



# SMALL WARS

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## JOURNAL

## Thoughts on Professional Military Education: After 9-11, Iraq, and Afghanistan in the Era of Fiscal Austerity

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*The nation that will insist upon drawing a broad line of demarcation between the fighting man and the thinking man is liable to find its fighting done by fools and its thinking by cowards.*

*General Sir William F. Butler*

These are wise words to consider as we enter a new era in a complex national security environment. As we have departed from Iraq and will drawdown in Afghanistan within a few short years, it is time to consider the way ahead for Professional Military Education (PME). We need neither fools nor cowards and hopefully we will have the wisdom to fight for the education we need to be successful in the future national security environment.

It is fashionable to tout the blogs with their critiques of the war colleges, the admonitions that everyone should go to civilian graduate schools or that the military is anti-intellectual and that while PME is a necessary block to check for advancement, few really desire to attend (except for the break from operations it provides) and fewer still desire to teach (at least while in uniform). While there are many areas that could (and should) be considered for reform this paper will focus on two: A common core focus on the five fundamentals for professional military education and the development of an educational framework that separates education level from advancement in rank. Although the emphasis is on military education this proposal may also have application to a broader professional education for national security professionals as well.

### **First some assumptions:**

Despite the charges of anti-intellectualism it is assumed that education of military leaders and national security professionals contributes to successful strategy, campaigns, and tactical operations and the nation desires and requires its leaders to be well educated professionals capable of thinking and acting tactically, operationally, and strategically to ensure US national security.

Clausewitz' concept of *coup d'oeil* (the "inward eye" of Military Genius) is a trait worth striving

for in our leaders and the concept of education combined with experience to develop this will require more emphasis on education by those with experience as the military draws down from the extensive combat operations of the post 9-11 decade. Fundamentally the nation requires military and national security professionals who have that “inward eye” who are capability of cutting through the fog, friction, and complexity of war and crisis to be able to plan and make decisions without perfect information.[1]

Fiscal constraints are going to require a “less is more mindset” and funding for education will unfortunately be reduced to some degree along with cuts in military expenditures across the board. These constraints will require evaluation of the professional military education process to determine what efficiencies can be gained and what are the most important subjects to be taught at all levels of the process.

Each service and branch within the service has unique requirements for training and educating their personnel and historically they have met these requirements in exemplary fashion as evidenced by the high performing organizations that exist throughout the military. In addition, the services have emphasized these unique (and often tactical) requirements at the expense of operational art and strategy particularly at levels below senior service college. However, even in times of fiscal constraint it is possible to correct this imbalance without necessarily sacrificing tactical proficiency.

Finally, it may be assumed that grounding in operational art and strategy in a common core curriculum for all military leaders *at all levels* (and national security professionals writ large) will enhance critical thinking, problem understanding and problem solving and the ability to execute tactically as well as think strategically. Again, Clausewitz concept of *coup d’oeil*, if developed, can provide our military with leaders who will execute effectively across the range of military operations.

### **Is there a need for a Core PME Curriculum?**

The simple answer is yes. A core curriculum is key to ensuring that the joint military has a common basis for understanding joint and combined military operations and strategy. A common, foundational educational experience can provide the basis for career long interoperability in the joint force, the ability to have a common understanding for the American Way of War and most importantly provide the basis for development of successful campaign plans and strategies. Ideally, such a common educational experience should be provided to national security professionals, military and civilian alike; however, the civilian aspect is beyond the immediate scope of this paper but should be considered.

In addition to a common core curriculum there may be value in a common educational framework for career military personnel. The US military has been known as an institution that provides excellent educational and training opportunities to allow military and civilian personnel to develop to their full potential. This should be sustained and built upon. The remainder of this paper will outline a framework and recommend a common core curriculum upon which military service schools providing professional military education should consider building.

### **An Educational Framework**

All the services have some form of basic, intermediate and advanced training and education levels. There are basic, advanced and career courses, intermediate level education, advanced operational warfighting schools, and finally, senior service colleges. There are a myriad of other service and joint educational opportunities for commanders and staff at all levels as well. The vast majority of these courses provide

outstanding training and some of the higher level ones a good education as well. Selected personnel also attend schools of the other services, particularly at the intermediate and senior levels. Additionally there are Joint education requirements as mandated by Goldwater Nichols and also opportunities for civilian and foreign schooling.

However, most of the educational opportunities are provided based on rank and time in service. While promotion timelines are mandated by law, attending school is a function of service regulation and to a certain extent, service custom. In order to increase the intellectual capacity of the services it may be time to consider education separate from rank and conventional or traditional timelines. An educational framework separate from rank may provide the services with the opportunity for individual military personnel to develop intellectually at a rate that may better support operational art and strategic thinking. A straw man educational framework may be designed as follows:

- **Journeyman:** Initial entry training and education. Completion of the traditional basic entry level courses would make military personnel apprentices with the basic foundational knowledge necessary for initial assignments and to work for and learn from senior mentors.
- **Practitioner:** Completion of Advanced level training and education of officers and non-commissioned officers (NCO) usually associated with branch and service specific training tactical for officers and NCOs; e.g., Captain's Career Course or Advanced NCO Course (ANCOC). Completion of this level of education and training qualifies the officer and NCO as practitioners of their professional discipline in their specific branch or military occupational specialty.
- **Expert Practitioner:** Usually associated with Intermediate Level Education. Military personnel who possess superior intellect and education in operational art who can plan and support campaigns and lead tactical operations conducted by US Joint and International/Coalition forces.
- **Master Practitioner:** Usually associated with Senior Service College education. Strategic level thinkers, planners and leaders who have the demonstrated ability and educational background to support the development and execution of National Security and Theater Level Strategy, work within the US interagency and international coalition communities and oversee the planning, development, and execution of campaigns to support theater and national strategy.

Although this framework is linear and progressive, movement up the "ladder of education" should not be based on the current timelines and central selection boards but by demonstrated intellectual capacity to excel at the education level and the potential for making contributions to US national security commensurate with the level of education vice rank. Command of specific organizations would still be based on appropriate rank, experience and demonstrated potential to command at the designated level; however, staff and action officers and personnel at each level could consist of a mix of those with the requisite education level and others of the traditional rank and time in service. Within this educational framework that is divorced from rank and timelines, it would be possible to have Majors or even senior Captains attend the Master Practitioner education level if they were identified to have the requisite intellectual capability and demonstrated potential to effectively contribute after receiving the education.

Furthermore, within the national security community there are many talented professionals in their twenties and thirties with graduate level educations serving in key policy and strategy positions in Defense, at State and throughout the interagency to include on the National Security Council. If these professionals were serving in the military they would be Captains and Majors. It is very rare that a military person of such rank would be serving in a similar position at the same age because of the traditional military hierarchy, though there are some who are fortunate to be exposed to these positions through select internship and fellowship opportunities. The fact is however, that Captains and Majors are

as equally talented as their civilian peers and the military in some cases is wasting those young officers with the aptitude and desire to serve in such positions because the personnel management bureaucracy does not support such assignments. However, if the military were to provide a master practitioner level of education to the right officers it could provide such military talent to the national security community sooner in their careers and such talent could enhance the military's ability to provide more effective support to national security decision making.

### **Proposed Core Curriculum**

Again, although the educational framework is linear and progressive, it is necessary to have a fundamental core curriculum to be able to not only prepare military personnel and national security professionals to progress, but also to ensure linkage, coordination, and synchronization between the tactical, operational, and strategic levels. In short, even Journeymen must have sufficient strategic level understanding in order to plan and execute effective tactical operations in today's complex security environment. The connectivity from Journeyman to Master Practitioner would be provided by a fundamental core curriculum taught at each level but adjusted appropriately for the level of education and experience of the military personnel attend the school. This core curriculum would consist of the following "Fundamental Five":

- History – Military, Civilization and Cultural and Political History. Military personnel must be well grounded in history and be able to use the lessons of history to inform how to think about the future. Even Thucydides remains relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century as does Sun Tzu and Clausewitz as well as the contemporary histories of Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Non-US and Western History must also be studied as well. Continuous use of the case study using examples from throughout history and the range of military operations from irregular and insurgency to large scale conventional state on state war and the evolution (and even revolution) of conflict over time is critical to preparing for the future.
- Theory – Military, Political and International Relations. Students must continue the study of military theory and the full range of theories from insurgency to state on state warfare to deterrence and nuclear theory from Mao to Mahan to Douhet to Brodie. Note that there is a strong tie between military theory and military history; one really cannot be studied without the other. Of course there is overlap with Thucydides, Sun Tzu and Clausewitz between history and theory but one imperative is to ensure understanding of the enduring *nature* of war and conflict with the evolving *character* of war and conflict. In addition, Political and International Relations theories must be examined and understood from the Realist to the Idealist schools. Finally, emerging concepts (that have not reached theory stage) should also be examined to include as examples Joseph Nye's Soft and Smart Power and Ann-Marie Slaughter's Responsibility to Protect.
- Geography – one of the most overlooked and neglected subjects in PME today is the study of geography and specifically military geography. "Military geography, one of several subsets within those broad confines (of geography), concentrates on the influence of physical and cultural environments over the political-military policies, plans, programs, and combat/support operations of all types in global, regional, and local contexts. Key factors directly (sometimes decisively) affect the full range of military activities: strategies, tactics, and doctrines, command, control, and organizational structures; the optimum mix of land, sea, air, and space forces; intelligence collection; targeting; research and development; the procurement and allocation of weapons, equipment, and clothing; plus supply, maintenance, construction, medical support, education, and training." (from Military Geography by John Collins, COL, US Army RET) The study of military geography is necessary to be able to bridge the civilian, cultural, physical and military divides in all forms of conflict.

- Operational Art - The critical study of campaign planning and the orchestration of battles, engagements and operations and their linkage to strategy. Again, the study of operational art will be heavily dependent on and overlap with history, theory, and geography. Effective use of case studies is also a critical component of the study of operational art.
- Strategy - The art and science of attaining balance, coherency and linkage among ends, ways, and means in support of policy. Strategic studies must include policy development and execution and understanding the interagency processes and organizations and international institutions. It will also depend heavily upon history, theory, geography and operational art and rely on relevant case studies. Most importantly it will include the understanding and integration of all the instruments of national power: diplomatic, informational, military, and economic.

These fundamental five would be taught at all four education levels of the educational framework. They would form the common core curriculum upon which services and branches would add their additional educational requirements that would develop personnel with the unique military skills required for their branch or occupational specialty. This common core curriculum would provide two critical capabilities to military personnel and national security professionals. First, it would provide a common educational experience with a common tactical, operational, and strategic vocabulary that would facilitate joint and interagency integration and operations. Second, and most important, this type of curriculum would develop the always sought after but rarely realized “how to think” mindset rather the easier “what to think” outcome of most training environments. Finally, the fundamental five would be the basis for a career long learning process, to include self study, that will provide the intellectual foundation for military and national security professionals.

Some will question why there would need to be such a reliance on the fundamental five and in particular history and theory. In 2010 while at the National War College a US Navy SEAL officer was asked at the completion of his first oral examination what books he had read in the fall term that were among the most relevant and his response is illustrative and yet not unique. He answered, “Thucydides, of course.” He said he had never studied the Peloponnesian War until he was a student at National and did not look forward to having to read such ancient history that could have no apparent relevance to today’s national security environment. However, as he read the book he found himself realizing that the work is relevant and that national security practitioners are making the same mistakes today as were made by the Spartans and Athenians. The lessons are enduring.

Others may argue that this reliance on these fundamental five core curriculum overlooks so many modern subjects and topics that are believed by many to be required for study. While these fundamental five would be taught at all levels elective courses can be offered for areas requiring more specialization. However, one of the advantages that such a curriculum may provide is the ability of the US military to overcome its sometimes counter-productive search for new terms and concepts that in the end are merely repackaged historical concepts and the proverbial reinvention of the wheel. Two quotes from Colin Gray illustrate both one aspect of the American way of war and the reason why every military officer and national security practitioner should have a thorough grounding in history and theory.

*"The American defense community is especially prone to capture by the latest catchphrase, the new-sounding spin on an ancient idea which as jargon separates those who are truly expert from the lesser breeds without the jargon."*

*"If Thucydides, Sun-tzu, and Clausewitz did not say it, it is probably not worth saying."*

Another way to look at this is to prevent the idea of "concept shopping." Since 9-11 the US military has reinvented Irregular Warfare (which has existed in the US military since at least the American Revolution) and developed redundant concepts such as Security Forces Assistance (SFA), Building Partner Capacity (BPC), Train, Advise, and Assist (TAA), Organization, Training, Equipping, Rebuilding, and Advising (OTERA) all designed to do achieve similar effects with the already existing Foreign Internal Defense doctrine. It also rediscovered the works of Mao, Galula, Thompson, Kitson, Sarkesian, and McKuen among many others. Had the military been more thoroughly grounded in History and Theory there would not have been a need to invent new names for reinvented concepts that have historically existed nor the need to rediscover theorists, historians, and practitioners who had relevance to current security challenges. And even with the rediscovery of such theorists the military continued the idea of "concept shopping." A friend and colleague, Dave McHenry, sums it up best when he commented on the latest discussion of mission command, the use of "mission type orders" and the German concept of Auftragstaktik:

"Auftragstaktik is also part of the American military's history of concept shopping. We LOVE to reach out to the world and grab their coolest buzz words and culture/context centered ideas and try to make them plug-and-play within our armed forces. Operational Art, Systemic Operational Design and Mission-Type Orders all fall under the 'other guys good ideas that we'll just steal and not reinterpret to our cultural or contextual requirements.' Auftragstaktik in its purest German form worked really well for the Germans (up to the point that they lost the war). Ignoring doctrine and writing orders more to "cover our ass" than to dictate action (because as a planner the one thing I KNOW is that the commander on the ground will do whatever he wants to do regardless of what his Tasks to Subordinate Units paragraph directs him to do) is probably the uniquely American interpretation."

Again, a grounding in history and theory can help the military to prevent the reaching out for the latest "buzzwords" and instead focus on understanding security problems and properly adapting relevant historical concepts and theories to modern conditions because of a thorough understanding based on comprehensive career long study.

An educational framework that is delinked from the promotion process and traditional timelines can contribute to reducing the perception of anti-intellectualism and allow those personnel with the demonstrated intellectual ability to think and operate at the appropriate level to maximize their skills and ability sooner rather than later in their careers and for longer periods of time. A common core curriculum can and should provide the intellectual foundation for military and national security professionals to be able to deal with the complex global security environment that exists today and will continue to exist in the future.

This paper has recommended two new concepts for consideration for professional military education. There are of course many details that would need to be worked out and numerous obstacles that would need to be overcome. However, if these two ideas spur critical thought about the current professional military education system that leads to increased emphasis on and respect for education and critical thinking within the military and national security community it will have accomplished an important objective. But just as we do not need fools and cowards to be our fighters and thinkers we should keep in mind this adage when we think about our professional education:

The history that lies inert in unread books does no work in the world.

If you want a new idea, read an old book.

‘Tis the good reader that makes the good book.

A book is like a mirror. If an ass looks in, no prophet can peer out.[2]

Even if these ideas are not feasible, one of the most important things the US military must do is to ensure that in the times of fiscal austerity that is to ensure that it continues to invest in the most important resource it has: its people. And the best investment that can be made in people is through education.

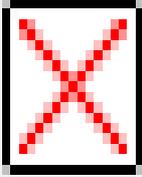
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[1] Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1976), p. **100-103**.

[2] The "maxims" quoted come from Clark Becker, Lord Lytton, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Georg Lichtenberg in Jay Luuvas "Military History: Is It Still Practicable?" Originally published in Army War College's *Parameters*, March 1982 Jay <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/luvaas.htm>

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