

# TOO BUSY TO LEARN

By Major General Robert H. Scales, U.S. Army (Retired)



When the current wars begin to wind down, which they inevitably will, we need to take a closer look at reforming—possibly even by congressional mandate—professional military education (PME).



When I started my PhD dissertation at Duke University in the mid-1970s, Dr. Ted Ropp, my faculty adviser, asked me to do research on how the post-Napoleonic industrial revolution affected the evolution of doctrine in the British Army. Much had been written by that time about the transition from sail to steam in the British Navy. He presupposed that the introduction of smokeless powder, rifled quick-firing artillery, and the machine gun would have had a similar impact on the perceptions of British Army officers during the interval between the heyday of Victorian small wars and the beginning of World War I.

I remember the day I had to tell Professor Ropp that his hypothesis was wrong. I discovered that the issue wasn't the ability or inability of the army to embrace the technologies. Actually, I learned that the British Army had become an institution that ignored most everything that characterized modernity because it had become *an army too busy to learn*.

Success, promotion, and public acclaim came with active service in a series of popular and not terribly stressful imperial campaigns against native peoples throughout the empire. Time spent in the staff college was time wasted. Publishing was bad form and was best done under a pseudonym. Talk in the mess was about sport, not the art and science of war. The great names of that era; Wolseley, Roberts, Napier, Robertson, Kitchener, and Haig all gained public adulation from a press that worshipped the colorful deeds of these men of action.

The reckoning came at the battles of Mons and Le Cateau in 1914, when this army disappeared under the guns of a force that had spent the last half-century studying war rather than practicing it. The cultural bias toward action rather than reflection so permeated the British Army in World War I that the deaths of more than a million failed to erase it. Some scholars contend that this tragic obsession still left its dulling mark until well after World War II.

My great fear is that we are suffering a similar fate for a similar reason.

### Circling the X

Units whose operational tempo causes a backlog in maintenance routinely “circle X” minor faults to keep their equipment moving. All of us know that deferring maintenance too long eventu-

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**Richard Caton Woodville II's “The first VC [Victoria's Cross] of the European War, 1914” depicts Captain Louis Grenfell's 9th Lancers at Audregny on 24 August 1914. Unlike the “too busy to learn” British Soldiers early in World War I, their German counterparts “had spent the the last half-century studying war rather than practicing it.”**

ally leads to catastrophic materiel failure. My sense is that the military has begun to circle X its officer seed corn. A bias toward active service in our protracted small wars is making our military an institution too busy to learn.

The evidence is disturbing. Throughout the services officers are avoiding attendance in schools, and school lengths are being shortened. The Army's full-term staff college is now attended by fewer and fewer officers. The best and

brightest are avoiding the war colleges



U.S. ARMY CENTER FOR MILITARY HISTORY

**World War II proved that military thinkers make good leaders. Army Lieutenant General Troy H. Middleton commanded the the VIII Corps, which he led in Operation Cobra and the Battle of the Bulge. All this came after teaching stints at Infantry School, the Command and General Staff College, and the Army War College and service as Commandant of Cadets, Dean of Administration, and acting Vice President of Louisiana State University.**

in favor of service in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The average age of war college students has increased from 41 to 45, making this institution a preparation for retirement rather than a launching platform for strategic leadership.

Most disturbing is the disappearance of experienced officers as instructors. Service schools produce two classes: students and instructors. Students graduate with knowledge, valuable to be sure. But instructors return to the force with the wisdom accumulated from long-term immersion in a subject and an amplified appreciation of the art and science of war that comes from time to reflect, teach, research, and think. Perhaps that's why 31 of the 35 most successful corps commanders in World War II served at least one tour as an instructor in a service school. Arguably the most successful, Lieutenant General Troy Middleton, taught at a series of schools for ten years.

Today, the condensed wisdom that comes from teaching and research is increasingly being contracted out to civilians. Ask any upwardly mobile major or lieutenant colonel what he thinks about his career prospects after being assigned as a service school instructor today.

## Action versus Intellect

Equally troubling is the sense that our growing intellectual backlog is not causing much of a stir in the halls of power. Our culture has changed to value and solely reward men and women of action. Just like their British antecedents, the personnel system rewards active service, not demonstrated intellectual merit. Spend too much time thinking and reflecting and the rewards system denies promotion and opportunities to command. Don't get me wrong. Combat service is important, particularly at the junior grades. War is our profession, and every self-respecting young warrior needs to "pet the elephant" to prove he or she has the right stuff.

This bias toward action has caused our learning system to atrophy and become obsolescent. Thirty years ago the Department of Defense led the world in progressive learning. The case-study method was invented at the Army War College. The services pioneered distance learning and the use of diagnostics, as well as objective means for assessment and measurement. Business schools today slavishly copy our method of wargaming and the use of the after-action review. But sadly, atrophy has gripped the school house, and what was once the shining light of progressivism has become an intellectual backwater, lagging far behind the corporate and civilian institutions of higher learning.

Virtually all attempts to reform professional military education have failed principally because these efforts have been driven by academics who focus reform on curricula and faculty hiring. The truth is, PME reform is not a pedagogical problem.

It's a personnel problem that can be addressed only by changing the military's reward system to favor those with the intellectual right stuff.

All is not lost. Sandwiched inside past failures are some real demonstrable successes. Perhaps we can build on them. So far I've found five. It's instructive to note that all five at their inception were strenuously resisted by service personnel bureaucracies, in part because of their success.

## Five Successes

The first PME success is the "Petraeus Model" of strategic preparation for higher command. This includes attendance at a top-tier civilian graduate school to study history or social and behavioral science followed by a teaching assignment at a service academy. Petraeus is joined by a remarkably successful cadre of leaders who have demonstrated exceptional talent in the chaotic environments in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Some names are familiar because they reached three or four stars: Chiarelli, Stavridis, Dempsey, Ward, and Dubik. All of these leaders (along with fellow intellectual travelers such as Admiral Mike Mullen, Marine General Jim Mattis, and Army General Stanley McChrystal) share a lifelong obsession with reading history and studying the art of war. At some time in their careers, they ignored the caution of personnel officers about spending too much time in school while under scrutiny for command selection.

The second successful innovation is the Foreign Area Officer (FAO) Program. The services' personnel reward systems liked this idea even less than the Petraeus Model. With the exception of a few survivors like Karl Eikenberry, the system has habitually ground off even the most successful and well-regarded FAOs at the colonel level with few if any opportunities for command. Yet the very four stars who routinely advised subordinates not to become FAOs (and, sadly, routinely ranked them below their operational brethren in fitness reports) discover once in command that officers who understand alien

cultures and speak their languages fluently are essential multipliers when fighting irregular wars at the strategic level.

The third reform was so sweeping and threatening that only the legislative hammer could have driven it though the service personnel systems. In the mid-1980s, Representative Ike Skelton (D-MO), as part of the Goldwater-Nichols legislation, forced the services to learn how to operate efficiently—the essence of “jointness.” Skelton’s effort gained traction because of the services’ failure to fight together as a team during the invasion of Grenada in 1983. Skelton leveraged the law to hold the services’ reward systems for promotion and command hostage unless they made a meaningful commitment to jointness. To ensure that his reforms would last, Skelton legislated that staff and war colleges bring together student officers from all services to study joint as well as service-specific subjects.

The fourth reform was born during the Cold War and only survived the personnelist’s ax by the fortuitous arrival of war. Prior to Operation Desert Storm, General Norman Schwarzkopf created a small cell of four majors and a colonel to act as his intimate brain trust to plan his campaign. The group became known as the “Jedi Knights.” All were graduates of the School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS), essentially the Army staff college’s second-year honors program. SAMS sought to create true operational artists by a strenuous year-long immersion in military history using the proven case-study approach to learning. The school’s success spawned parallel programs within all service staff colleges.

GETTY IMAGES (ROGER L. WOLLENBERG)

(Left to right) General David Petraeus greets Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Admiral Mike Mullen, Secretary of Veterans Affairs General Eric Shinseki, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton prior to President Barack Obama’s West Point speech to lay out his Afghanistan plan. “The Petraeus Model,” the author says, is one recent success in professional military education.

In 1998 the Army War College created the fifth pedagogical reform with the Advanced Strategic Art Program, basically a strategic-level SAMS that used the same history-based case-study methodology to produce world-class strategists at the lieutenant colonel level.

### Start by Building a Bench

Any holistic effort at reform must start by rewarding and selecting those with the greatest intellectual gifts at commissioning. Experience in today’s wars has proved the value of the human component in war. We have learned, often painfully, that war is not a science project. Officers like Petraeus who are successful in the chaos and uncertainty of small wars tend to be innovative, creative, empathetic, and non-linear thinkers. Unfortunately, the services still tend to favor a technical rather than a humanist preparation for commissioning. All services, to include the Navy and Air Force, should readjust the percentage of officers educated in the physical and the social sciences to favor the latter.

Again following the Petraeus Model, once young officers have proved their ability to command at the tactical level, they should be offered a “soldier’s sabbatical,” a fully funded two-year hiatus to study military art, behavioral science, and alien culture and language at a top-tier civilian graduate school. Their spouses should also be supported as long as they are able to meet admission requirements. This time away should be “free,” in that it would be a reward for successful command and incur no additional service obligation. If students are able to pass the preliminary requirements for a Ph.D., they should be fast-tracked though statutory requirements for joint qualification.

Personnelists will object to such a sweeping dedication of the force to learning by arguing that so many junior officers away from units will harm readiness. To counter



their objections, Congress should legislate the program and increase officer strength to cover academic absences.

The services begin to find their flag officers at the grade of major/lieutenant commander. Therefore, any officer selected early for that grade who does not hold a graduate degree in the social and human sciences should be sent immediately to a first-tier graduate school before returning to the operational force. Every graduate program must require the study of a foreign language, and no officer should be promoted beyond the grade of lieutenant colonel/commander without demonstrating proficiency in a foreign language.

It took the legislative hammer of the Skelton reforms to break the back of individual service parochialism 20 years ago. The same hammer must be invoked again to drive the services to reward intellectual merit. To that end, the law must be revised to reflect the requirement that no officer can be selected for flag rank without first serving a two-year tour as an instructor at a service school.

### Officers Should Teach

The insidious creep of the civilian contractor must be reversed such that virtually all ROTC, service academy, and staff and war college faculty positions be filled by uniformed officers. Those positions at service PME institutions better suited to civilian instructors should be filled with long service professionals from government agencies such as State, Agency for International Development, Commerce, Homeland Security, or the Office of Management and Budget, as well as a liberal infusion of professional staffers from congressional committees.

Not every officer loves to learn. But those who do are a special breed often ground off at the tactical level only to be sorely missed at the strategic level when their skills are needed most. Strategic genius can best be preserved by expanding service honors programs at the staff and war colleges. Successful completion of a second-year staff college program would qualify majors to compete through examination for selection for service on joint and coalition staffs, in addition to selection for tactical commands at the lieutenant colonel/commander level.

Those who succeed at both staff and command would then be eligible to compete (again by examination) for selection to the National War College, an institution in this scheme reserved solely for

those officers (and selected government civilians) who have shown unique intellectual merit. A certain proportion of all key joint, combatant command, coalition, and interagency billets at the flag level would be reserved by statute for these gifted cohorts of the Jedis.

### Institutional Changes

Today, professional military education has no real champion. Learning policy is set by the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness. The title of this position really highlights the problem. However well meaning this person may be, his or her first priority is to man the force rather than to educate it. And we have learned that these two imperatives are not intrinsically compatible.

Thus, we need reform that would create a Chief Learning Officer at the Assistant Secretary level within DOD. This person would be charged with the intellectual health of the force and would report both to the Secretary of Defense and the chairs of the Armed Services Committees.



U.S. AIR FORCE (MICHAEL W. TYLER)

**Representative Ike Skelton (D-MO) speaks at the May 1988 groundbreaking ceremony for Whiteman Air Force Base's new Combat Crew Training Squadron building. In the mid-1980s, Skelton was instrumental in forcing the services to approach their jobs in a joint manner. In the process, he held hostage the services' reward systems for promotion and command unless they embraced jointness. It may again take legislation to bring about real PME reform.**



U.S. ARMY (DON MIDDLETON)

Students in the Intermediate Level Education course attend a guest speaker presentation at the Army's Command and General Staff College in Leavenworth, Kansas. The author calls for expanding service honors programs at such schools, which would help reverse "the insidious creep of the civilian contractor" into the faculties of service PME institutions and preserve "strategic genius."

To be complete, the learning function needs a military champion as well, preferably at the four-star level.

The most likely candidate for this job would be the commander of Joint Forces Command, who would be held responsible for joint learning by all services. The person in this position would set standards for learning and would pass on all service command and promotion lists to ensure that those selected meet the intellectual requirements for positions of higher responsibility.

Today, the efficiency/fitness report is an officer's scorecard for rating "manner of performance" on the job. Officers do receive academic fitness reports after completing a program of study, but these have no real impact on career prospects. This must change. Intellectual achievement must be graded and assessed with the same rigor and objectivity as manner of performance.

An officer's learning record should reflect class standing in all PME and civilian institutions. It should contain confidential evaluations of an officer's ability to think critically, innovate, write, speak, and act with intellectual agility. The record would list the officer's publications and research and a separate evaluation by a joint academic selection board

of an officer's fitness report as an instructor. Promotion and command selection boards would be required by statute to report out the collective intellectual achievements of selected officers to Congress and the various service secretariats.

## A Window of Opportunity

History suggests that the greatest opportunity for reform occurs as wars wind down and the institution has time to reflect and reset itself for future conflicts. The demand for excellence in coalition warfare came out of the painful experience with the British in World War II. Radical changes in how the services educated their officers and enlisted personnel emerged from the painful lessons of Vietnam.

We will be fighting in Afghanistan and elsewhere for some time, to be sure. But soon we will begin to find some breathing room to close the learning gap that has grown so wide and insidious since 9/11. Unfortunately, the gap will never close as long as the learning function is held hostage to the services' systems of reward. We could rely on the tender mercies of individual service personnel systems to fuel intellectual reform. But the fight to inculcate jointness within the services warns that real PME reform can only happen through the blunt instrument of legislative action. ❄

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**General Scales is currently president of Colgen Inc., a consulting firm specializing in issues relating to land power, war gaming, and strategic leadership. One of the nation's most respected authorities on land warfare, he served more than 30 years in the Army, commanded two units in Vietnam, and ended his career as Commandant of the Army War College.**