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The Barometer

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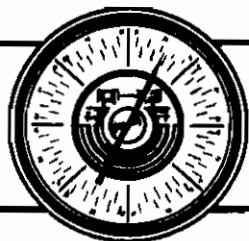
THE BAROMETER

In his article on automating the officer selection and promotion system (*Review* Sep-Oct 1972) Captain Lewis has done an outstanding job of identifying and proposing solutions to many problems that have perplexed thoughtful officers of all ranks. I am sure all of us can cite instances where the best fitted were not selected while officers who should have been noncontinued for the good of the service were elevated to higher rank. On the other hand, those of us who have served on a selection board know all too well how difficult it is to make the correct evaluation on the basis of records that are often ambiguous, biased, or incomplete.

I would like to suggest, however, that excessive reliance not be placed on the computer to substitute for human judgment and that the computer be used instead to compile and present data in a form best suited to allow judgment to be made. This requires that a number of safeguards be added to the proposed system to protect against inadvertent errors and to identify exceptional cases where an injustice could result from the blind operations of the computer. The rule "garbage in, garbage out" must never be forgotten when dealing with the most sophisticated of these calculating machines. The following instances came to mind as I read and pondered Captain Lewis' article, almost all based on personal experience of observation,

where the computer program might produce an undesirable result.

● *Reporting senior with insufficient experience.* Every officer has to start a first time, and until he has built up a history of reports there is the possibility of gross injustice in the calculation of a multiple by the method proposed. Assume, for instance, that a reporting senior has only evaluated two lieutenant commanders, one of whom was rated high and the other low, or both either high or low. The multiple computed from these ratings would almost always be unfair to an officer whose promotion happened to depend heavily on it.

● *The elite group.* Suppose a group is put together by ordering outstanding officers from many other commands to work on a task of particular importance. (Polaris is an example.) The reporting senior might well be justified in evaluating every one of these in the 10 percent select or deep select categories, but the computer would tend to reduce their multiples, unfairly in this exceptional case.

● *Length of time under observation.* Cases are common where an officer, through no fault of his own, passes through a quick succession of duty assignments and reporting seniors where he cannot be observed long enough to be properly evaluated. The senior in such a case will usually temper his fitness report with caution simply because he has not had time to confirm his early impressions of the officer's performance. The result can appear, however, to be an extended period of

mediocre performance. This often occurs when commands are reorganized and both officers and reporting seniors are shuffled around and can result in injustice to one who is caught in the situation.

● *Abrupt break in a record.* This can happen when an officer for some reason makes a poor first impression on a senior or when the senior has to rely heavily on the evaluation of an intermediate in the chain of command. Such a situation usually works itself out in time, and if the first impression was erroneous manifests itself in a rising curve of grades. Sometimes, as in the preceding case, one of the officers involved may be transferred, leaving an anomalous point in the performance record. The computer could easily be programed to print out a graph of an officer's marks coded to identify the different break points, and this graph could be a big help in evaluating the cases of officers near the selection cutoff score.

● *Improper weighting of elements.* Allowing the selection board to assign weights to such elements as type of command, etcetera would have to be carefully controlled and should probably be done on a more individual basis than indicated in the article. For instance, arbitrarily giving all Navy De-partment assignments a higher weight would tend to reward mediocre performance in a favored type of duty and penalize outstanding performance in a less-favored position. One of the most persistent criticisms of the existing selection system is that it gives more weight to the billet than to the officer's performance in it, and the effect is compounded by "pre-selection" in the detailing process. The computer could be programed to prevent flagrant instances of inequitable weighting or at least to flag them for further attention by the selection board.

It may be pointed out that the foregoing cases are all exceptions of an unusual nature. That is exactly the point. Computers are seldom capable of handling exceptions, and such cases are precisely the ones where judgment is most needed. The most effective use of the computer requires that it be an aide to human judgment, not a substitute for it. If the selection system is approached in this way, computerization as suggested by Captain Lewis could greatly reduce the inequities of the system as well as the labor and anguish of the selection board.

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