Leadership challenges: lead, train, care

Former SMAs look at today's Army with seasoned foresight

By Dave Crozier

Photo by Spc. Joseph Edmondson

Former Sergeants Major of the Army (l-r), Jack L. Tilley, Richard A. Kidd, and Julius W. Gates spent some time discussing Leadership Challenges facing today's Army during a recent visit to the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy, Ft. Bliss, Texas.

Because of the need for transformation, today's Army has been thrust into a rapidly evolving force that is modular, lethal, asymmetrical and capable of adapting to changing threats and technology. The challenges in accomplishing this are seen by some as many and significant. But for three former Sergeants Major of the Army, the challenges are as old as the profession of leadership itself.

"I don't think leadership challenges ever change, said the 9th Sergeant Major of the Army Richard A. Kidd. "You might change the equipment; you might change the uniform; you might change a lot of things; but the leadership challenges are primarily to lead, train and care for the troops."

Kidd relayed those words in January at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy, Fort Bliss, Texas, while attending the Nominative Command Sergeants Major Conference, hosted by the 13th Sergeant Major of the Army Kenneth O. Preston. Also attending the conference were former Sergeants Major of the Army Julius W. Gates and Jack L. Tilley, the 8th and 12th Sergeants Major of the Army respectively. The conference brought together senior noncommissioned officers to discuss changes in policy, technology, strategies and challenges for the Army. While there, the former Sergeants Major of the Army spent time talking to students of Class 55 about leadership challenges as they see it for the transforming Army.

Each admitted that since retiring from the Army, their vision and knowledge of current issues is limited, but that many of the challenges they see are actionable, and their historic perspectives do give them some insights.

"You know, I look at today's Army, and I see several challenges. I think there is a tremendous challenge for the Guard and Reserve. I think there is a tremendous challenge for the military families, and I also think there is a tremendous challenge for the active duty Army simply just because of the pace of what is going on," Tilley said. "And that pace didn't just start with Iraq; it started 10 years ago. And when they shrunk down the Army from 18 divisions to 10, the pace picked up. So one of

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8th Sergeant Major of the Army

the biggest challenges I see for today's Army is how to sustain what you currently have for an extended period of time."

Gates agreed in context but added that from his perspective the challenges have to do with the differences he sees from years past.

"What really causes leadership challenges is the situation; the environment that you have to fight in, and today our Soldiers are fighting in a much more different environment than they were in WWII, Korea or Vietnam," Gates said. "I am not saying those environments weren't critical, stressful and very, very dangerous; they were. But the environment is different today. Today they are your friends; tomorrow those friends are driving a car with a bomb in it, and killing your Soldiers. That's a tough situation."

Another tough situation the former top sergeants see is the stress on the Guard and Reserve, particularly in the face of recent announcements seeking the possibility of regularly scheduled two-year controlled tours on active duty for the reserve component.

"Now that's a real challenge," Tilley said. "The whole problem here is what are you going to do? If you look at the whole problem, how do you sustain what you currently have and quite frankly you only have a couple of ways of doing that. You either utilize the Guard and Reserve to increase the size of the force or you increase the size of the Army."

Photo by Spc. Joseph Edmondson

The 9th Sergeant Major of the Army Richard A. Kidd said it is the Army's core values, Warrior Ethos, that enables leaders to lead and help transform today's Army.

Tilley acknowledged the Army's current program of Transformation noting that Soldiers are being pulled out of administrative positions and being placed in Combat Arms and the like, but said the Army has to be looking down range for its long-term capabilities. That long-range look is something Kidd believes was done with the reserve component.

Photo by Spc. Joseph Edmondson

The 8th Sergeant Major of the Army Julius W. Gates urges caution when making changes to today's Army, particularly when it comes to NCOES.

"First of all you have to give credit to the Army in those earlier years when we looked at the future years and saw that the Guard and Reserve were going to have to be better than what they were," Kidd said. "And there was a lot of effort that went into upgrading their abilities. Part of the problem comes from downsizing [the Army] which is causing us to bring [Reserves] in, in larger numbers then they were expected to come in with."

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9th Sergeant Major of the Army

Gates agreed that long-range planning is key, but said the entire picture needs to be looked at, not just the Army picture.

"We really don't know what affect [two-year tours] will have on society. Bringing some of our Reserve Soldiers onto active duty like we are doing now; activating those organizations, [could] cause some problems out there," Gates said. "[Sometimes] we don't really look at that [fully]. I know of three lawyers who made up a law firm, and all three are reserve component Soldiers – one is in the National Guard, and the other two are in the Reserves. All three were activated and they lost their law firm."

Gates recognizes this is just one incident, but said "someone" has to sit down and look at all aspects of that type of call-

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Jack L. Tilley
12th Sergeant Major of the Army

up for the reserve component and what affects it has on the nation as a whole.

When it comes to Army Transformation and the creations of Units of Action, Brigade Combat Teams and the like, the former Soldiers had some mixed thoughts about it all.

"I think you have to [transform the Army] and I think [Gen. Schoomaker's] focus is not a bad idea. To have small brigades, more brigades, that is a step in the right direction," Tilley said.

Photo by Spc. Joseph Edmondson

The 12th Sergeant Major of the Army Jack L. Tilley said one challenge he sees is sustaining the current force for an extended period of time.

He added that change is inevitable and the process of Transformation will eventually take pressure off the Army, but said it is a waiting game to see what adjustments may be needed in the future.

While Kidd agreed times have changed and the Army needs to change with it, he said he had concerns about the way the Army transforms.

"Historically, we have transformed into what we need now, versus what we need in the future, and then end up a day late and dollar short," he said. "By the time we transform, you are up against a whole new threat — a new need, if you will — and then the process of transformation is needed again. That's my only concern."

Gates said the Army has to change, but cautioned that the wrong kind of change can be dangerous.

"If you change the structure of the military to fit the needs of today, the current situation, and then 10 years from now we may be fighting a heavy fight; if you are not careful you may destroy your capability to do just that," Gates said. "You still have to have an Army that is capable of fighting different types of battles. It is not just the War on Terrorism. It may be the most sophisticated war we have ever fought, but what if we have a confrontation with some other larger country? So you have got to be careful."

The former SMAs cautioned that care also needs to be taken when making changes to the Noncommissioned Officer Education System.

"The Army needs to be very, very careful," said Gates. "At one time, we did something that wasn't very smart, we took the Basic Noncommissioned Officers Course and made it a correspondence course. And that wasn't the smartest thing in the world."

"I think you have to continually change and make it better for the future. But there is one thing they ought to do, which frustrated me as the Sergeant Major of the Army, is that you work on these things and you go on and then you start working on them again," said Tilley. "It would almost be better off if you hired civilian contractors, told them what you wanted, and allowed them to build your education system for you and then come back and present it to you. The reason being is that in the Army we would just keep changing it. In the civilian market, you have got somebody that is saying this is what you have to do to get it done."

Tilley, Gates and Kidd also had concerns about sending as many Soldiers to school as possible, but understand the current operations tempo makes it very difficult. And while they do not like the idea of correspondence courses, they did agree that using current technology – video teletraining, computer-aided training and mobile training teams – is a viable way of training.

When it comes to giving advice to NCOs to overcome the challenges of Army Transformation, the former SMAs went straight back to the basics.

"The leadership stuff you did for years is not going to change, but technology and equipment are. What I see as challenges are recruitment, retention, suicide prevention, safety and things like that," Tilley said. "I think leaders have to have more communication today. There are a lot of people that just aren't sitting down and talking to their Soldiers, not only talking to their Soldiers, but talking to their chain of command."

"Technology doesn't improve your leadership ability," Gates affirmed. "You have got to lead those Soldiers. Train those Soldiers and maintain the standards even in wartime – spend time with the individual Soldier."

"I keep saying lead, train, care – the core values, Warrior Ethos – [the Army] is giving it different names, but is has always been there. If you have those [core values], you can adapt to anything, and transform into anything," Kidd said. "But the key to getting it done are those core values that have been there since day one and will always be there. If we lose those, we lose everything."