

NEAR EAST SOUTH ASIA CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

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***Note – The views expressed are my own and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Department of Defense.**

Today's U.S. military is involved in what some describe as an "era of persistent conflict." American military forces have been at war continuously since 11 September 2001 -- a longer period of prolonged war than any conflict save the American Revolution. The U.S. military entered the decade focused on so-called "rapid decisive operations" and is leaving it heavily vested in irregular warfare. This is an unprecedented evolution -- with an inherent shift in knowledge, skills, doctrine and training.

Moreover, thoughtful analysts now are beginning to describe a merger between conventional and irregular warfare into a yet, and only partly understood, "hybrid war." Our understanding of warfare ten years ago was centered on war as short, sharp, high technology conflicts such as the 1999 Kosovo air war, the 2001 assault in Afghanistan, and the race to Baghdad in 2003. Today, our view of conflict today is molded heavily by the active counter-insurgency campaigns of Iraq and now Afghanistan.

Murky combinations of conventional and irregular warfare -- "hybrid wars" -- may involve something yet again, as discovered by the Israelis battling Hezbollah in south Lebanon in 2006 -- chilling combinations of high tech weaponry in the hands of shadowy guerilla organizations well trained in both close combat and in-conflict social work and global media relations. Warfare has never been more complex.

Officer leadership in this era faces demands that may make the relative intricacy of soldiering during the Cold War simple in comparison. Indeed, a recent unpublished Army study attempting to define leader requirements described the characteristics of a future officer as: "An agile, adaptable, multi-skilled officer who leads in an era of complexity and global, persistent conflict." Consider just how different that definition is from what we sought in American military officers of 1950,

1970 or even 1990! By extension, the myriad of demands on senior officers – flag and general officers of one- to four- star rank -- dealing with regional and global complexities at the strategic level will be even more challenging.

Since the end of the Cold War, some have argued that American strategic thinking has suffered. Andrew Krepinevich and Barry Watts in their recent report “Regaining Strategic Competence” observe that “the ability of the U.S. national security establishment to craft, implement, and adapt effective long-term strategies against intelligent adversaries at acceptable costs has been declining for some decades.” They further note that “reversing this decline in U.S. strategic competence is an urgent issue for American national security in the twenty-first century.” Military officers – although by no means the only players in the realm of strategic thinking on national security – remain central actors and advisers in U.S. national security thinking, planning and execution.

General and flag officers serve at the most senior advisory positions of responsibility in the U.S. national security establishment, as well as commanding far-flung deployments of troops in the field. Yet a number of critics have begun to argue that both senior officer advice and command in the past decade has fallen short. The term “A Failure of Generalship” has been used to describe this assessment– a charge that I think has some merit and deserves close examination.

Books covering the Iraq War by Bob Woodward and Tom Ricks expose, at a minimum, some disturbing shortcomings in our civil-military relations at the most senior level during the last eight years. Colonel Paul Yingling’s 2008 article *Armed Forces Journal* titled “A Failure of Generalship” sparked a firestorm of controversy inside the military, especially in the U.S. Army. Yet regardless of how we evaluate these accounts, few can seriously argue that major errors in strategic planning and thinking were absent in the planning and execution of our recent conflicts. As has recently been noted by Dr Janet Breslin-Smith and Colonel Cliff Krieger of the National Defense University, senior military

(and some civilian) leaders that both advised on the merits of and subsequently commanded our ongoing conflicts were the product of our post-1986 Professional Military Education (PME) program. Did we get something fundamentally wrong?

Despite some sharp critiques of recent U.S. military strategy, no nation in the world can approach the United States today in competing for sheer pre-eminence in conventional warfare. Many would argue that U.S. military pre-eminence over the last half century (setbacks in Vietnam and Iraq notwithstanding) rested upon our technological superiority in weaponry and communications; others will claim our innovative adaptation of maneuver warfare doctrine was the key to success.

Many argue that our unquestioned superiority rests firmly upon the quality of our people in uniform, while still others insist that success depends upon the superiority of our training and organizational interactions at all level – from combined arms between infantry, armor and artillery to interoperability or “jointness” between the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines. In fact, most observers of the U.S. military today rightly assert that it conducts joint operations at levels of brilliance that would be nearly inconceivable to the authors of the Goldwater-Nichols legislation. Today’s mantra has moved beyond “jointness” to seeking even higher levels of coherence with interagency and international partners – a reflection of success.

I would contend that our military successes since Pearl Harbor – and in some measure our failures – have depended first and foremost on the intellectual capital of our military leadership – our ability to train, educate and develop officers skilled in understanding the ever-changing character of warfare, from tactical to grand strategic level. This intellectual and human capital was formed, nurtured and grown by the military educational establishment – what we today call “PME” or Professional Military Education.

It is important to remind ourselves that the American people and our civilian leadership fundamentally expect U.S. military officers – especially our Admirals and Generals – to be, simply put, unchallenged experts at war and conflict. Furthermore, our most senior military leaders must be unquestioned masters of a highly specialized career field: deterring conflicts in peacetime but prevailing in war at the least cost to the nation when required. No other segment of our society holds that charter, and no other competing corporate priority within the vast bureaucracy of the military should ever overshadow this core competency. The sine qua non of our military force is this: to fight and win the nation's wars. No other element of society holds that mission, and no other set of society's leaders owns this full responsibility. Military leaders spend lifetime thinking about war; we should expect them to be the best in the world at what we ask them to do.

Given the notable shortcomings many ascribe to U.S. strategic thinking over the last decade – some deeply involving senior military leaders – we must seriously question whether our program of PME today is on the right track. In my estimation, we are drifting off course, and if uncorrected, our marked advantage in the intellectual capital of warfare given the realities of an increasingly uncertain future is at risk.

One risk to the intellectual capital of our military leadership is brilliantly examined by retired Colonel Lloyd Matthews in the July 2002 issue of ARMY magazine. Matthews's theme was "anti-intellectualism in the military." This well-known characteristic of our military culture – found in one form or another in each of our military services – denigrates the values of knowledge and reflection on war and promotes operational experience above all other attributes. In a time of war, this is certainly understandable and in many ways admirable, but may come at a future cost. The "muddy boots" soldier is still the most esteemed among peers – and promotion rates to flag rank and assignment to key commands leading to our most senior three- and four-star positions reflect this not-so-subtle bias. This is more than simply the preference for "men of action" over "men (and now women) of reflection." It ultimately directly

affects the bench of flag officers available for selection as future strategic leaders at the three- and four-star level.

A recent member of a service flag officer selection board noted to me recently that the final board decisions in many cases rested not upon whether an officer had commanded well at every level, but commanded *in combat at each level of command* – an astonishing threshold to establish, and one given sheer chance opportunity has little or nothing to do with an officers potential for flag rank. “Muddy boots” experience in combat – quantity, not just quality – trumped all other factors in making the final call. This impetus to select the best tactical leaders for advancement to flag rank has the unintended consequence of creating a bench full of general officer tacticians where strategists are now required. This trend signals increased risk to our future strategic leadership capital if left unchecked.

Today’s system of PME inadvertently reinforces this bias toward tactical leadership. PME includes no civilian graduate education as a requirement in any military service. All services recognize that civilian graduate degrees are desirable, but – much different than my experience twenty years ago – today a graduate degree is a guaranteed by-product of successful attendance at any military intermediate or senior level service college. Again, the law of unintended consequences – virtually 100% of the officer corps at the rank of Colonel or Navy Captain now sport advanced degrees, but the vast majority of those earn their degree while surrounded by the very same military students and professors with whom they share cultural, political, and social common traits in military educational institutions.

Degrees from the Ivy League or other highly reputable civilian schools are disappearing – or equally problematic – are being heavily directed toward “specialty” officers who will never again command; this is a particular problem in the Army, in my judgment. Future commanders – unlike today’s Soldier-scholars like CENTCOM commander General Dave Petraeus or SACEUR Admiral Jim Stavridis -- simply put, are

unlikely to attend top-tier civilian graduate schools to broaden their thinking. This lost opportunity to be exposed to the intense sharpening of thinking and widening of perspective and reflection that attends two years “outside the military cocoon” at a civilian graduate institution is irreplaceable. In some ways worse yet, civilian graduate students and faculty at our top tier academic institutions are now far less exposed to our upwardly mobile future senior military leaders.

The U.S. military’s career-long program of training and education of its leaders also reflects this “muddy boots” bias. PME is timed to deliver maximum benefit during the first twenty-five years of service -- and least benefit to officers entering the complexities of flag rank. The final ten to fifteen years of an officer’s career at flag rank – a time of continuous engagement in the most complex problems and a period of increasing individual flag officer influence on decision-making -- is spent uninterrupted by any extended education or reflection.

The hierarchy of U.S. Army PME for officers can be described as a triangle – at bottom, the tactical level, then operational, then strategic and ultimately grand strategic at the apex. This pyramid also represents the relative investment in officer education and development over the duration of an officer’s career – the vast majority at the tactical and operational level, and almost all in the first twenty years of one’s career of service. As officers matriculate to more senior levels, their educational development trickles off. The final substantial PME investment is made at about the twenty-year officer career mark at the senior service colleges. Here for ten months, senior Lt. Colonels and new Colonels study and reflect on a combination of operational, strategic and national security related topics. For the remainder of an officer’s career – now up to twenty *more* years for senior general and admirals – the senior service college experience signals the end of extensive education and development.

Subsequent “PME” or developmental courses for flag officers (one- to four-stars) are measured in weeks or days, with the “Joint” JPME 6-

week Capstone course for newly selected one-stars being by far the longest investment. This course has little educational component, and even less rigor. Thus, for almost all senior officers – all our generals and admirals – the final fifteen to twenty years of their career is almost entirely largely lacking in extended developmental experiences. This fact becomes more troubling when correlated with the reality that decision-making and complexity at the senior levels -- especially regarding strategic and grand strategic issues – is immensely more complex and uncertain than the relatively simpler worlds of tactics and operations. So-called “wicked problems” unresponsive to set-piece solutions abound.

Senior officers who have in almost all cases spent the preponderance of their careers as tactical and operational leaders – the “muddy boots” environment” -- now are required to significantly adjust their leadership model and intellectual horizon, and often grow new skill sets. Yet our investment strategy to prepare them for these challenges effectively ends at about the twenty-year mark of a 35- to 40-year career. The most demanding strategic tasks found to be the province of flag officer ranks are the very ones for which our system has prepared them the least. A ten-month school at 20 years service may be a dim memory ten years later to a two- or three-star Admiral!

In many ways, our flag officer development model can best be described as one of “osmosis built upon hope.” The “hope” reflects strong optimism that an officer five or more years removed from their senior service college experience will remember what they learned, and will then garner whatever else is needed from “osmosis” learning about strategic leadership through assignment, self-study and personal contacts with other flag officers. In a world where warfare looks nothing like what it did even ten years ago, this ad hoc senior leader development process may not be adequate to deliver the first-rate strategic leaders required in this century. We must invest more in our intellectual capital.

Recommendations:

I propose five changes that would significantly enhance the current effectiveness of PME and specifically provide a deeper investment in producing strategic leader at flag and general officer rank:

1) Incentivize civilian graduate schooling in the humanities for high-potential officers. Identifying attendance at these programs as an attribute expected of officers considered for early promotion would stimulate much wider interest in these options for our highly competitive officers. Put another way, with few exceptions, no officer in a command track should be promoted below the zone to lieutenant colonel without a civilian graduate degree from a first tier institution. This exposure to the sharpest intellectual development in early years must become an essential step for our most competitive officers.

2) Make military intellectualism respectable. Senior leaders must create an environment where “thinking warriors and “soldier-scholars” are showcased as the combat leader standard of excellence. General Al Grey as Marine Corps Commandant established this standard for the Corps in the 1980s, and changed the institution for a decade. Military commanders from battalion/squadron-level through 4-star combatant commanders and service chiefs must strongly and personally reinforce the importance of study and schooling to achieve mastery of the profession of arms. As our current conflicts diminish, units should once again institute officer professional development programs directed toward reading and thinking about military theory and history. Teaching assignments to service academies, and branch schools for the best officers should be encouraged and rewarded, along with commensurate civilian graduate schooling. Future commanders should be expected to come from these backgrounds.

3) **Re-evaluate Senior Service College Content and Credit.** Senior Service Colleges (SSC) should invest more deeply in providing study of classical theory of war and history in their curricula. All operational officers (future commanders) should attend a service or joint SSC with an established curriculum; fellowships (with very few exceptions) should not be a substitute for SSC, but an additive experiential development opportunity. The vast profusion of fellowships now used as a substitute for SSC means that increasing numbers of future senior leaders will miss the structured educational exposure of SSC and receive an often unstructured fellowship as a poor substitute. The educational impacts of this “rush to fellowships” must be closely examined.

4) **Challenge Service Officer Personnel Systems.** Career patterns for flag officers now extend to forty years, thereby providing significantly more time for both institutional development and broadening experiences for those who are destined to become our most senior leaders. Officers selected for early promotion should be differentiated by these extended educational and professionally broadening experiences. A new balance must be struck between repeat operational assignments and the value of other education and experience. Personnel systems should be scrutinized to ensure additional development time is fenced. Moreover, officer personnel policies that artificially separate the most educated portions of the officer corps from command assignments (such as the Army’s single track operations career field) should be closely examined for negative second order impacts on the development of an adequate bench of future strategic leaders.

5) **Invest in Flag Officer Education.** Despite the recognized complexity and impact of decisions made the Flag level of senior leadership, little serious effort has been made to specifically educate flag officers in preparation for their new level of responsibility. Short courses such as six-week CAPSTONE for newly selected flag officers should be revamped to add rigor and measureable educational objectives. Consideration should also be given to a longer course of higher command and staff (perhaps modeled on the U.K. program) to

focus a deep effort on educating future two-star (selects) in preparation for their final ten or more years of service. Given the impact these decision-makers will have on national security, to fail to further invest in their senior development as flag officers seems irresponsible.