between the officer and rater.¹⁴ In its design, the OES acknowledged that doing one’s current job well doesn’t always indicate suitability for increased responsibility. It also created a parallel feedback system to the OPR that allowed raters to assess their officers’ performance candidly while the official record of OPRs remained exemplary. That is, the OES system formalized the common practice of separating the extravagant praise of the OPR from the officer’s actual performance.

Recent problems with the OES concern the system's constrained portion, the PRF, which evaluates the officer's suitability for advancement by awarding one of three ratings: definitely promote (DP), promote (P), or do not promote (DNP). The DP recommendation is constrained to 75 percent of officers under consideration for promotion to major, and 55 percent of officers under consideration for promotion to lieutenant colonel.¹⁵ In December 1994, the Air Force announced it had confirmed problems at 22 bases involving improper procedures for awarding the controlled DP rating and for informally using a "top promote" rating, understood by raters and review board members to fall between DP and P. (Also known as the "Super P," the top-promote rating was often accompanied by comments such as, "If I had one more DP to give. . . .") This unofficial rating effectively devalued the P by inserting a superior, unofficial rating above it without burdening the rater with the attendant quota of DP. System modifications designed to correct some of these inconsistencies limited the information that evaluators could see and the way they could gather opinions from fellow senior officers.¹⁶

Four Problems with the

Officer Evaluation System and Possible Solutions

The OES represents a significant attempt to address issues in the OER, a recognizable step in the historical cycle of promotion schema.

Nevertheless, the OES is not necessarily the optimal promotion system—one free of flaws. In fact, it suffers from several significant weaknesses.

Problems

First, as occurred with the OER, the numerical ratings on the OPR are nullified since almost all officers receive the rating “meets standards.”

This fact makes the rating useless as a point of comparison or a feedback tool, a fact acknowledged by the separate, confidential feedback and PRFs. In the absence of meaningful numerical ratings and the elimination of the OER’s endorsement scale, the OES relies heavily upon the writing abilities of the rater. Official guidelines for writing performance reports create a separate and distinct language for these reports, using “stratification” phrases (discussed later in this article) and “push” statements. Although published OPR guidance states unequivocally that “promotion recommendations are prohibited in the OPR,” guidance from major commands endorses the use of push statements—recommendations for assignments that communicate a recommendation for promotion (e.g., “Air Command and Staff College now and then a tough joint job!”).¹⁷ Furthermore, according to the Headquarters Air Reserve Personnel Center’s *EPR/OPR/PRF Writing Guide*, “While promotion statements are prohibited, an evaluator may make recommendations to select officers for a particular assignment, developmental education, or continuation (IAW [Air Force Instruction

(AFI) 36-2406, *Officer and Enlisted Evaluation Systems*, 15 April 2005]).

There is a fine line between an assignment recommendation and an implied promotion statement.”¹⁸

Second, the OES postpones the actual evaluation of the officer until the process is nearly over. The scoring and ordering of officers take place at the promotion board, when the officer can no longer influence the outcome.

Third, the inflated ratings of the OES system not only devalue positive reports but also emphasize negative—or insufficiently laudatory—comments. The system assumes that no officer, at any time over the course of his or her career, will experience even a short period of less than stellar performance or conflict with a supervisor. If the latter does not wish to write effusively enough on the OPR, future promotion boards will note this lack of enthusiasm. In such cases, the rated officer has little recourse. One cannot appeal a favorable performance report simply because it wasn’t sufficiently laudatory. Gen David C. Jones, Air Force chief of staff from 1974 to 1978, described the rating problem this way: “The effectiveness report system has become so inflated that far more people get perfect effectiveness reports than can be promoted. The promotion board is faced not so much in finding out who should be promoted, but who shouldn’t be promoted. It’s very difficult if somebody has a bad knock on his record to promote that person and not to promote somebody who doesn’t have a bad knock on his record.”¹⁹

Fourth, the OES system is not predictable. Since almost all officers present the promotion board with highly favorable evaluations, they have little basis for assessing their chances for advancement. This concern is echoed in the debrief of recent promotion board results by Headquarters United States Air Forces in Europe: “Every board has seemingly inexplicable results. . . . The process is not well understood. We believe that the source of confusion is not only a lack of education on the promotion system, but a lack of realistic expectations as well.”²⁰ Such unrealistic expectations and inexplicable results might emerge from language that one could construe as deliberately misleading—a possibility examined in more detail later in this article.

Possible Solutions

To make the promotion system honest and understandable, we must recognize four significant truths.

All jobs are not the same. The mission of the US Air Force involves delivering sovereign options for the defense of the United States of America and its global interests—to fly and fight in air, space, and cyberspace.²¹ One may reasonably assume that every function within the Air Force contributes to the support of that mission. One may not reasonably assume that all jobs contribute to the mission equally—or that the officers holding those jobs should receive promotions at similar

rates. During the recent attempts at budget reduction, service leadership eliminated numerous facilities and positions by applying exactly this criterion: given limited resources, which functions are most critical to the mission?

The Air Force considers an officer who flies a combat aircraft more critical to the mission than an equally skilled (comparatively) budget officer. Granted, the budget officer is important, and the mission will suffer without his or her position, but the service can still carry out its core functions by retaining the pilot and eliminating the budget officer. The reverse is not true. Similarly, the budget officer's job is more critical to the mission than that of an officer supervising a section in Morale, Welfare, and Recreation (Services). Again, the service would miss the MWR officer and the mission would suffer—but not to the extent that it would without the budget officer.

Although the current system avoids such comparisons during individual evaluations, when the promotion board meets, it quickly and methodically reduces the job descriptions to scores. All other factors being equal, the board will promote a pilot in preference to a budget officer, who will advance over an MWR officer, because of their relative effect on the mission.

All officers are not equal. Some people do better work than others. Although the current system includes the DP, P, and DNP ratings, the

promotion decision actually depends upon the process of “stratification,” which “can be a statement of opinion, a ranking among peers, or can be reflected in a recommendation for an assignment, command, or [developmental education] opportunity.”²² Stratification uses structured statements to communicate the “relative strength of an officer” without the use of a numerical grade.²³ Ambiguity in the meaning and content of these statements led the Air Force to publish and revise the content and significance of the stratification statements, providing a Rosetta stone to decode the actual meaning of the rater’s statements.

According to the *Officer Evaluation System: Training Guide*, the accompanying sample statements describe four strata of officer strength:

Top:

“My #1 of 12 . . . finest officer I’ve ever known”

“Top 3% of my 35 Majors”

“My #1 choice for [senior developmental education] now . . . big [group commander] next!”

2nd level:

“Top 10% in wing”

“Top 10% I’ve known in my career”

3rd level:

“One of my best”

Lowest:

“Outstanding Officer”

“Superior Officer”²⁴

It is possible that a formal rating system which equates the meanings of “superior” and “lowest” and interprets the description “one of my best” as “3rd level” may not provide optimal clarity of meaning to either the

promotion board or the ratee. Even in the favorable levels, significant ambiguity exists between “top 3% of my 35 majors” (mathematically “first”) and “top 10% in wing.” This deliberately created, somewhat Orwellian alternative language (“superior officer” equals “the lowest performing officer I know”) exists in official guidance although not in the system’s establishing regulations (e.g., AFI 36-2501, *Officer Promotions and Selective Continuation*). Though evidently created for a reason and a definable purpose, the nature of that purpose is not readily apparent.

Possible reasons for creating this language might include preserving the morale of the officer who receives a poor rating by describing his or her performance as “superior” or “outstanding,” hindering the ratee’s ability to challenge or appeal the rating (the individual would have little basis for protesting the English meaning of “outstanding officer”), or relieving the rater of the possibly uncomfortable task of directly informing subordinates that their performance is deficient. However, the availability of the translation guide undermines all of these reasons. Moreover, this language might have arisen to remedy a problem in this or previous evaluation systems and has continued to exist as a vestigial feature. The unique language of performance reports may have an origin but not a purpose. Eliminating coded language and reclaiming meaningful numerical ratings would greatly clarify the rater’s actual judgment and intent.

At some point, everybody has a bad day. No evaluation system can possibly maintain its integrity when the slightest hint of less-than-stellar performance—let alone failure—could mean the end of one’s career. All officers, from those in the Punic Wars to participants in Operation Enduring Freedom, have made significant, costly blunders at some time during their careers: “When initiative is used there is often an element of risk involved, and often mistakes are made when risks are taken. The Air Force wants officers who will take risks.”²⁵ The OES system actively discourages risk taking by making the penalty for failure prohibitively high. Officers should be expected to make mistakes as they learn. The current evaluation system’s almost 100 percent promotion opportunity to first lieutenant and captain acknowledges this expectation. Assuming a lieutenant’s lack of experience, raters make the appropriate allowances in writing their performance reports. Unfortunately, many careers end when the young officer, having little maturity and perspective, antagonizes the rater and receives a less-than-effusive OPR. History has shown that some of the greatest American military leaders went against the conventional career paths at certain points in their careers, seeking unconventional opportunities that expanded their experience and made them more useful to the military profession.

Not every officer wants to be a general. The personal price of reaching the highest ranks is considerable. Competent, dedicated officers

may decide that they are more motivated by family concerns, engaging duties, and desirable locations than by promotion to the highest ranks. This truth is the antithesis of the experience of many senior officers. No one becomes a general without trying very hard, for a very long time, to become one. Those who survive this competition may neither understand nor respect colleagues who choose a different path. The current promotion system—designed and enforced by officers who have reached the highest ranks—assumes that every officer strives for constant advancement. It does not value a competent, dedicated, productive major who does not actively attempt to climb much higher.

To empower subordinates, one must respect their choices. A transparent and predictable promotion system should make clear the path to higher rank and the relative costs of career (and life) decisions. A system that empowers the lowest affected echelon gives subordinates the opportunity, authority, and resources to do the job. If we trust our officers with so much that is vital to the nation, why do we hesitate to let them manage their own careers?

An Alternative System of Evaluation

The Air Force should adopt a simpler, more predictable, and more transparent system of evaluation and promotion that retains the current stated values and criteria. As a starting point, such a system would review each officer position and assign it a score for its value toward

promotion. This will do nothing more or less than move this calculation from the opaque, subjective judgment of the promotion board to a standardized, systematic, and transparent process that makes these position ratings known to the officers filling them.

By means of a simplistic methodology, each position would carry a numerical rating (0 to 2) based upon its attributes in the stated criteria of supervisory responsibility, policy-making responsibility, specialized expertise, operational duty, and mission essentiality. Scoring each category from 0 to 2 produces a 10-point rating scale for the position (see table below). Headquarters Air Force will assign position scores; otherwise, major commands would maneuver for favor among their own personnel and fields.

Table. Example of possible position ratings for junior officers

| Position | Supervisory Responsibility | Policy-Making Responsibility | Specialized Expertise | Operational Duty | Mission Essentiality | Total Position Score |
|-------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Pilot | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 6 |
| Budget Analyst | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 4 |
| Maintenance Officer | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 6 |
| Security Forces Officer | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 6 |
| Public Affairs Officer | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 |
| Civil Engineer | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 6 |

Such a scaling system likely will increase the value of operational jobs, slightly decrease staff positions, and generally assign lower ratings to base-level support positions. This quantitative rating will align well

with the current position-description guidance, which assesses the value of positions on their “level of responsibility, number of people supervised, dollar value of resources or projects . . . [and the] uniqueness of the job.”²⁶ One may assume that officers are aware of the published guidance and the status of their positions compared to others filled by officers of similar grade. Further, daily interactions with both the formal and informal Air Force culture undoubtedly have made base-level support officers acutely aware that their career field positions are promoted at a lower percentage than operational and staff positions. Additional weighting factors, such as the ability to replace the officer with a civilian contractor or the location of the duty (in-theater and overseas versus the continental United States), may affect the determination of the position’s operational value and essentiality to the mission.

This scale might value some positions so lowly that filling them with competent personnel becomes difficult. Such a situation raises the question of whether or not such positions properly require an officer or whether a noncommissioned officer or civilian contractor might prove more appropriate. Most importantly, members of the officer corps will know the value of their jobs in terms of promotion and be able to make rational, well-informed decisions about their future. Once again, some of these truths may seem harsh and adversely affect performance and morale. However, after applying for operational and staff positions, an officer assigned to administrative duties—possibly at an undesirable

location—probably has already experienced such effects and a realization that he or she might be an “outstanding officer.” Having more precise, quantified information will let such officers know what practical steps they may take to improve their position (such as performing their current duties in a manner worthy of a higher score and volunteering for an undesirable position assigned a higher score as an incentive).

The scale favors supervisory jobs directly related to operations. The same position may be rated differently in various locations, based on required levels of readiness, geographical demands of the position, privation, availability requirements, and so forth, as determined by Air Force needs at the service level. A maintenance officer in a forward location such as Korea may rate higher in mission essentiality than someone with the same position in Texas. The scale also rewards officers for assuming greater supervisory and policy-making responsibilities. As in the past, this is the preferred path to higher ranks.

Although the position itself carries its own weighted value, performance also will factor into the determination of promotion potential. Raters will score the officer’s performance on a 1 to 3 scale, 2 representing competent performance of all duties. Establishing a requirement for significant justification of higher or lower ratings should give the performance score a strong central tendency. As the recent OPR analysis at US Air Forces in Europe observes,

Fact: few officers’ achievements truly stand out.

Exceptions:

- Combat . . . significant contingency participation
- Functional or unit awards and recognition
- Distinguished graduate distinction
- Competitive selection for [command] opportunity

INSIGHT: most often, the best that can be said about impact: “good, but not distinctive.”²⁷

To award a high grade of 3 for performance, the rater must specify examples justifying this rating for reviewers and board members. Similarly, scoring an officer as a poor performer demands the recording of specific failures. Administrative reviews of such a system should be geared to encouraging ratings of 2, save significant documented evidence of exceptional performance. Raters then multiply this performance value by the position score, yielding the total points—a score that will reward both increased job value and superior performance. Thus, a 3 performance in a job with a value of 4 will score the same as a 2 performer in a job rated 6. Officers can either accept highly valued jobs or perform well to contribute to their own advancement; doing both, of course, optimizes the possibility.

The armed services do have some experience in objective rating systems. At the conclusion of World War II, the services experienced a crisis in managing a vast force whose primary goal was to get out of the service and go home. The Navy and Marines experienced isolated but disturbing incidents of rebellion when they forced veteran combat troops overseas to remain in service but released new recruits, still located

stateside.²⁸ The Army solved this dilemma by hastily devising a point system. Troops received points for months in the service, months in combat zones, battle ribbons awarded, and various personal citations. This system clarified soldiers' situations, allowing them to quickly calculate the points they had earned and the number of months required to accumulate enough to leave the service. Furthermore, it was equitable, permitting those who had served the longest and in the most hazardous conditions to leave first.

Although not perfect, the point system was well received and quickly adopted by the other services, and demobilization proceeded to completion in an orderly manner. This discussion, however, proposes a system that optimizes the possibility of producing a stable, predictable evaluation process manageable over the long term, as opposed to one that makes dramatic changes to satisfy short-term budget and manning requirements. For example, what could be done if the Air Force projects a need to promote 300 captains to major in a given year, but 350 officers attain the required score for promotion? Management of the force over an appropriately long horizon should allow anticipation of this problem several years in advance. If the service deems the problem critical, then it might raise the required score for promotion in small, annual increments over several years and make the problem known early enough to captains who might be affected so they could take meaningful actions. If the potential for overage persists, the Air Force might adjust its

assignment rotations and needs to accommodate the extra officers. If the problem still occurs, then the service should promote the high-scoring officers. Undermining the integrity of the system is far more damaging to the service than the marginal cost of the extra promotions. According to a basic tenet of management, one should not incur long-term liabilities to satisfy short-term needs. After educating and training people for a decade, the Air Force should not sacrifice that investment, its potential future, and the faith of the officer corps in the system to meet the relatively small demands of the immediate circumstance.

Officers would undergo a performance rating at six-month intervals, thereby producing more reports than under the current system and diminishing the impact of each. Consequently, an officer could receive a poor rating during one period but improve it in the next, and his or her specific performance would not carry over. Raters must justify each rating with the performance only from the period of that report. The reports, much simpler than the current OPR, should reduce the administrative burden, even when produced more frequently. When this time period is divided between positions, administrative procedures will address the consultation between supervisors and the precedence of position scores. These anomalies will generally not prove significant since the system primarily seeks to dampen the effect of any single performance report.

Periods of training and education (Air Command and Staff College, technical school specific to a career field / position, Squadron Officer School, etc.) would be rated on the same criteria, but officers would acquire additional points for successful completion of the training. To prevent the continued addition of degrees for the purpose of inflating one's score, the system limits the number of times raters can award these points.

The officer would have time windows for promotion (one and a half to three years for first lieutenant, three to five for captain, and eight to 12 years for major). As officers reach specified longevity windows, their cumulative scores will be evaluated against an Air Force standard for promotion. The service reserves the right (though a limited one) to alter this standard to respond to its changing needs. Promotion is a long-term process, incorporating years of effort by the officer and investment by the Air Force. Standards for promotion should not respond to volatility in short-term force-management concerns. Given the highly statistical nature of this system, the service should be able to control the rate of officer promotions to a high degree of precision while leaving the responsibility for realizing that standard squarely in the hands of the officers.

Promotion boards will remain to ensure quality control. An officer who has amassed a very high score does not, simply by virtue of having accumulated numbers, earn promotion while facing disciplinary actions.

These boards will also offer a defense against raters who “game” this system, as has occurred in the past, requiring substantiation of sudden jumps in an officer’s score just prior to a promotion deadline.

Although this process may seem too simple and objective for the complexities of evaluating leaders, it does—in a visible and systematic way—only what the promotion board does when it scores officer records. At that board, senior officers evaluate the candidate’s job history and performance and score them. Air Force Pamphlet 36-2506, *You and Your Promotions*, specified the use of a nine-point scale to attain this quantification:

| | |
|------------------------------|-----------------|
| Absolutely Superior | 10 |
| Outstanding Record | 9.5 |
| Few Could Be Better | 9 |
| Strong Record | 8.5 |
| Slightly Higher Than Average | 8 |
| Average | 7.5 |
| Slightly Below Average | 7 |
| Well Below Average | 6.5 |
| Lowest in Potential | 6 ²⁹ |

The current OES training guide implements the alternative four-tiered stratification scale for quantifying OES language and offers seven separate strategies for creating word descriptions that help quantify performance.³⁰ This raises the question of why the rater does not quantify performance, assigning it a numeric value instead. This approach might remove ambiguity and provide transparency, with all parties knowing the rules and having an opportunity to influence the outcome.

Moreover, numerical grading by the direct supervisor most effectively captures the subjective aspect of the promotion process implied in AFI 36-2501: “A promotion is not a reward for past service; it is an advancement to a higher grade based on past performance and future potential.”³¹ The supervisor is the closest participant in the process with personal knowledge of the officer under evaluation and has directly observed his or her ongoing performance. A quantitative grade that captures each rater’s subjective assessment of the officer’s performance and potential over the course of his or her career would provide a more accurate, balanced, and ongoing judgment than a single, subjective assessment by officers many degrees removed, interpreting ambiguous language authored by raters of varying writing skills.

Transition

Converting the entire system once again, as in past transitions, involves some effort. However, the rescoring of past OPRs to the new format should prove relatively simple. If implemented, the promotion board process will remain essentially the same with very minor adjustments. A central board will rate officer positions for scores, after which a second series of boards will review the officer’s OER/OPR records and assign a rating of 1, 2, or 3 to each six-month performance period. Statistical sampling of past records would also allow the service

to establish promotion-score standards that will accurately mirror past promotion rates.

Conclusion

On the one hand, this system clearly offers a number of benefits, especially that of showing all officers where they stand at every point in their careers. Moreover, the service would set scores for promotion according to its needs (similar to the percentages now associated with promotion potential). An F-15 pilot would know the consequences of refusing to leave the cockpit for a supervisory position. The value of military education and advanced degrees would be clear. Less-than-perfect ratings on any single report would not prove fatal. Superior performance in a single position, though certainly beneficial to promotion, would not guarantee higher ratings in future positions. The system would vastly reduce the influence of the rater's writing skills. The promotion board would still exist as a quality check, but officers would finally feel that they are driving their careers, answering only to themselves with regard to reaching or not reaching their goals. The sometimes "paternalistic" role of the Air Force Personnel Center in guiding officers' careers would diminish, and speculation about what the promotion board actually wants would finally end. Officers sitting on the boards would benefit from the simplified and less ambiguous language of the raters' comments and from the clearer meaning of the promotion

language at the time reports were written (stratification language today might mean something completely different than it would a decade from now).

On the other hand, in this system, some jobs will not facilitate promotion, and the officers in them likely will move. Certainly, we already know this, but admitting it will take an unaccustomed degree of candor. Measured objectively against other positions, jobs formerly on the fast track may be downgraded. Thus, in terms of their positions, officers will have a much clearer picture of their chances of promotion. The current system allows 18 months from the first notification of promotion denial to final discharge from the service—a great difficulty to overcome.

Additionally, the present system can adversely affect morale because officers cannot control, much less predict, a process that offers them little to no information with which to make informed choices. Provided with a clear, simple system, officers may respond favorably and maturely. Altering established ways of doing business calls for some adjustment, but many of these practices are the source of disaffection among some members of the officer corps now. The nation trusts Air Force officers to control nuclear weapons, manage billions of dollars, and guard our security. Perhaps it's time to trust them to guide their own careers as well.

Notes

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