



# FREE OF BIAS? ARMY OFFICER EVALUATIONS

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**Ronald Granieri:** Welcome to A Better Peace, the war room podcast. I'm Ron Granieri, professor of history at the department of national security and strategy at the US Army War College and podcast editor of The War Room. It's a pleasure to have you with us. The army prides itself on being as much of a pure meritocracy as any organization can be. Promotions are based on performance with every soldier being given the best opportunity to perform at the highest level as raters attempt to use objective measurement rubrics as the basis for their decisions. But is the evaluation of officers completely free of bias?

Our guest today, Colonel Bonnie Blue Clemente, who goes by Buffy of the Army War College class of 2021 has conducted research on the topic of officer evaluation bias as a strategy research project and has concluded that there is indeed bias, conscious and unconscious, in the officer evaluation system. While also offering ideas about how such bias can be managed and limited in the future. Colonel Clemente is a 22-year active-duty army adjutant general Corps officer. Previously she was the chief DA secretary executing the Army's promotion and selection boards. She has been a battalion and brigade S1 and a G1, and we are delighted to have her with us today. Welcome to A Better Peace Colonel Clemente.

**Buffy Clemente:** Thank you very much, Ron. Glad to be here.

**RG:** So reading your bio, I have an idea how this topic would be of interest to you. But can you tell the audience how did you specifically get interested in researching the question of bias in the officer evaluation?

**BC:** So two main reasons actually. One, as you know from my bio having been a battalion brigade S1 and G1 I've reviewed hundreds of evaluations from a variety of raters and senior raters all different levels from captain up through general officers, one, two stars. And then secondly, the big reason was in my last job that you highlighted in the execution of the promotion selection boards for the army, the amount of weight that is placed on the evaluation by board members in each and every board, it's just so large that if there's a bias in your evaluation how can you overcome it? And I think I've also seen examples throughout my career

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of a senior rater who had a specific philosophy on who would get the top block on an evaluation and how over time it was so difficult for some people to overcome that person's personal philosophy that didn't necessarily align with the army at the time we had switched from the above center of mass to the most qualified blocking system.

**RG:** Well, that's a fascinating question. This idea about your what are the most common sources of bias, right? If people who have risen in an organization they may have an idea of how and why they rose or that the people that they've liked rose in the organization, the people who they think have done the job well. And how often does the army specifically sort of reinforce people's ideas about what they should be looking for when they're making their evaluations?

**BC:** So the interesting aspect is when I was doing my project, I specifically went to the valuations branch of HRC, which is the Human Resources Command. And I asked when we changed about 10 years ago to the current evaluation form we have, was bias something that was considered? And the very quick answer I got was no. And I was kind of shocked and doing my research I could see that well in a way without realizing the army did address one of the biases, one of the structural biases of a central tendency air by limiting how many could get the top block, which is now the most qualified. However, they didn't realize it at the time but at the same time they also created a central tendency or bias because those blockings below most qualified they aren't limited. So now you could overinflate how many are highly qualified versus qualified. And so that was one of the things that I found.

**RG:** Right. And I want to ask this question as an army civilian. So I have not gone through the officer evaluation process and a lot of our audience might not have. So you've already hinted at that there's qualified, highly qualified and most qualified. When an officer goes through this process, what are they told after they get the result? Are they given any specifics about why they were placed in whatever block they were put in? Or is that information solely held by the army as an internal matter?

**BC:** So the regulation requires that officers are counseled initially within 30 days, quarterly thereafter and they should be receiving a closeout counseling of their evaluation. The evaluation should not be a surprise to them in other words. Now I can't say for sure all leaders do that. I can say I make sure I do that. And I believe the majority of leaders try to do that. And if you go through and cover the strengths and weaknesses that you see in the individuals you rate throughout the entire rating period when it comes time for your evaluation it shouldn't be a surprise. It doesn't mean there won't be surprises at all, but it shouldn't be. The other thing is there is a cultural shift from the way the valuation was before to now. Before everybody was expected to get a top block, which was an above center of mass. As a result, the culture was if you did not get that top block above center of mass, it was a career ender for you.

And then when they changed it and it's limited to no more than 49%, there was a lot of consternation within the army officer Corps regarding is this going to be a career ender for me because now I'm not getting the top block because not everybody can? And so the culture had to shift in the army of instead of everybody expecting to get the highest marks across the board this top block, there are certain points in your career based on the level of responsibility and the scope of the job you're in that you really need to be aiming to achieve a most qualified, which is the current top block in those assignments. But it is okay to have some highly qualified blockings, but you need to have like a little heartbeat. They refer to it as your most qualified. It needs to be a heartbeat and you want to try to have it at the best times.

**RG:** I mean and it's something we've talked about on other at least one other of our recent podcasts about grit and growth. We talked about this issue of how does the army deal with officers whose performance is good but maybe had to overcome a particular problem. And the idea about always being perfect can be a real challenge. I'm reminded of one pop culture reference comes to mind is in the famous play about real estate agents Glen Gary, Glen Ross, there is a sales competition. And the guy who runs the competition comes in and tells the salesman, "Here first prize is a new Cadillac. Second prize is a set of steak knives. Third prize is you're fired." So the idea that if you make it or to use another quote from that immortal film classic, the legend of Ricky Bobby, if you're not first you're last.

So we create this kind of pressure, which the army is trying to deal with by saying okay, you don't have to get all top marks in order to have a successful evaluation. But then we get to the idea of how do senior raters make these decisions? And so when you talk about bias, you mentioned the problem of somebody might have in their head an idea about what constitutes the best that might not correspond to what officers are being told or what the army wants people to think. What are the other common sources of bias or common examples of bias that you came across in your research?

**BC:** So I would say there's an overarching umbrella of three main types of biases. Structural, information, and cognitive. Structural's something that's obviously already in the system. Information is the information you're receiving. Where I focus my project was on the cognitive biases. Because the cognitive biases are what the army really needs to look at is the unacceptable cognitive biases and then how can we get after it? So there was some previous research that was done and they found five types of cognitive biases in the evaluation process. And so I'm just going to briefly, if you don't mind Ron, I'll just highlight what they are with a quick example. I'll list them first for you. They are halo effects, first impression error, similar to me effect, central tendency error, which I've highlighted a little bit already and duration neglect. So for the halo effect, what that is that's when an evaluator allows one performance dimension to influence all the other performance areas.

So for example, let's say an officer projects self-confidence and has a commanding presence. This officer may benefit from a positive halo effect even though that officer may lack initiative

or an ability to extend influence outside their chain of command. Which are also key leader attributes that the army wants. Secondly, when you look at the first impression error, which you're probably very familiar with this as most of the audience is. You may have heard it as a belief bias or confirmation bias. You hear the term first impressions last. Well they do and that's what this bias is. So obviously an officer who meets their senior rater for the first time that senior rater just a part of human nature, we develop an impression of that individual. And this bias can be more prevalent really if you're removed from your rater or senior rater. Let's say you're geographically separate, you have fewer interactions.

So what does the rater and senior rater most likely remember? That first impression that they had of you. The third one is the similar to me effect. And I think this is one that you have actually mentioned without realizing or not Ron. And this is where I assess someone's performance basically in a positive manner if they resemble me. So for example, let's say I have two company commanders that I'm senior rating, and both of them have outstanding results. Their companies are head and shoulders above the other companies. They are performing outstanding. They both have great leadership traits, but one of them I align better with that person's leadership style than the other person. If I give a stronger narrative in that person's evaluation, I'm likely demonstrating a similar to me effect bias. I mentioned to you the central tendency error so I'm not going to rehash that because I think I really already explained that when you're over-inflating the blocking on something because there's not a limit that has been placed on it.

**BC:** And then the last one is the duration neglect bias. Another way to think of this is like a recall bias. What do you remember the best? Right? So this occurs when the rater replaced greater emphasis on peak events or recent events. So for example let's take a national training exercise event. Well, there's a lot of planning and preparation that goes into that before the actual event. You can have a commander or who is terrible at turning in movement request to the staff, laid on everything, stuff isn't filled out right, hasn't been checking stuff. You get to the exercise, that person performs better than everybody else, that person's unit performs better than everybody else. You get back and then what does the senior rater remember of the national training exercise? Well, most likely remembers how great that commander performed. Well, what about all the other shortfalls that happened prior to? If you do not account for those other things, then you're demonstrating duration neglect bias. So hopefully I explained that well enough and if you have questions let me know.

**RG:** Totally. Because I guess the flip side of the duration neglect bias is what if that officer did a fantastic job in everything leading up to the exercise but then through some particular chain of circumstances the unit's performance in the exercise is not so good. That can then work against the officer once again without someone taking into account the other aspects of the job that they did just fine.

**BC:** Exactly Ron. And then that would be a more negative narrative that maybe that officer isn't really deserving of. Because it doesn't reflect the entire performance of the individual.

**RG:** Is it possible to generalize, Buffy about how much contact senior raters have with the officers they rate? Like are there certain branches where you're more likely to have regular contact or is this just a function of the segregation between higher ranks and lower ranking officers?

**BC:** I think it's a combination of a couple of things. I think as you get more senior, the type of interaction becomes different because of that geographical separation. However, we still have units where you might have a lot of geographical separation even with different companies or battalions. Even when I was at Fort Huachuca, Arizona with the military intelligence brigade, they have a battalion that's out at Goodfellow air force base. So it's not even located in the same state. So because of that geographical separation, it just depends really I think more so than any one or two factors.

**RG:** If I'm a company commander, this is one of those another civilian question for you. But if I'm a company commander, if I'm a captain, is my senior rater my battalion commander, my brigade commander?

**BC:** Your senior rater would be your brigade commander because as a company commander the battalion commander would be your rater and then your senior rater would be the brigade commander.

**RG:** Got you. So that's where we really begin to see the geographical space that would be between an individual company and the brigade command. You mentioned these five types of cognitive biases and I think everybody can recognize them, probably see them in their own life. In your research, do you have a sense of which of these five are... I know they're all say let's say they all may be easy or hard to remove depending on the individual rater. But do we have a sense of which of these cognitive biases are easier to address versus which ones are more persistent and difficult to address?

**BC:** So when it comes to looking if something's easy or hard, you have to look at how much change I think there is that's needed. So looking at the five, I would say the easiest in a sense would be the first impression, the halo effect and the duration neglect. And that's because those are really the individual can impact those. And through a strategy of recognition, remediation, incorporation, I think these individually focused biases can actually be overcome. Recognition requires an openness to self-awareness and acceptance of feedback. And then feedback can also become part of a remediation strategy that you incorporate. So looking on the other spectrum, because you mentioned which ones are the hardest, the other two I think are the hardest and I'll

start with the central tendency error and then talk about the similar to me effect if that's okay Ron.

**RG:** Sure.

**BC:** The central tendency error I think would be the hardest because for that one to be changed, you have to look at changing the Army's officer culture. If you think back to how I mentioned we had a cultural shift from everybody was getting that top block to now it's limited to 49%. That was a big shift in the officer Corps. So when it comes to a central tendency error, that one requires a cultural shift. Which it takes time to do and you have to really work at gathering buy-in and working on your messaging aspect. The other one that's similar to me effect I think would be hard to address as well.

And a very interesting study that I found it showed that officers with significant higher cognitive abilities had 18 to 32% lower odds of below the zone selection for promotion to major or Lieutenant Colonel and selection for battalion command. So my takeaway from that was that the skills that we desire in the army for our strategic leaders may not actually be viewed as positively by leaders who have lower cognitive abilities than the people they are rating. So therefore you could also see that you might have conflicting personalities coming to light as well.

**RG:** Interesting. Am I reading this correctly? That if my senior rater thinks I'm too smart for my own good that could negatively affect my evaluation.

**BC:** It could. So one thing this study mentioned was what shows cognitive ability, right? Well, some of it is inquisitiveness, questioning things, right? Seeing things from a different angle, right? Well, if you're the leader and let's say you're a battalion commander and you're putting out how something's going to occur for the unit and you have that one company commander who keeps asking questions all the time, you could take those one or two ways. You could take that hey, this person really wants the organization to be the best it can be, is really trying to make sure that we don't have any problems going through. This person is definitely demonstrating critical thinking, strategic thinking, which the others aren't.

Or, and this is where I think a lot of senior leaders probably are inclined to think is why is this person constantly questioning me? Do they disagree with every decision I make? What is going on? And you can see there could be potentially a personality conflict that ensues. So I think that is an example of how the cognitive ability that we want in our strategic senior leaders are we really developing it earlier?

**RG:** Interesting. The whole idea about asking questions all the time that reminds me of the anecdote that secretary of defense Mattis, his call sign was chaos, but it wasn't because he was disorganized but chaos stood for Colonel has another question. Going back to his earlier days as

an officer where he was the kind of officer who was always asking questions after listening to briefings from his commanders. I guess it didn't hurt him too much, but it is an issue.

**BC:** It's funny you bring that one up, Ron. Because I just watched that on YouTube I think yesterday or the day before about him explaining chaos versus his... About his book. So very interesting yes.

**RG:** And this then gets to that idea. So if we talk about here what are hard or what are easier, what kind of recommendations or suggestions in your research and going forward do you think that the army could address to try to get at these things? You mentioned the idea of recognition as a way the more aware people are of these potential biases, the better they can push back against them. But what other recommendations, policy, alterations, or suggestions do you have going forward?

**BC:** So one of the remediation techniques, Ron, that I stumbled across in my research was something called ideation sessions. And this would be when a leader either asked for thoughts or other possibilities to a scenario that they pose at the end of a meeting or an activity to further creative and critical thinking skills. This would also encourage an increased value being placed on cognitive ability. Additionally, if you want something the army policy-wise could do, if you look at what's been done with the battalion and the Colonel commander assessment programs, they do these evaluations where peers, subordinates and superiors do an evaluation on an individual. Well, that stays internal to that. We've also had that MSAF 360 assessment that we've had problems with that. But something similar, maybe not to the main extent that it is for the B cap and C cap, but something similar or some type of an assessment that a couple of peers and subordinates complete that the rater and senior rater can utilize in order to help really open their aperture on how other people view this person.

So growing up as a young Lieutenant when we came to studying about what does it mean to be a leader? I always remember how no one person is really just one person, you're really three people. You're really who you think you are, who others think you are and then there's the mix of the two, right? So if you can open that aperture and get additional perspectives, I think that's helpful. So let me give you an actual example of how this can be beneficial as well. Because in my last job for all the board recorders, we would sit together myself, the XO's, our majors, two of the senior civilians. And we would talk about the strengths and weaknesses to determine who I was going to ultimately select to be the team leads for the next year.

One of the things that came out of that was that one of the captains, a phenomenal officer doing a super job, had some issues with working with civilians, nothing major but struggled. That was a challenge for that individual. And it wasn't something that I was aware of if I hadn't received that input from a source other than me looking. So what I could do then as a leader was, I could help address this challenge this person had and provide some recommendations and some tools. And I

could talk to this person and help develop that individual in order to be better at working across outside the military channels and working with civilian counterparts.

**RG:** Which is certainly something that for that officer to move up to the strategic level they'd have to be able to figure out how to do.

**BC:** And it was a great timing because this person was going to be a senior captain heading off to ILE. Now was the time for this person, "Hey, I know you struggle with it, I know you don't like it, but this is actually a blessing to have this challenge. Because now you can figure out how you're going to work through this." And then you have that information, what you've learned from that experience in your toolkit as you proceed further.

**RG:** Sure. So what obstacles do you think exist to making progress? You mentioned broadly speaking some army culture assumptions people might have. But when you think about this in the context of your research, what are the practical or intellectual obstacles to these kinds of reforms going forward?

**BC:** So you hit the first one, so I'm not going to cover it for you anymore Ron. I think you got that and the audience probably has it as well regarding organizational culture. But the other one as I think through this, I think is really individual stubbornness. To acknowledge and accept constructive feedback from others, especially when it counters what we already think is the truth. And this really gets back after the who we are. We think we are one person, we think we're one way. But until you are open to accepting something that counters what you think, some people are really a lot harder on themselves than others and some people are not as hard. And then they get feedback from someone else and the person who's really hard on themselves finds out man, they're a lot more self-critical than they think they are or vice versa. But you need that in order to help put things into perspective.

**RG:** And it sounds as though what you're saying is this is the kind of thing that can have a positive feedback loop going forward. So a young officer rising through the ranks who is having good and serious and multi-level conversations about performance along the way will become more self-aware. And then that self-awareness will help them when they're in the senior rater position and they're rating junior officers. That they will try to do the same essentially for the generation that comes after them. If that's so, and this is the one big final question for you. Is how will we measure or how should we measure progress towards the elimination of bias? The world's imperfect, we're never going to quite get there, but how do we measure progress?

**BC:** So I think what we would see is an increased level of leader development feedback. When you ask officers how many leaders have actually taken time to talk to you about your performance? If we see an increase in that, I think that would be one positive aspect. Another



thing that I think we would see is an increased level of trust and confidence from the officer Corps in how it perceives the evaluation process. Specifically in rating the evaluation process as being fair and equitable. I think we would see an increase in that as well.

**RG:** Got you. And you mentioned in the pre discussion so you're going back to Fort Knox. What is your next assignment going to be and will you be able to continue dealing with these questions going forward?

**BC:** So I think I will be at a different level. However, my upcoming job I'm going to be working for the adjutant general, helping with the [inaudible 00:27:47] transition into the active duty side, because it's going to be transitioning under the adjutant general. And then after that I've been blessed and selected to be the fifth Corps G1. So I will be well-versed and working heavily with evaluations again in my near future Ron.

**RG:** Outstanding. Well, and instead of having a young officer run around and tell you, "Colonel Clemente, I worked on this on my SRP at the war college." You can actually be that young officer for yourself to talk about your own SRP.

**BC:** Yes I can.

**RG:** And with that happy thought in mind, I want to say thank you, Colonel Buffy Clemente for joining us today on A Better Peace to talk about your research. Good luck going forward.

**BC:** Thank you very much, Ron. Glad to be here.

**RG:** You bet. And thanks to all of you for listening in. Please send us your comments on this program and all the programs and send us your suggestions for future programs. We're always interested in hearing from you. Please if you have not already, please subscribe to A Better Peace on the pod catcher of choice. And after you have subscribed, because of course you want to subscribe to A Better Peace, please rate and review this podcast because that's how other people can find us as well. We're always interested in increasing the size of this community for these kinds of conversations. And we look forward to welcoming you all back again. But until next time from the War Room, I'm Ron Granieri.