Pensive Sword

Educating Officers in Austere Times

Confronted with austerity, an organization usually has two options: hunker down or innovate. In military organizations, the tendency is to hunker down. Budgetary cuts and manpower reductions are uniformly distributed across subfunctions through the "salami slice" or "peanut butter spread" methods, and everyone is asked to do the same—or a little more—with less. Seldom, if ever, does a mission or area of responsibility go away with the dollars and people. In this world of linear exsanguination, everything gets progressively smaller. Travel budgets, supply accounts, and flying-hour programs all shrink, and training programs are scaled back by fiscal necessity. Yet, the security requirements and capabilities demanded of the services remain the same. Hence, the force becomes "hollow."

Innovation is the antidote to the hollow force; but organizations in general, and military organizations in particular, have trouble innovating. Doctrine, standard operating procedures, as well as tactics, techniques, and procedures for fighting, all present impediments to innovation. Perhaps more than any institution shy of the medieval monastery, the military is comfortable with routine. The command of execution is called an "order," and orders usually, well . . . preserve order. Yet, austerity demands changes in the established order. Austerity demands innovation.

Scholars are of two schools on military innovation. Barry Posen, in studying doctrinal innovation in Britain, France, and Germany between the world wars, concluded that organizational inertia kept these hidebound militaries from innovating and that new doctrine required considerable pressure from key political figures sensitive to changes in the balance of power among nations. These politicians, knowing little of military matters, then worked through "mavericks" like Hugh Dowding in Great Britain's Fighter Command and Heinz Guderian in the German Wehrmacht to effect change.[1] Implicit to Posen's analysis was the assumption that civilian leaders would have the mental capacity to understand how changes in military doctrine could shape regional and global balances of power. Further, Posen seems to have assumed that military

personnel bound to routine and organizational priorities, even sensing changes in the security environment, could do little about them.

On the other hand, Stephen Rosen, once a student of Posen, took a different approach and came to nearly the opposite conclusion about military innovation. Rosen saw plenty of evidence for military professionals "sensing changes in the security environment" and implementing innovative programs in response. From William Moffett's aircraft carriers to Hamilton Howze's helicopter-mobile infantry, Rosen depicts a US military in tune with the social and technical forces auguring for change. Perceptively, he contends that the key to the long-term innovation usually associated with peacetime is promotion of promising officers to flag rank—through the new system or way of doing business. Rosen also contends that budgetary levels had little to do with innovation. In fact, most of the innovation he documents occurred in relatively austere financial climates for the military.[2]

The analyses of Posen and Rosen—as well as that of Owen Reid Coté, who contends that interservice competition is the key to US military innovation[3]—while insightful at times, fail to account for the phenomenon. All seem to write around the variable with the most impact: the education of officers who become innovators and leaders. Thus, education is the engine of military innovation, creating knowledge capital that is the military answer to austerity.

While some would contend that military education is oxymoronic, it is absolutely essential to conceptualizing and implementing productive change in US security, because we cannot *train* innovators. Educated men and women sense changes in the security environment that affect the international balance of power. Their horizons are broader than those defined by doctrine and standard tactics, techniques, and procedures. They also understand the intricacies of civil-military relations so essential to funding projects through to completion, as well as the moral and ethical boundaries to action.

Training, on the other hand, teaches what we already know. Its processes are linear, and adjustments are typically scalar—more of this or less of that yields a proportional output. The military knows training. In fact, Strategic Air Command in the 1950s invented the systems approach to training (SAT). The airlines adopted the SAT for training pilots, and it morphed into instructional systems development (ISD), the dominant philosophy of Air Force training today. Some "educationists"

would contend that, through outcomes-based education, ISD has also become a dominant educational philosophy, a *doctrine* if you will, particularly for the military. Steeped in learning objectives and samples of behavior, the proponents of ISD have attempted to turn education into a social science—something that would lend itself to an operational readiness inspection—and something it will never be. The true object—the desired learning outcome—of real education is unknown. Hence, it cannot be derived in a reductionist manner by adjusting the input. Education is nonlinear and borders on chaotic. It is emotional, revelatory, and prone to question the established order of things. It is also horribly inefficient. Hence, education is a strange bedfellow to military practice. But sleep together they must, because education provides answers to the questions unresolved by training, unpenetrated by doctrine, and unrelated to previous experience. Education is the key to dealing with austerity, because as budgets shrink and capabilities decline, knowledge capital earned in the interim will become critical to US national security.

And so it has been in the past. William T. Sherman and Emory Upton realized as much in the militarily austere late nineteenth century when they set in motion the plans to build the Army schools at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Elihu Root, as secretary of war, further refined the system in the wake of the Spanish-American War by establishing the Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, to assist the newly established General Staff. Root systematized the postgraduate education of Army officers to include branch schools for infantry, artillery, and cavalry; a general intermediate course at Leavenworth that focused on logistics, tactics, and operations; and the War College to focus on strategy and civil-military relations. This template or continuum of postgraduate education for officers remains intact today and has been widely copied by the other services. The graduates of these "applicatory" courses saw the Army through the rapid technological and sociological changes that preceded the two world wars, and they shone as division and corps commanders in those conflicts. Some went on to become chiefs of staff, secretary of state, and even president.[4] And even in the most austere budgetary climate of the interwar period and Great Depression, the Army insisted on sending a large cohort of its best officers to the Leavenworth schools. From 1920 to 1940, 3,677 officers graduated from the one-year or two-year course at Leavenworth. In fact, school seems to have been the primary activity for Army officers during the lean interwar and

depression years. Of the 34 US Army officers who commanded corps in World War II, 25 spent 10 years or more as students or instructors.[5] In the worst of times, the Army invested scarce dollars in education, and the payback was enormous.

Similarly, the Navy at the end of the nineteenth century—perhaps the most austere period in its existence—invested in the postgraduate education of its officers by founding the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. While the focus at Leavenworth was on tactics and operations amid technical and social change, the emphasis at Newport was on strategy, curiously transformed by the same forces.[6] The Naval War College adapted itself to a nation transforming its outlook from isolation to manifest destiny. The Navy was, in fact, part of that transformation. It was no accident that Stephen B. Luce, first commandant of the school, brought the son of noted West Point professor, Dennis Hart Mahan, to the college almost coincident with its founding. Alfred Thayer Mahan is perhaps the most influential military theorist of the past two centuries, and his posting at Newport points to something painfully obvious about education. It can be only as good as the administration, faculty, and students engaged. Here the relationship *is* linear: good administration hires good faculty who, in turn, attract good students. At one point the Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia, boasted George C. Marshall as the assistant commandant and Joseph Stilwell and Omar Bradley as department heads. The stellar accomplishments of these officers in the Second World War reinforces Rosen's thesis about innovative military enterprises: promoting the participants to flag rank ensures the success of the system. As Marshall, Stilwell, and Bradley demonstrated, the same is true of schooling. Creating a path to flag rank that runs through the podium of the classroom ensures the continuing quality of faculty. School administrators must take pains not only to attract upwardly mobile officers to faculty positions, but also arrange key assignments following the completion of teaching duties. This manner of "flight-following" requires a degree of complicity from the personnel system. In other words, the emphasis on education and the rewards for graduating students and faculty must become a service-wide enterprise. Only then will the colleges attract faculty who can credibly demand rigor and students willing to rise to the challenge. Or, as MAJ Smith Leach, the assistant commandant at Leavenworth, said to the entering class of 1902, "We are equally concerned with your present achievement

and your future promise."[7] Such concern is properly levied on both students and faculty.

The Air Force has had a mixed experience with education, which is particularly interesting since America's youngest service was literally born in school. What became the Air Corps Tactical School fit into Root's system as a branch school and was originally established at Langley Field in Virginia in the early 1920s. It then moved to Maxwell Field, Alabama, in 1929. Throughout the Great Depression, faculty at the ACTS, including George Brett, Haywood Hansel, and Harold George, evolved a doctrine of high-altitude, precision, daylight bombing of enemy industrial capacity that would one day become the stalking horse for service independence. While these men went on to achieve flag rank during the Second World War, faculty duty in Air Force schools could hardly have been viewed as a route to stars.

Take, for example, the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies (SAASS), perhaps the Air Force's most elite school. The student body is small, mostly mid-career active duty Air Force officers, and has ranged from 25 to 60 members since its inception in 1991. The number of faculty, all possessing doctoral degrees, has fluctuated with the student body from nine to 22 members, of which nearly half have been military. Ninety-eight percent of Air Force SAASS graduates have been promoted to the rank of colonel. Of those eligible to meet the brigadier general (O-7) board, nearly 30 percent have been promoted. Most of the military faculty at SAASS are indeed graduates who completed additional schooling. Yet, not a single one of these graduates cum faculty, with more than 30 eligible, has ever been selected for flag rank. Part of this is attributable to the additional time required to earn the requisite PhD for faculty standing. But the Air Force personnel system reassigned all would-be professors between their doctoral programs and return to teaching duties. Many of these intervening postings have been to squadron command or very high-impact staff positions. Two former faculty have commanded groups, yet not a single appointment to wing command—the general prerequisite for earning the first star.

Some have said the Air Force is not enamored with education, but the numbers tell a different story. Students fare extraordinarily well after graduation, and selection for a school, as well as peer competition in elite company, serve to stratify their records and lead to promotion. Military faculty, on the other hand, typically retire as colonels and find research

or teaching positions as civil servants. By not promoting these scholars, many of whom also have impeccable operational credentials, the Air Force deprives itself of intellectual throw weight in senior ranks and disincentivizes faculty duty for some of its most talented officers. Such profligacy may be acceptable in times of plenty, but austerity begs prudence in managing resources of this caliber.

One way of managing the military-faculty resource is to do away with it by hiring civilians into either contract or civil service positions. Recent studies demonstrate that civilians cost less by a considerable margin.[8] The tweed coats, however, have certain drawbacks that inhere from the lack of fresh operational experience and diminished value as role models and career mentors for younger officers. Civilians who are retired officers ameliorate these shortcomings somewhat, without eliminating them completely. Often shorted in the calculations, however, is the benefit that accrues to military officers as faculty members. Here the growth in intellect and maturity can be substantial and pay dividends throughout the remainder of a career, provided the service and its personnel system are willing to capitalize on the advantages accrued. So, the current practice of mixing civilian and military faculty in most schools, with ratios dictated by the needs of students, seems both reasonable and fiscally prudent. It also suggests that the faculties of military schools should have civilian degrees and focus their broad-based education on the specific needs of their officer students. In this manner, both the value and variety that inhere in civilian academe penetrate the military gene pool.

Equally contentious is the question of in-house versus "commercial" education for officers. The United States continues to harbor some of the finest graduate schools in the world, and many officers have benefitted by taking advanced degrees from these civilian institutions. The problem of mass application has components of time, money, and specialization. Civilian degrees usually take longer than the military professional alternative, and tuition is relatively expensive. More importantly, the civilian programs are often only tangentially connected to the profession of arms. While one could take behavioral science to learn about leadership, and international relations or political science to learn about coercion, or military history to learn about strategy, that approach is more obtuse and lacks the focus of professional military education.

Austere budgetary climates may suggest cuts to postgraduate educational programs for officers. While penny wise, such a move would be

pound foolish. Compared to other items and activities in the military budget, education is inexpensive and pays for itself in the form of ideas. Education can point the way to more efficient and effective practices that are congruent with reduced spending. Most of the institutions for military education were established in relatively lean times, and each appears to have prepared officers for the conflicts that ensued. Today the US military should expect the same and embrace education as a hedge against future threats. The keys to good education are savvy administration and qualified faculty, while the first priority of college administrators is the faculty. Attracting qualified military faculty requires work in the personnel system to assure relevant follow-on postings and promotion, in some cases to flag rank.

Military education programs will always hover between the natural tension of order and chaos, between liberalism and certitude, between education and training. This is a natural consequence of juxtaposing the military with that which would attempt to change it. As Neil Sheehan wrote of Curtis LeMay late in his career, "He could not sense that what he might least want to hear was what he might most need to know."[9] So it is with the military and education. Let them speak to each other. SSQ

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Notes

1. Barry Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984).

2. Stephen P. Rosen, *Winning the Next War: Innovation and the Modern Military* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

3. Owen Reid Coté Jr., "The Politics of Innovative Military Doctrine: The U.S. Navy and Fleet Ballistic Missiles" (PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1996).

4. Timothy K. Nenninger, *The Leavenworth Schools and the Old Army: Education, Professionalism, and the Officer Corps of the United States Army, 1881–1918* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978).

5. Timothy K. Nenninger, "Creating Officers: The Leavenworth Experience, 1920–1940," *Military Review* 69 (November 1989): 60.

6. Ronald H. Spector, "'Professors of War': The Naval War College and the Modern American Navy" (PhD diss., Yale University, 1967).

7. Nenninger, *Leavenworth Schools and the Old Army*, 60–61.

8. Kirsten Keller et al., *The Mix of Military and Civilian Faculty at the United States Air Force Academy: Finding a Sustainable Balance for Enduring Success* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corp., 2013).

9. Neil Sheehan, *A Fiery Peace in a Cold War: Bernard Schriever and the Ultimate Weapon* (New York: Random House, 2009), 160.