



# PRESIDENT'S VIEWS

## *A Professional Issue*

BY JOHN K. NALAND

Earlier this year, the *Foreign Service Journal* polled readers, asking for suggestions on new topics to be covered. One response, in particular, caught my attention: "How many senior officers have sold their souls to the devil over Iraq to advance their careers?" It is indeed true that, until now, that issue has not been addressed in this journal.

However, the same question, as applied to senior military officers, has been the subject of vigorous discussion in professional military publications over the past few years. For example, the *Armed Forces Journal* ("the leading joint service monthly magazine") has published numerous articles examining whether America's senior military officers have fulfilled their duty to offer professional advice to their politically-appointed civilian superiors, especially concerning initial operations in Iraq:

- In April 2007, active-duty Lieutenant Colonel Paul Yingling wrote that "generals have a responsibility to society to provide policymakers with a correct estimate of strategic probabilities." He charged that, as a group, U.S. generals had chosen conformity and career advancement over providing their frank, expert views.

- In July 2007, active-duty Lieutenant Colonel John Mauk argued that "the failure of our generals in Iraq was a failure to stand up to the defense sec-



retary, the administration and their appointed leader in Iraq."

- In August 2007, active-duty Colonel Henry J. Foreman Jr. cited "the failure of the senior uniformed ranks to serve as a responsible check

and balance to manifold civilian strategic shortcomings — often hiding behind the principle of political neutrality to disguise cowardice and careerism."

- In February 2008, retired Lieutenant General John H. Cushman called for an investigation of prewar planning to determine if "U.S. four-stars ... [had] forcefully made known their objections to the defense secretary and, if necessary, to the president."

The unifying theme of these essays is that, due to timidity or careerism, some senior U.S. military professionals failed to provide their political superiors with potentially unwelcome expert assessments. Is the military alone in having senior officers who have failed to stand up for their services, or can the same be said of some of our nation's senior career diplomats? To answer these questions, we need to put the issue in context.

By law and tradition, the American system of government makes a clear distinction between politically appointed and career officials. Political appointees come and go with the electoral tides. They are not selected because they are, by some objective measure, the best prepared person for the job, but rather because they helped

the new president get elected and share his worldview. Career officials, on the other hand, rise through government ranks based on documented performance and demonstrated potential. They then use their years of experience to provide frank, nonpartisan advice to political appointees whose job it is to make the final decision.

What is *not* supposed to happen is for career officials to abandon their apolitical orientation by allying themselves with a politically appointed patron in order to obtain a plum position ahead of their peers. Career officials are not supposed to be compliant yes-men and yes-women who fail to meet their professional responsibility to speak up, behind closed doors, about likely negative consequences of pending policy decisions.

Have these things taken place in recent years at the State Department? Have some senior career officials "sold their souls" over Iraq and other issues in order to advance their careers? I believe that some have. I also believe that it is appropriate for active-duty diplomats, like our uniformed colleagues, to openly discuss this important professional issue.

I will do so in my November column — not by looking backward at the historical details of Iraq policy formulation, but rather by looking forward at broader issues of enduring importance: What are the professional responsibilities of senior career officials? What should happen to those who fail to fulfill those responsibilities? ■

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