On Aug. 1, Gen. Richard Cody, the United States Army’s vice chief of staff, flew to the sprawling base at Fort Knox, Ky., to talk with the officers enrolled in the Captains Career Course. These are the Army’s elite junior officers. Of the 127 captains taking the five-week course, 119 had served one or two tours of duty in Iraq or Afghanistan, mainly as lieutenants. Nearly all would soon be going back as company commanders. A captain named Matt Wignall, who recently spent 16 months in Iraq with a Stryker brigade combat team, asked Cody, the Army’s second-highest-ranking general, what he thought of a recent article by Lt. Col. Paul Yingling titled “A Failure in Generalship.” The article, a scathing indictment that circulated far and wide, including in Iraq, accused the Army’s generals of lacking “professional character,” “creative intelligence” and “moral courage.” Yingling’s article — published in the May issue of Armed Forces Journal — noted that a key role of generals is to advise policy makers and the public on the means necessary to win wars. “If the general remains silent while the statesman commits a nation to war with insufficient means,” he wrote, “he shares culpability for the results.” Today’s generals “failed to envision the conditions of future combat and prepare their forces accordingly,” and they failed to advise policy makers on how much force would be necessary to win and stabilize Iraq. These failures, he insisted, stemmed not just from the civilian leaders but also from a military culture that “does little to reward creativity and moral courage.” He concluded, “As matters stand now, a private who loses a rifle suffers far greater consequences than a general who loses a war.”
General Cody looked around the auditorium, packed with men and women in uniform — most of them in their mid-20s, three decades his junior but far more war-hardened than he or his peers were at the same age — and turned Captain Wignall’s question around. “You all have just come from combat, you’re young captains,” he said, addressing the entire room. “What’s your opinion of the general officers corps?” Over the next 90 minutes, five captains stood up, recited their names and their units and raised several of Yingling’s criticisms. One asked why the top generals failed to give political leaders full and frank advice on how many troops would be needed in Iraq. One asked whether any generals “should be held accountable” for the war’s failures. One asked if the Army should change the way it selected generals. Another said that general officers were so far removed from the fighting, they wound up “sheltered from the truth” and “don’t know what’s going on.”

Challenges like this are rare in the military, which depends on obedience and hierarchy. Yet the scene at Fort Knox reflected a brewing conflict between the Army’s junior and senior officer corps — lieutenants and captains on one hand, generals on the other, with majors and colonels (“field-grade officers”) straddling the divide and sometimes taking sides. The cause of this tension is the war in Iraq, but the consequences are broader. They revolve around the obligations of an officer, the nature of future warfare and the future of the Army itself. And these tensions are rising at a time when the war has stretched the Army’s resources to the limit, when junior officers are quitting at alarming rates and when political leaders are divided or uncertain about America’s — and its military’s — role in the world.

Colonel Yingling’s article gave these tensions voice; it spelled out the issues and the stakes; and it located their roots in the Army’s own institutional culture, specifically in the growing disconnect between this culture — which is embodied by the generals — and the complex realities that junior officers, those fighting the war, are confronting daily on the ground. The article was all the more potent because it was written by an active-duty officer still on the rise. It was a career risk, just as, on a smaller scale, standing up and asking the Army vice chief of staff about the article was a risk.

In response to the captains’ questions, General Cody acknowledged, as senior officers often do now, that the Iraq war was “mislabeled” in its first phases. The original plan, he said, did not anticipate the disbanding of the Iraqi Army, the disruption of oil production or the rise of an insurgency. Still, he rejected the broader critique. “I think we’ve got great general officers that are meeting tough demands,” he insisted. He railed instead at politicians for cutting back the military in the 1990s. “Those are the people who ought to be held accountable,” he said.

Before and just after America’s entry into World War II, Gen. George Marshall, the Army’s chief of staff, purged 31 of his 42 division and corps commanders, all of them generals, and 162 colonels on the grounds that they were unsuited for battle. Over the course of the war, he rid the Army of 500 colonels. He reached deep into the lower ranks to find talented men to replace them. For example, Gen. James Gavin, the highly decorated commander of the 82nd Airborne Division, was a mere major in December 1941 when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Today, President Bush maintains that the nation is in a war against terrorism — what Pentagon officials call “the long war” — in which civilization itself is at stake. Yet six years into this war, the armed forces — not just the Army, but also the Air Force, Navy and Marines — have changed almost nothing about the way their promotional systems and their entire bureaucracies operate.

On the lower end of the scale, things have changed — but for the worse. West Point cadets are obligated to stay in the Army for five years after graduating. In a typical year, about a quarter to a third of them decide not to sign on for another term. In 2003, when the class of 1998 faced that decision, only 18 percent quit the force; memories of 9/11 were still vivid; the war in Afghanistan seemed a success; and war in Iraq was under way. Duty called, and it seemed a good time to be an Army officer. But last year, when the 905 officers from the class of 2001 had to make their choice to stay or leave, 44 percent quit the Army. It was the service’s highest loss rate in three decades.

Col. Don Snider, a longtime professor at West Point, sees a “trust gap” between junior and senior officers. There has always been a gap, to some degree. What’s different now is that many of the juniors have more combat experience than the seniors. They have come to trust their own instincts more than they trust orders. They look at the hand they’ve been dealt by their superiors’ decisions, and they feel let down. The gap is widening further, Snider told me, because of this war’s operating tempo, the “unrelenting pace” at which soldiers are rotated into Iraq for longer tours — and a greater number of tours — than they signed up for. Many soldiers, even those who support the war, are wearying of the endless cycle. The cycle is a result of two decisions. The first occurred at the start of the war, when the senior officers assented to the decision by Donald Rumsfeld, then the secretary of defense, to send in far fewer troops than they had recommended. The second took place two years later, well into the insurgency phase of the war, when top officers declared they didn’t need more troops, though most of them knew that in fact they did. “Many junior officers,” Snider said, “see this op tempo as stemming from the failure of senior officers to speak out.”
Paul Yingling did not set out to cause a stir. He grew up in a working-class part of Pittsburgh. His father owned a bar; no one in his family went to college. He joined the Army in 1984 at age 17, because he was a troubled kid — poor grades and too much drinking and brawling — who wanted to turn his life around, and he did. He went to Duquesne University, a small Catholic school, on an R.O.T.C. scholarship; went on active duty; rose through the ranks; and, by the time of the 1991 Persian Gulf war, was a lieutenant commanding an artillery battery, directing cannon fire against Saddam Hussein’s army.

“When I was in the gulf war, I remember thinking, This is easier than it was at training exercises,” he told me earlier this month. He was sent to Bosnia in December 1995 as part of the first peacekeeping operation after the signing of the Dayton accords, which ended the war in Bosnia. “This was nothing like training,” he recalled. Like most of his fellow soldiers, he was trained almost entirely for conventional combat operations: straightforward clashes, brigades against brigades. (Even now, about 70 percent of the training at the Captains Career Course is for conventional warfare.) In Bosnia, there was no clear enemy, no front line and no set definition of victory. “I kept wondering why things weren’t as well rehearsed as they’d been in the gulf war,” he said.

Upon returning, he spent the next six years pondering that question. He studied international relations at the University of Chicago’s graduate school and wrote a master’s thesis about the circumstances under which outside powers can successfully intervene in civil wars. (One conclusion: There aren’t many.) He then taught at West Point, where he also read deeply in Western political theory. Yingling was deployed to Iraq in July 2003 as an executive officer collecting loose munitions and training Iraq’s civil-defense corps. “The corps deserted or joined the insurgency on first contact,” he recalled. “It was a disaster.”

In the late fall of 2003, his first tour of duty over, Yingling was sent to Fort Sill, Okla., the Army’s main base for artillery soldiers, and wrote long memos to the local generals, suggesting new approaches to the war in Iraq. One suggestion was that since artillery rockets were then playing little role, artillery soldiers should become more skilled in training Iraqi soldiers; that, he thought, would be vital to Iraq’s future stability. No one responded to his memos, he says. He volunteered for another tour of combat and became deputy commander of the Third Armored Cavalry Regiment, which was fighting jihadist insurgents in the northern Iraqi town of Tal Afar.

The commander of the third regiment, Col. H. R. McMaster, was a historian as well as a decorated soldier. He figured that Iraq could not build its own institutions, political or military, until its people felt safe. So he devised his own plan, in which he and his troops cleared the town of insurgents — and at the same time formed alliances and built trust with local sheiks and tribal leaders. The campaign worked for a while, but only because McMaster flooded the city with soldiers — about 1,000 of them per square kilometer. Earlier, as Yingling drove around to other towns and villages, he saw that most Iraqis were submitting to whatever gang or militia offered them protection, because United States and coalition forces weren’t anywhere around. And that was because the coalition had entered the war without enough troops. Yingling was seeing the consequences of this decision up close in the terrible insecurity of most Iraqis’ lives.

In February 2006, Yingling returned to Fort Sill. That April, six retired Army and Marine generals publicly criticized Rumsfeld, who was still the secretary of defense, for sending too few troops to Iraq. Many junior and field-grade officers reacted with puzzlement or disgust. Their common question: Where were these generals when they still wore the uniform? Why didn’t they speak up when their words might have counted? One general who had spoken up, Eric Shinseki, then the Army chief of staff, was publicly upbraided and ostracized by Rumsfeld; other active-duty generals got the message and stayed mum.

That December, Yingling attended a Purple Heart ceremony for soldiers wounded in Iraq. “I was watching these soldiers wheeling into this room, or in some cases having to be wheeled in by their wives or mothers,” he recalled. “And I said to myself: ‘These soldiers were doing their jobs. The senior officers were not doing theirs. We’re not giving our soldiers the tools and training to succeed.’ I had to go public.”

Soon after Yingling’s article appeared, Maj. Gen. Jeff Hammond, commander of the Fourth Infantry Division at Fort Hood, Tex., reportedly called a meeting of the roughly 200 captains on his base, all of whom had served in Iraq, for the purpose of putting this brazen lieutenant colonel in his place. According to The Wall Street Journal, he told his captains that Army generals are “dedicated, selfless servants.” Yingling had no business judging generals because he has “never worn the shoes of a general.” By implication, Hammond was warning his captains that they had no business judging generals, either.

Yingling was stationed at Fort Hood at the time, preparing to take command of an artillery battalion. From the steps of his building, he could see the steps of General Hammond’s building. He said he sent the general a copy of his article before publication as a courtesy, and he never heard back; nor was he notified of the general’s meeting with his captains.
The “trust gap” between junior and senior officers is hardly universal. Many junior officers at Fort Knox and elsewhere have no complaints about the generals — or regard the matter as way above their pay grade. As Capt. Ryan Kranc, who has served two tours in Iraq, one as a commander, explained to me, “I’m more interested in whether my guys can secure a convoy.” He dismissed complaints about troop shortages. “When you’re in a system, you’re never going to get everything you ask for,” he said, “but I still have to accomplish a mission. That’s my job. If they give me a toothpick, dental floss and a good hunting knife, I will accomplish the mission.”

An hour after General Cody’s talk at Fort Knox, several captains met to discuss the issue over beers. Capt. Garrett Cathcart, who has served in Iraq as a platoon leader, said: “The culture of the Army is to accomplish the mission, no matter what. That’s a good thing.” Matt Wignall, who was the first captain to ask General Cody about the Yingling article, agreed that a mission-oriented culture was “a good thing, but it can be dangerous.” He added: “It is so rare to hear someone in the Army say, ‘No, I can’t do that.’ But sometimes it takes courage to say, ‘I don’t have the capability.’ ” Before the Iraq war, when Rumsfeld overrode the initial plans of the senior officers, “somebody should have put his foot down,” Wignall said.

Lt. Col. Allen Gill, who just retired as director of the R.O.T.C. program at Georgetown University, has heard versions of this discussion among his cadets for years. He raises a different concern about the Army’s “can do” culture. “You’re not brought up in the Army to tell people how you can’t get things done, and that’s fine, that’s necessary,” he said. “But when you get promoted to a higher level of strategic leadership, you have to have a different outlook. You’re supposed to make clear, cold calculations of risk — of the probabilities of victory and defeat.”

The problem, he said, is that it’s hard for officers — hard for people in any profession — to switch their basic approach to life so abruptly. As Yingling put it in his article, “It is unreasonable to expect that an officer who spends 25 years conforming to institutional expectations will emerge as an innovator in his late 40s.”

Yingling’s commander at Tal Afar, H. R. McMaster, documented a similar crisis in the case of the Vietnam War. Twenty years after the war, McMaster wrote a doctoral dissertation that he turned into a book called “Dereliction of Duty.” It concluded that the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the 1960s betrayed their professional obligations by failing to provide unvarnished military advice to President Lyndon B. Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara as they plunged into the Southeast Asian quagmire. When McMaster’s book was published in 1997, Gen. Hugh Shelton, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs, ordered all commanders to read it — and to express disagreements to their superiors, even at personal risk. Since then, “Dereliction of Duty” has been recommended reading for Army officers.

Yet before the start of the Iraq war and during the early stages of the fighting, the Joint Chiefs once again fell silent. Justin Rosenbaum, the captain at Fort Knox who asked General Cody whether any generals would be held accountable for the failures in Iraq, said he was disturbed by this parallel between the two wars. “We’ve read the McMaster book,” he said. “It’s startling that we’re repeating the same mistakes.”

McMaster’s own fate has reinforced these apprehensions. President Bush has singled out McMaster’s campaign at Tal Afar as a model of successful strategy. Gen. David Petraeus, now commander of United States forces in Iraq, frequently consults with McMaster in planning his broader counterinsurgency campaign. Yet the Army’s promotion board — the panel of generals that selects which few dozen colonels advance to the rank of brigadier general — has passed over McMaster two years in a row.

McMaster’s nonpromotion has not been widely reported, yet every officer I spoke with knew about it and had pondered its implications. One colonel, who asked not to be identified because he didn’t want to risk his own ambitions, said: “Everyone studies the brigadier-general promotion list like tarot cards — who makes it, who doesn’t. It communicates what qualities are valued and not valued.” A retired Army two-star general, who requested anonymity because he didn’t want to anger his friends on the promotion boards, agreed. “When you turn down a guy like McMaster,” he told me, “that sends a potent message to everybody down the chain. I don’t know, maybe there were good reasons not to promote him. But the message everybody gets is: ‘We’re not interested in rewarding people like him. We’re not interested in rewarding agents of change.’ ”

Members of the board, he said, want to promote officers whose careers look like their own. Today’s generals rose through the officer corps of the peacetime Army. Many of them fought in the last years of Vietnam, and some fought in the gulf war. But to the extent they have combat experience, it has been mainly tactical, not strategic. They know how to secure an objective on a battlefield, how to coordinate firepower and maneuver. But they don’t necessarily know how to deal with an enemy that’s flexible, with a scenario that has not been rehearsed.
“Those rewarded are the can-do, go-to people,” the retired two-star general told me. “Their skill is making the trains run on time. So why are we surprised that, when the enemy becomes adaptive, we get caught off guard? If you raise a group of plumbers, you shouldn’t be upset if they can’t do theoretical physics.”

There are, of course, exceptions, most notably General Petraeus. He wrote an article for a recent issue of The American Interest, a Washington-based public-policy journal, urging officers to attend civilian graduate schools and get out of their “intellectual comfort zones” — useful for dealing with today’s adaptive enemies.

Yet many Army officers I spoke with say Petraeus’s view is rare among senior officers. Two colonels told me that when they were captains, their commanders strongly discouraged them from attending not just graduate school but even the Army’s Command and General Staff College, warning that it would be a diversion from their career paths. “I got the impression that I’d be better off counting bedsheets in the Baghdad Embassy than studying at Harvard,” one colonel said.

Harvard’s merits aside, some junior officers agree that the promotion system discourages breadth. Capt. Kip Kowalski, an infantry officer in the Captains Career Course at Fort Knox, is a proud soldier in the can-do tradition. He is impatient with critiques of superiors; he prefers to stay focused on his job. “But I am worried,” he said, “that generals these days are forced to be narrow.” Kowalski would like to spend a few years in a different branch of the Army — say, as a foreign area officer — and then come back to combat operations. He says he thinks the switch would broaden his skills, give him new perspectives and make him a better officer. But the rules don’t allow switching back and forth among specialties. “I have to decide right now whether I want to do ops or something else,” he said. “If I go F. A. O., I can never come back.”

In October 2006, seven months before his essay on the failure of generalship appeared, Yingling and Lt. Col. John Nagl, another innovative officer, wrote an article for Armed Forces Journal called “New Rules for New Enemies,” in which they wrote: “The best way to change the organizational culture of the Army is to change the pathways for professional advancement within the officer corps. The Army will become more adaptive only when being adaptive offers the surest path to promotion.” In late June, Yingling took command of an artillery battalion. This means he will most likely be promoted to full colonel. This assignment, however, was in the works nearly a year ago, long before he wrote his critique of the generals. His move and probable promotion say nothing about whether he’ll be promoted further — or whether, as some of his admirers fear, his career will now grind to a halt. Nagl — the author of an acclaimed book about counterinsurgency (“Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife”), a former operations officer in Iraq and the subject of a New York Times Magazine article a few years ago — has since taken command of a unit at Fort Riley, Kan., that trains United States soldiers to be advisers to Iraqi security forces. Pentagon officials have said that these advisers are crucial to America’s future military policy. Yet Nagl has written that soldiers have been posted to this unit “on an ad hoc basis” and that few of the officers selected to train them have ever been advisers themselves.

Lt. Col. Isaiah Wilson, a professor at West Point and former planning officer in Iraq with the 101st Airborne Division, said the fate of Nagl’s unit — the degree to which it attracted capable, ambitious soldiers — depended on the answer to one question: “Will serving as an adviser be seen as equal to serving as a combat officer in the eyes of the promotion boards? The jury is still out.” “Guys like Yingling, Nagl and McMaster are the canaries in the coal mine of Army reform,” the retired two-star general I spoke with told me. “Will they get promoted to general? If they do, that’s a sign that real change is happening. If they don’t, that’s a sign that the traditional culture still rules.”

ailure sometimes compels an institution to change its ways. The last time the Army undertook an overhaul was in the wake of the Vietnam War. At the center of those reforms was an officer named Huba Wass de Czege. Wass de Czege (pronounced VOSH de tsay-guh) graduated from West Point and served two tours of duty in Vietnam, the second as a company commander in the Central Highlands. He devised innovative tactics, leading four-man teams — at the time they were considered unconventionally small — on ambush raids at night. His immediate superiors weren’t keen on his approach or attitude, despite his successes. But after the war ended and a few creative officers took over key posts, they recruited Wass de Czege to join them.

In 1982, he was ordered to rewrite the Army’s field manual on combat operations. At his own initiative, he read the classics of military strategy — Clausewitz’s “On War,” Sun Tzu’s “Art of War,” B. H. Liddell Hart’s “Strategy” — none of which had been on his reading list at West Point. And he incorporated many of their lessons along with his own experiences from Vietnam. Where the old edition assumed static clashes of firepower and attrition, Wass de Czege’s revision emphasized speed, maneuver and taking the offensive. He was asked to create a one-year graduate program for the most promising young officers. Called the School of Advanced Military Studies, or SAMS, it brought strategic thinking back into the Army — at least for a while.
Now a retired one-star general, though an active Army consultant, Wass de Czege has publicly praised Yingling’s article. (Yingling was a graduate of SAMS in 2002, well after its founder moved on.) In an essay for the July issue of Army magazine, Wass de Czege wrote that today’s junior officers “feel they have much relevant experience [that] those senior to them lack,” yet the senior officers “have not listened to them.” These junior officers, he added, remind him of his own generation of captains, who held the same view during and just after Vietnam. “The crux of the problem in our Army,” Wass de Czege wrote, “is that officers are not systematically taught how to cope with unstructured problems.” Counterinsurgency wars, like those in Iraq and Afghanistan, are all about unstructured problems. The junior and field-grade officers, who command at the battalion level and below, deal with unstructured problems — adapting to the insurgents’ ever-changing tactics — as a matter of course. Many generals don’t, and never had to, deal with such problems, either in war or in their training drills. Many of them may not fully recognize just how distinct and difficult these problems are.

Speaking by phone from his home outside Fort Leavenworth, Wass de Czege emphasized that he was impressed with most of today’s senior officers. Compared with those of his time, they are more capable, open and intelligent (most officers today, junior and senior, have college degrees, for instance). “You’re not seeing any of the gross incompetence that was common in my day,” he said. He added, however, that today’s generals are still too slow to change. “The Army tends to be consensus-driven at the top,” he said. “There’s a good side to that. We’re steady as a rock. You call us to arms, we’ll be there. But when you roll a lot of changes at us, it takes awhile. The young guys have to drive us to it.”

The day after his talk at Fort Knox, General Cody, back at his office in the Pentagon, reiterated his “faith in the leadership of the general officers.” Asked about complaints that junior officers are forced to follow narrow paths to promotion, he said, “We’re trying to do just the opposite.” In the works are new incentives to retain officers, including not just higher bonuses but free graduate school and the right to choose which branch of the Army to serve in. “I don’t want everybody to think there’s one road map to colonel or general,” he said. He denied that promotion boards picked candidates in their own image. This year, he said, he was on the board that picked new brigadier generals, and one of them, Jeffrey Buchanan, had never commanded a combat brigade; his last assignment was training Iraqi security forces. One colonel, interviewed later, said: “That’s a good sign. They’ve never picked anybody like that before. But that’s just one out of 38 brigadier generals they picked. It’s still very much the exception.”

There is a specter haunting the debate over Yingling’s article — the specter of Gen. Douglas MacArthur. During World War II, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower threatened to resign if the civilian commanders didn’t order air support for the invasion of Normandy. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill acceded. But during the Korean War, MacArthur — at the time, perhaps the most popular public figure in America — demanded that President Truman let him attack China. Truman fired him. History has redeemed both presidents’ decisions. But in terms of the issues that Yingling, McMaster and others have raised, was there really a distinction? Weren’t both generals speaking what they regarded as “truth to power”?

The very discussion of these issues discomforts many senior officers because they take very seriously the principle of civilian control. They believe it is not their place to challenge the president or his duly appointed secretary of defense, certainly not in public, especially not in wartime. The ethical codes are ambiguous on how firmly an officer can press an argument without crossing the line. So, many generals prefer to keep a substantial distance from that line — to keep the prospect of a constitutional crisis from even remotely arising. On a blog Yingling maintains at the Web site of Small Wars Journal, an independent journal of military theory, he has acknowledged these dilemmas, but he hasn’t disentangled them. For example, if generals do speak up, and the president ignores their advice, what should they do then — salute and follow orders, resign en masse or criticize the president publicly? At this level of discussion, the junior and midlevel officers feel uncomfortable, too.

Yingling’s concern is more narrowly professional, but it should matter greatly to future policy makers who want to consult their military advisers. The challenge is how to ensure that generals possess the experience and analytical prowess to formulate sound military advice and the “moral courage,” as Yingling put it, to take responsibility for that advice and for its resulting successes or failures. The worry is that too few generals today possess either set of qualities — and that the promotional system impedes the rise of officers who do.

As today’s captains and majors come up through the ranks, the culture may change. One question is how long that will take. Another question is whether the most innovative of those junior officers will still be in the Army by the time the top brass decides reform is necessary. As Colonel Wilson, the West Point instructor, put it, “When that moment comes, will there be enough of the right folks in the right slots to make the necessary changes happen?”