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RETHINKING PROFESSIONAL MILITARY EDUCATION

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Professional Military Education (PME), the Department of Defense (DOD) funded system through which most military officers receive their mandated post-commission education, has recently been the focus of considerable scrutiny, including assertions that PME is broken. Journalist Tom Ricks suggested potentially shutting the Air War College in 2011, referencing it as “an expensive joke” consequent to an 18-year faculty veteran raising issues regarding lax academic standards and unqualified faculty.¹ Zealous discussions of nuclear war with Islam at the Joint Forces Staff College were brought to the attention of and addressed by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), General Martin Dempsey's office, with findings of “institutional failures” allowing the “inflammatory” course to be taught, with the instructor consequently relieved and reprimanded.² Faculty at the National Defense University (NDU) have been targeted by the J-7, the directorate in the Joint Chiefs of Staff office responsible for force development, for pruning. Perhaps, however, that pruning would not be inappropriate as NDU has long been known to host a significant number of Senior Executive Service (SES) deadwood parachuted there by the Pentagon when administrations change. Equally likely, however, is that one-year contracts being offered to faculty will drive out the qualified academic professionals who remain.³ An investigation by the Navy Inspector General's office at the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) resulted in the firing of the President and the Provost for financial mismanagement.⁴ All of these incidents are indicative of a larger crisis in PME.

But PME and the War Colleges specifically serve as a valuable and irreplaceable experience for senior military leaders. The security practitioner-oriented curriculum and the inter-service mix of students in the classrooms cannot be duplicated in civilian institutions, the best of which would not have room to incorporate the large numbers of officers mandated to attend senior service school in any event. Further, it is within the seminar rooms of PME institutions that military officers interact with members of other services, or even different branches of their own

¹ Tom Ricks, “Need Budget Cuts? We Probably Can Start by Shutting the Air War College,” *Best Defense*, April 11, 2011.

http://ricks.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/04/11/need_budget_cuts_we_probably_can_start_by_shutting_the_air_war_college

² Spencer Ackerman and Noah Shachtman, “‘Institutional failures’ led Military to Teach War on Islam,” *Wired*, June 20, 2012.

<http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2012/06/failure-oversight-war-islam/>

³ Tom Ricks, “Continuing Erosion at NDU,” *Best Defense*, June 14, 2012,

http://ricks.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/06/14/continuing_erosion_at_ndu

⁴ Sam Fellman, “Navy Fires Grad School President and Provost,” *Navy Times*, November 27, 2012.

<http://www.navytimes.com/news/2012/11/navy-nps-firings-postgraduate-school-provost-president-112712w/>

service, toward gaining better understanding of their various cultures and modes of operation, essential in a joint, interoperable world. In addition, military officers also engage in PME seminars with their civilian counterparts from various federal agencies such as DoD, Homeland Security, the State department, and intelligence agencies. Though these civilians are a small minority at PME institutions, they play a key role in expanding the perspectives military officers are exposed to during their PME educational process. The PME learning experience is not duplicable in civilian institutions. Therefore, it is imperative that the value of the War Colleges be recognized and the best practices employed to achieve the stated goals.

Though PME and War Colleges have been faced with budget cuts in the past, former Army War College Professor Steve Metz explains the difference between then, and now.

Historically, the military educational system was cut less during periods of declining defense budgets than things like force structure and procurement. The idea was that if the military had to be smaller, it should at least be smarter. This happened between the two world wars, after World War II, after Vietnam and after the Cold War. This time, however, civilian and uniformed leaders seem less inclined to shield the professional military educational system from cuts. The staff and war colleges have already lost faculty. If this continues, the future U.S. military may be both smaller and less smart. The United States could weather a bit of that. The challenge is in identifying the point at which a less educated military forces means risk and danger. We must cut, but cut wisely.⁵

Metz raises a number of interesting points, the first of which is that civilian and military leadership seem to no longer see education as a priority. That alone is troublesome and deserves further scrutiny. Therefore, in what promises to be an increasingly tight DOD resource environment, resources alone makes it imperative to assess the current state of PME, and it is our recommendation that it be done through an independent, comprehensive study.

Fundamentally, there are three basic questions facing any academic institution: What should be expected of the graduates of the institution? What, therefore, should be taught? and Who should teach? In the case of PME, in order to chart a path forward so that future military officers will be better able to effectively deal with change, the current status of each of those points must first be determined: what is expected of the students, what is being taught, and by whom. These queries are more complex than might first be assumed, requiring that the right specific questions be asked by individuals knowledgeable about the military profession and the academic profession, but without a vested interest in the outcome.

Furthermore, the right entity to conduct a comprehensive study regarding the current answers to those questions will need to possess the authority to compel full cooperation from each of the War Colleges, be experienced in conducting in-depth analytic studies, have knowledge about educational vice training methodologies, and the willingness to challenge existing assumptions associated with PME. It also cannot rely on self-reported institutional data, often skewed to place information in its best light. Whether the study team is created by a congressional committee, initiated by GAO, or established through the Pentagon, its charter must be clearly stated and War Colleges directed to be fully supportive of its efforts.

Asking the right questions is the key to delivering a meaningful result. Suggestions are given in the 2013 book *Educating America's Military* regarding appropriate questions about current execution issues, such as faculty composition and professional expectations (theirs and the institutions), resources spent on core versus peripheral missions, and administrator qualifications and administrative bloat. A critical precursor issue, however, is to identify whether a mismatch exists between what Congress and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, want from PME and what service operators expect and which has, therefore, at the very least influenced execution issues. We contend that it does. That mismatch must be recognized and addressed before strategic alignment between goals and processes can succeed.

VERIFYING THE GOAL

The 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act, the Skelton Panel and the 2010 follow up study seem clear on Congress' desired

⁵ Steven Metz, "Strategic Horizons: U.S. Profession Military Education on the Chopping Block," World Politics Review, April 17, 2013. <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/12879/strategic-horizons-u-s-professional-military-education-on-the-chopping-block>

goal for PME, shorthanded here as “intellectual agility.” In 2012, General Dempsey released a White Paper on PME stating the purpose of PME was to “develop leaders by conveying a broad body of professional knowledge and developing the habits of mind essential to our profession,” including intellectual curiosity, coupled with openness to new ideas.⁶ Therefore, Congress and the highest echelons of the military appear in agreement with the intended goal – broad-based intellectual agility/curiosity. Whether, however, that goal is shared by subordinates is an important question.

Samuel Huntington talked about a propensity toward technicism as one of three military traditions (with popularism and professionalism) in his seminal 1957 work *The Soldier and the State*.⁷ That propensity has increased proportional to the increased reliance on technology for command, control, communication, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance in the military, with a consequent favoring of technical vice broader, strategic education by leadership. While that makes sense at the operational and tactical levels, strategic leaders need different skill sets.

How much education is valued today by the military services has been questioned by Colonel Charles D. Allen, USA (Ret.), Professor of Cultural Science in the Department of Command, Leadership, and Management at the U.S. Army War College. “As important as curriculum and faculty are, they are moot issues if those officers who have the greatest potential to serve as strategic leaders deem attendance at one of our war colleges unnecessary and are allowed to bypass it.”⁸ While the value of education as reflected by requirements for attending resident programs and subsequent promotion after attendance varies among the military services, operational experience trumps education for all.

Finally, some military leaders are more direct in their disdain for academics, and exhibit sometimes open anti-intellectualism. Retired Army Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Peters has perhaps been most direct in this regard. He refers to academics as “theory poisoned and indecisive.” After making his case regarding how education prepares officers for, as the title of his article states “Learning to Lose,” Peters bluntly states his view: “The natural charge against the arguments advanced here is ‘anti-intellectualism.’ And the accusers would be exactly right.”⁹ Peters, however, simply openly states views privately heard from too many general officers.

Richard H. Kohn, professor of History of Peace, War, and Defense at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and former Chief USAF Historian, says the combined result of these attitudes is profound.

In effect, in the most important area of professional expertise—the connecting of war to policy, of operations to achieving the objectives of the nation—the American military has been found wanting. The excellence of the American military in operations, logistics, tactics, weaponry, and battle has been manifest for a generation or more. Not so with strategy.¹⁰

Slow-rolling, tacitly averting or openly ignoring Congress’ and General Dempsey’s goals directly affects the strategy or approaches taken within the War Colleges to achieve their goals. It can be done because follow-up and accountability has been lax.

The current instruction that guides joint requirements for PME institutions is known as the Officer Professional Military Education Policy (OPMEP). This Joint Staff instruction identifies learning objectives in a variety of different areas most of which are, appropriately, operationally oriented. Senior military officers, first and foremost, must be knowledgeable about the planning and execution of military operations at the theater and strategic levels. The OPMEP, however, also lays out a variety of other learning objectives associated with political, economic, bureaucratic, leadership and other areas about which graduates of senior PME institutions are expected to have

⁶ General Martin Dempsey, USA< Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Education White Paper, July 16, 2012.

http://www.jcs.mil/content/files/2012-07/071812110954_CJCS_Joint_Education_White_Paper.pdf

⁷ *The Soldier and the State, The Theory of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 193.

⁸ “Redress of Professional Military Education: The Clarion Call,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, 4th Quarter, 2010.

http://www.ndu.edu/press/lib/images/jfq-59/JFQ59_94-100_Allen.pdf

⁹ “Learning to Lose,” *The American Interest*, July/August 2007. <http://www.the-american-interest.com/article.cfm?piece=291>

¹⁰ Richard H. Kohn, “Tarnished brass: Is the U.S. Military Profession in Decline?” *World Affairs*, Spring 2009.

<http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/tarnished-brass-us-military-profession-decline>

gained specified levels of knowledge. Identifying the right balance of operational and non-operational areas of educational focus will be one of the key challenges for the study team.

The study team would be well served by starting with a review of the OPMEP to determine whether its guidance, as currently constructed, is likely to achieve the desired educational, vice training, PME objectives. The OPMEP is deliberately broad, allowing for maximum flexibility of interpretation at the individual War Colleges. While on the one hand that means there are no “ugly babies” as each of the institutions can justify its curriculum as being within OPMEP guidelines, for the most part, breadth has proven a far better approach than the Joint Staff micromanaging academic curriculum. Keeping the OPMEP broad is also a good idea as those who develop it or review it, the Military Education Coordinating Committee (MECC), an advisory body to the CJCS on joint scholarships and key educational issues, are not necessarily experienced in academic curricula development or execution and seem to tend to the status quo.

Consequently, the role and composition of the MECC -- largely responsible for providing advice and feedback on PME quality, currency and validity -- should also be considered in the comprehensive study. Whether MECC members are supportive of intellectual agility -- or even truly recognize what that encompasses in terms of execution needs and methodologies -- as the PME goal rather than supporters of a model more inclined toward a status quo and training approach is influential, and can be determinative, on whether PME institutions are dynamic or, in military parlance, self-licking ice cream cones. This highly bureaucratic group, often populated by individuals with minimal expertise or experience in education beyond their PME appointments, wields significant influence on the education of America’s military and has operated largely off anyone’s radar other than the J-7, another bureaucratic group with minimal expertise or experience in education.

More OPMEP guidance could be useful, and not constrain institutional flexibility, if developed through an academic rather than a bureaucratic approach. Not surprisingly though, bureaucratic and organizational politics, as well as individual personalities, plays a role in guarding the status quo. Individuals in both the J-7 and on the MECC, sometimes with long-standing professional connections between them, but with limited academic credentials or experience among them, can dominate the process. With Congressman and long-time PME advocate and champion Ike Skelton no longer “watching” whether striving for “intellectual agility” is still the goal, that responsibility has been left to bureaucrats and military operators unfamiliar with educational concepts and sometimes not amenable to change, and who frequently have a propensity for training versus education.

Clearly, the study team must operationalize what “intellectual agility,” as prescribed by Congress and General Dempsey, means in terms of expected outcomes of War Colleges and the educational competencies and skill sets desired of graduates. (“Competencies,” it should be noted, is a term used with caution in education, as it is often associated with metrics more amenable to training. It is easier to determine who has competencies in rifle assembly than critical thinking.) This should be the crucial first objective of the study team. Once specific educational outcomes are identified, the effectiveness of current senior PME curriculum and associated educational processes at delivering these outcomes can be evaluated.

Addressing key questions to identify potential gaps between Congress and General Dempsey’s intent, and execution, will allow the survey team to identify a specific set of actions for each War College that will enable progress towards achieving the desired educational outcomes and generating an optimal return on investment of the very significant PME expenditures associated with senior officer education. Beyond efficiency issues, however, though clearly important in these fiscally constrained times -- is the importance of providing our senior military leadership with the right education for the complex challenges they will face in the future. Whether those challenges involve providing political leaders the best advice possible regarding operational strategies in foreign lands, navigating the Byzantine political world of Washington DC, or looking into the future to know what will be needed to keep America safe, and how to get it, we owe it to them and the nation to provide our military officers with the kind of education which will put them on an equal footing with their strategic peers, and, therefore, have their voices heard.