

ARMIES CAN'T BE DEMOCRATIC

BY BRUCE BLIVEN, JR.

THERE'S a basic, elementary test for any proposal that the Army be reformed: will the change increase fighting efficiency?

An army is for fighting — that alone and nothing more. All Army policy, from the curriculum at West Point to the purchase of GI shoe strings, should contribute to performance on the battlefield.

This simple point, in the current flurry of criticism of the Army, has been almost entirely neglected. A number of reforms have been suggested and backed up by all sorts of arguments — except the only one that cuts any ice.

Since the debate has been heavily one-sided, it can be assumed that public opinion is by now solidly “sold” on the idea that there should be less disparity between officers and enlisted men — that the “caste system” should be abolished. Dozens of soldier-writers, war correspondents, and even a retired general have espoused the cause in print. It has been the subject of radio forums, newspaper editorials and endless dinner-table conversation. Surely, by this time, everybody

knows about this colonel or that major who drank champagne out of his private icebox while his men thirsted for brackish water, or who sat Prussian-like in a reserved front seat at the Bob Hope show.

This chorus of criticism has led to official action, and the official action, in turn, has lent weight to the beefing. The Secretary of War, presumably because he felt there was merit in the complaints (or because he has a good public relations sense), appointed a commission of ex-soldiers to study the question and recommend changes. The report of this commission has been made, and action is promised. The newspapers have already announced that distinctive uniforms for officers — a frequently mentioned sore-spot — will be outlawed as soon as present regalia has had time to wear out.

But should the Army try to be popular? Is a good army an army that its soldiers like? Is our goal easy recruiting or the highest conceivable fighting potential?

Most of the caste system criticisms that have appeared in print follow a

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pattern. They enumerate glaring examples of abuse of officer privileges, which aren't hard to find; any soldier, regardless of rank, can talk to you all night about the juicy ones he has encountered. Then the critic cites the lagging statistics on reenlistment, quotes from "B-Bag," the letters-to-the-editor column in *Stars and Stripes*, or mentions one or two soldier-opinion polls on "What do you most dislike about the Army?", and drops the subject right there. That's all the argument there is. The caste system must go, you are left to infer, because it is unfair, or undemocratic, or unpopular.

Such criticism proves, beyond all reasonable doubt, that the private's life is a dreary one; that it isn't fun to be stuck on the bottom of the Army deck of cards.

But who ever suggested that the Army should try to be fair, or democratic, or fun? All the Army wants (and all the country wants of the Army) is to be able to win battles. Fun and fairness, unless they help win, are charming but irrelevant.

So for just a moment, let's forget how selfish it was for the colonel to reserve the best seat in the theatre, and try to figure out why every army in the world carefully maintains rigid distinctions not only between officers and enlisted men but between ranks among both officers and enlisted men.

The answer to that is the answer to nearly all the complaints that are being heard. With rank goes privilege, and with privilege goes great

temptation towards its abuse. It's abuses of privileges, particularly by officers, that have caused all the shouting and the protest.

I feel that I am in a position to talk about the subject because I've served in the Army as both an enlisted man and an officer, and especially because I spent all of my three and one-half years, except for a few months at various Army schools, in line infantry divisions, where the views of relations between the commanders and the commanded is clear and unhindered. I was with the Twenty-ninth Infantry Division from Omaha Beach to the Elbe River, and that's important too, because some of the aspects of this rank question which seem baffling in training and in garrison straighten themselves out on the battlefield.

II

Let me, then, explain why the caste system exists. Our Army, any army, must organize on the assumption that it is going to fight, a premise which will remain valid until superstratosphere-jet-propelled-guided atom bombs have, positively, rendered all ground forces obsolete. Most soldiers never get within sight of the enemy, it's true, and many units spend the war fighting extraordinarily unmilitary battles. Nevertheless in organization and custom as well as in the established relations among its members the Army must be guided by the requirements of fighting because fighting is its primary business.

On the battlefield the great problem, in concrete terms, is to move the leading platoon forward. The whole mechanism of the Army, all its specialized services, all its headquarters, all the work of planning and supply, is directed towards this simple problem: to move an ordinary rifle platoon, commanded by an ordinary lieutenant, down the road a few hundred yards in the face of enemy fire. The lieutenant doesn't look forward to his job with any great relish. Neither do his men. Neither would any sensible person. The chief difficulty, the hardest conundrum an army has to solve, is moving the platoon on down the road, or across the beach, or onto the next little piece of high ground.

If we had several hundred thousand great lieutenants capable of commanding by the power of their personal leadership alone, or if we had several million riflemen inspired with a will to die, if necessary, at their lieutenant's suggestion, the problem would be quite simple of solution.

Since we have neither except in extremely small numbers, the Army has to resort to the expedients of discipline, fear and semi-automatic response, those old-fashioned, undemocratic devices armies have always employed. It erects a chain of command and preaches instant, unquestioning obedience to orders from above. It assigns rank to the men who form the links in the chain, and with rank goes power and privilege. To minimize confusion it insists on sharp distinc-

tions between those who give and those who receive orders, and keeps the two groups separate, largely on the theory that lack of familiarity breeds respect. It does all this in the hope that when the lieutenant (responding out of habit to his captain's order) tells the platoon sergeant to have the two lead scouts move on out, the lead scouts will promptly get up and move despite the immediate jeopardy to their constitutional rights, their sense of dignity and their very lives.

When the system works an outfit is said to have good discipline. Our Army, by and large, had no better than fair discipline this last time out. Officers and non-commissioned officers were too deeply imbued with democratic spirit to conform easily with the rules of the caste system game. They found it hard to play along with the fiction that their rank or grade set them apart. They valued personal popularity more than efficiency in their commands. On the battlefield these attitudes, desirable and admirable in civilian life, were a definite and often costly handicap. With better discipline, for example, the men who sought cover, despite their orders, in the water and behind the anti-landing obstacles on Omaha Beach on D-day might still be alive.

Because of our fair-to-middling discipline a major advertising campaign was required to fight trench foot in the ETO during the winter of 1944-45 when it should have been enough to issue orders through normal

channels. The cure for trench foot was prevention in the form of dry socks. The Army had plenty of dry socks. It lacked junior officers and non-commissioned officers who could insist that the few men in their outfits change from wet to dry socks, so an elaborate theatre-wide drive had to be initiated. Socks were served like beans in the chow-lines, socks were inspected daily, inter-company competitions were staged on the basis of trench-foot reports, all to the accompaniment of a publicity campaign on posters, in *Stars and Stripes* and on the American Forces Network.

Poor discipline was responsible for the annihilation of K Company in one of our regiments. It happened just north of Aachen in the billiard-table terrain close inside the German border, where every village acted as strong-point and fire-support for its neighbor towns in the skillfully planned German defense. After bitter fighting all day long, K Company finally banged its way into the shattered remnants of the tiny town that was its objective, just about the time the October sun was setting. Despite fatigue and hunger and heavy casualties, the next thing to do, as every man in the hundred-odd had been trained to know, was to establish proper local security, an all-around guard system to insure against a surprise German effort to get the village back. But somewhere down the chain of responsibility someone must have decided to hell with the local security. The Company com-

mander must have neglected to check. Early the next morning battalion headquarters discovered that K Company, surprised in the night, had been completely wiped out, all its members taken prisoner, wounded or dead.

A few special units, like Carlson's Marine Raiders, have fought brilliantly without depending upon the standard formulas for discipline. Usually they have had an extraordinary commander able to get obedience by inspiration, by bona fide leadership, and who could therefore afford the luxury of abolishing the marks of caste and gain advantage, creating a sense of specialness and fostering exceptionally high morale. Discipline based on unorthodoxy can far outreach the normal, humdrum brand.

Unorthodox methods are possible only against a background of orthodoxy. Leaders like Col. Carlson are scarce as the proverbial hen's teeth and highly perishable. Unfortunately the Army must assume that most commanders will possess just standard ability and will need all possible aid in maintaining control of their units. Hot outfits, furthermore, don't last long. When casualties have cut down the original personnel or when, for any other reason, the initial, inspired *esprit de corps* is shattered, they are likely to crack up suddenly and completely. The Army must plan in terms of interchangeable personnel to insure that its work-horse units will remain effective as fighting organizations through long campaigns.

For the majority of combat troops

the way to battle efficiency is the grubby, distasteful routine of endless practice in weapons and techniques and drill in the doctrine that officers are, by definition, infallible beings whose orders make good sense — a necessary falsehood in battle where uncertainty makes opportunity for the enemy and where hesitation can be the beginning of panic; a falsehood which needs bolstering by symbol and ritual, by artificial barriers erected between men, by underscoring and exaggerating the hierarchy of army society, by punishing those who fail to conform with the ceremony.

III

The only justification for the method is proven success; no modern-size army has been able to function on any other basis. Soviet Russia tried to “democratize” her army but hastily dropped the experiment after disastrous experience in Finland in 1940. The caste system may offend our principles. It is certainly offensive to all but a tiny minority of those Americans who have had to live by its tenets. It does, however, help that average lieutenant in moving his average platoon on down the road.

Several of the critics have gone wildly wrong on the idea that Army caste breaks down or is abandoned at the front. Mr. Robert Neville in *Life*, for example, after listing an impressive series of discriminations against enlisted men in such matters as hotel accommodations, nightclubs,

bars, bathing beaches and dancing partners, went on to say that “the caste system is abolished at the front in favor of teamwork.”

Mr. Neville, I’m afraid, is deceived by trivia. He means that at the front officers and enlisted men ate C-rations together, wore identical uniforms and slept in the same foxholes.

The fact is that at the front the caste system is most rigidly enforced — in every respect except the minor details. At the front the lines of authority are most clearly drawn, as they must be, because death is immediately involved. The gulf between the man who gives the order and the man who receives it becomes wider than ever, even though both men may sleep on the same wet ground. There is no doubt about which man is the major in command, although the major may have temporarily shed his gold leaves.

The captain, who eats his C-rations with his company, does so because there isn’t an alternative. He is far more isolated and alone, even in their midst, than he ever was at the officer’s mess in garrison. He knows that nobody in the company will be more optimistic than he appears to be; that any uncertainty in his behavior will be passed on and magnified. He is, normally, both pessimistic and uncertain and, while he might like very much to tell his company all about it, he knows that a sudden lapse into comradely talkativeness would quickly destroy his power to command.

Similarly, all up and down the

chain of command, battle intensifies the caste structure; the hierarchy of authority is more distinct. And, as soon as the outfit is pulled out of the line, its officers will re-establish all the paraphernalia of rank because, within the contrived situation, they make sense.

It is easy to see how the system, by awarding power and privilege, creates an atmosphere in which abuses of power and privilege are not unusual. Almost all the horrible examples of officer misbehavior, which the critics cite, are in the abuse category. They grow out of policies, however, which the Army not only endorses but fosters. All the incidents involving "off limits for enlisted men" restrictions are logical extensions of the approved idea that whenever possible, officers and enlisted men should live and relax apart. The stories about officers living in captured mansions or having fabulous clubs differ only in degree from the sensible doctrine that the most desirable house on any Army post automatically goes to the commanding general.

It is unreasonable to expect officers not to abuse privilege when they live by an artificial system in which no man can define on logical grounds just where the bounds of good taste lie. Ideally all officers would be superior beings who would invariably conduct themselves with discretion and dignity. Practically, this quality is just about as rare as the gift for genuine leadership.

In choosing a commander, more-

over, the Army can't afford to put a sense of *noblesse oblige* at the top of the list of desirable characteristics. If ability to get things done coincides with a keen appreciation of what conduct becomes an officer, well and good. But if it does not . . .

I recall a case in point, a battalion commander who had been promoted with startling rapidity on the battlefield (after a sluggish pre-combat career) because, in progressively difficult command assignments, he had an unblemished record of success. His men did what he ordered.

He was incredibly young and unduly impressed by his new oak leaves, a swaggering confident fellow, with great and infectious enthusiasm. During a lull in the fighting the major, pleased with himself and his outfit's record, and straining to discover some adequate means of parading his new rank, ordered his men to steal a couple of German horses for his personal use. On top of that he ordered that a detail of men be picked to take care of his small, private livery — perfect raw material for another case in the dossier on officer misconduct: "GIs Clean Stables While Major Rides."

Now the Army might outlaw the procurement and maintenance of private stables and direct that all stolen horses be made available to men and officers on some equitable basis. But the Army could not have kept this particular major from finding some way to swagger in victory and to display his authority. If his horses had been denied him, he would

have invented another device. Nor could the Army afford to relieve him; as a commander he was too valuable. The major's superiors said nothing about the incident because the major's battalion, given an objective, could be expected to seize and hold it.

Not all the innumerable anecdotes of this sort can be explained away so simply, because many of the officers guilty of the worst extravagances were, in addition to their other sins, incompetent soldiers. Incompetence, however, was not restricted to Army officers. I rather doubt that there was more ineptitude among them than among non-commissioned officers, or privates, or war workers or growers of victory gardens. The incompetence of the major, to be sure, is conspicuous because, by caste system definition, majors are infallible. Yet the miracle was not that the War Department commissioned a number of misfits but that, under compulsion to draw half a million new officers out of thin air, it found so many good ones. Incidentally, 531,000, or 66 per cent of the total of 800,000 men, not counting chaplains and medical officers, who saw commissioned service came from the ranks of enlisted men, a crushing refutation to the idea that the barrier between officers and men was beyond hurdling.

Let me sum up the dilemma: We can't abolish discipline in our Army, because undisciplined troops don't win battles. So far nobody has devised a way to achieve discipline except by the caste system of authority, a

hierarchy of rank in which each grade is practised in obeying orders from above and expecting obedience from below. And this system, by its nature, invites abuse by giving men more power than most men can handle.

Emotional indictment of all distinctions of rank will cure none of the Army's troubles. The flurry of critics deserve no support when they tilt against the abuses inherent in the system, but have no alternative scheme to propose. That kind of criticism is closely akin to traditional Army griping; complaints about the unavoidable unpleasantness of being a soldier must be ignored (and are), because mud, unpalatable food, hard work, and danger are inevitable results of the mistake of getting into war.

The sudden fashion for berating the Army is understandable. Soldiers do save up mental notes — just as the legend has it — for postwar memoirs which will devastatingly describe the sadistic lieutenant who assigned them extra kitchen police. Soldier-writers, moreover, are particularly sensitive to the whips and scorns of the caste system; they hurt because their civilian skills and reputations are not much wanted or respected in the Army scheme of things. They chafe at the fact that, on Army publications, they must take orders from some silly officer who has never seen the inside of a newspaper office, and in hot indignation loudly champion the cause of the underprivileged private against the plutocratic brass hat — as

if mild incitement to rebellion were any assistance in moving that platoon on down the road. And when they get discharged, they blow off steam by letting the Army have it right between the eyes.

The Army, looking dismally ahead towards lean years of public apathy and skimpy appropriations, can't afford to ignore what seems to be a real expression of popular protest. Yet neither can the Army reform in any but superficial respects.

The Army can improve its methods. There is, and doubtless there will always be, room for improvement in the Army system for everything from classifying recruits to tending graves. The courts-martial manual, in particular, needs to be entirely revised and re-written. The Inspector General's Department could well be remade into an instrument of practical value. The problem of how to dispose of incompetent officers needs re-examination; too often the field

expedient seemed to be transfer toward the rear and promotion by a notch or two. Some inequities in pay, especially the failure to allow discharged enlisted men reimbursement for the furloughs they didn't get, should be wiped off the books.

Improvements along such secondary lines can and should be made. And, in addition, the Army can outlaw some of the more obvious and most odious symbols of the caste system, like the differences in uniform. It can frown heavily upon extravagant officers' clubs (or, alternatively, stress greater extravagance in enlisted men's clubs); it can order all officers to tread with caution in the exercise of their privileges.

The Army cannot, however, abolish the caste system proper. It knows no other way of managing soldiers on the battlefield, and the critics of the system, if they have a substitute to propose, are keeping it extraordinarily quiet.



Diplomacy of the Aggressor —

A wolf was lapping from a running brook when he spied a stray lamb paddling a little way down the stream. "Scoundrel!" he said, moving down to her, "how dare you muddy the water I am drinking?" "How can I do that?" the lamb asked humbly. "It runs from you to me, not from me to you." "Never mind that," snapped the wolf. "Only a year ago you slandered me with evil names behind my back." The lamb began to tremble. "Indeed, sir, a year ago I was not even born." "Well, then," the wolf said, "if it wasn't you, it was your father, and that's the same thing — don't think you're going to argue me out of my dinner" — and with that he leaped upon the lamb, and tore her to bits. — *AESOP'S Fables*

NEED WE FEAR TROPICAL DISEASES?

BY REAR ADMIRAL LUCIUS W. JOHNSON

MANY people fear that troops returning from tropical lands will bring with them terrible diseases hitherto unknown in the United States — diseases which may then establish themselves here. In numerous households such names as yaws, gangosa, leprosy, cholera, filariasis and elephantiasis have become words of horror. This fear is shown in countless letters, still being received by government bureaus, which ask repeatedly these questions: Can those terrible diseases be fenced out? What does the future hold for the men who became infected with them? Do the responsible authorities realize the danger? What are they doing to protect us?

Here are some reassuring answers, based on public health work in hot countries over many years, two of them spent in the Pacific area during the late war.

A large part of the public anxiety is based on misinformation and exaggeration. It is a very human trait for

those visiting foreign lands to enjoy telling astounding stories to a credulous audience, and travelers since the time of Ulysses have not hesitated to ornament truth with flowers of imagination. Anyone who has had the duty of censoring mail knows how numerous were the fantastic exaggerations that had to be deleted from letters home. No effective means of censorship has yet been found to stop the spreading of such tales by word of mouth.

I encountered an example of this kind of rumor-spreading one moonlight night as I sat on a wrecked Japanese plane beside the airstrip on Tarawa. A young aviator waited with me for transportation, homeward bound to join a new carrier. He was full of startling stories to take home to his folks. Here is one that he told me:

“Hundreds of our service men and women in the South Pacific have contracted leprosy from the natives. Huge leper colonies are being built for

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