Twitter Thread by Scott Stephens



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I've been working my pitch to better explain how I think we can better understand/eliminate sexual harassment and assault in our force. Buckle up for a thread; also usual disclaimers that I'm not a psychologist, therapist, sociologist, doctor, or lawyer. (+usual TWs) 1/

I suppose what I'm asking for is your feedback, your thoughts, and your criticisms- particularly if you specialize in one of these areas- but try and take it easy on me… understanding my expertise lies in decades of military leadership and not the social sciences. 2/

I believe that fundamental to our understanding is the idea that Sexual Harassment and Assault lie along a "Objectification Spectrum;" (taken from John Rector: recommend). One end of the spectrum is the ideal state of enlightenment, inclusivity, empathy, trust, & equality. 3/

On the other end lies a fundamental lack of empathy, lack of respect for ones existence, dismissive of social and physical autonomy, failure to respect consent, and ultimately, complete dehumanization; all which set conditions for sexual violence to occur 4/

Constantly tugging at us along this spectrum are psychosocial factors driven by our upbringings, societal constructs & influences, psychological makeup, experiences, peer groups, and overall worldview. In this case the most important are toxic masculinity, misogyny, & sexism. 5/

Corollary so called "contributing prejudices" include Hazing, Bullying, Homophobia, Transphobia, Xenophobia, Racism, and Extremism. (Yet another reason why attacking extremism in our ranks is so crucial) 6/

So what is my point? It's rather simple; that if sexual violence sits along this spectrum to dehumanization, the keys to preventing sexual violence are to apply the antidotes to things like gender discrimination, gender stereotyping, institutional sexism, & misogyny. 7/

With the idea that all of us exist somewhere along this spectrum, and the goal is to move towards the ideal state and away from objectification by applying these antidotes. 8/

And that thru steady application of these antidotes, we create irreversible organizational momentum towards the desired state, also creating sort of a "herd immunity" and isolating those who fail to adapt. 9/

Note: this is typically where someone will inject that "you cannot change predators!" They are going to act no matter what." It's important to point out that yes, predators can present varying degrees of outward normalcy, as well as varying degrees of premeditation." 10/

While identification and isolation of predators can be difficult (particularly the more psychopathic), it is important to point out that the majority of sexual assaults catalogued by the DoD are not characterized by this extreme Hollywood depiction of predatory behavior. 11/

Getting back on track– what I've discussed up to this point is wholly focused on PREVENTION. With sexual assault, you are either preventing or your are responding. There is no middle ground. 12/

While clearly as indicated by the Fort Hood Report, we have a long way to go on the response end of the spectrum (4 key findings and numerous recommendations); but we ought not to. In a lot of ways, response is pretty black & white- clear, tangible SOPs and checklists. 13/

In other words, things we are comfortable with as a military. (Note: I'm not being dismissive of survivor empathy here. This crucial piece of humanity requires leaders with high EI and who truly subscribe to what I'm about to describe; but the rest is largely procedural.)

These can be improved through institutional reform, better training and certification, & improved oversight. Additionally, most of these are on the broader institution to solve w/r/t investigative & judicial process. At our level, there is no reason we should be failing. 14/

Examining the "Prevention" side of the spectrum, the majority of our efforts tend to focus on these highlighted areas. While all are important (although arguably some can become counterproductive i.e. "no females in the laundry room after 1900!"), again, very tangible. 15/

These measures such as "hardening" the barracks and bystander intervention (everyone likes a hero!) make us feel good, they fail to address root causes and move our teams along the spectrum away from objectification and dehumanization. 16/

These "higher concepts in prevention and cognitive advancement" (my words) are more difficult to understand and even more difficult to apply. These were eluded to in the Fort Hood Report, but even then it's clear we struggle as an institution to operationalize them. 17/

The report stated the "The Army should examine, from recruitment throughout the lifecycle of a Soldier, how the Army can better develop the "whole" person, helping each Soldier recognize the value of the warriors with whom they serve." 18/

But how do we do this? How do you turn that away from platitudes and into a plan of action? This area, candidly, is what I'm struggling with. Because it cannot be done with an hour of PowerPoint slides per year, or with proclaiming "just treat each other with respect!" 19/

We’re talking about de- and re-programming sensitive elements of the human psyche. Inculcating a diverse group of people into a profession with common goals and ethics. Reversing course on decades of toxicity and discrimination. This isn’t easy stuff. 20/

Which, I suspect, is why we steer away from it and focus on things that make us feel good, but don’t ultimately solve the problem. We need to be having these larger discussions on climate and culture and who owns each. 21/

We must go through the intellectual rigor required to build better leaders who will truly develop unit climates of inclusivity and equality, that will create antibodies against objectification and dehumanization of our teammates. 22/

And we must encourage our higher institutions to tackle the tough problems of fundamentally revamping our culture, to reject and eliminate the corrosives which prevent us from becoming the safest, most lethal, most inclusive Army the world has ever seen. 23/

At this point, if you’re still reading, I’m genuinely interested in your thoughts and ideas. /end