



Audience members listen to General Dunford deliver graduation address at National Defense University's 2016 graduation ceremony, on Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC, June 9, 2016 (DOD/Sean K. Harp)

I Liked Ike . . . Whence Comes Another? Why PME Needs a Congressional Advocate

By John T. Kuehn

With all the discussion of troubles in the world of professional military education (PME), the obvious finally dawned on me in a discussion of the issue with a

colleague. Ever since former Representative Ike Skelton (D-MO) left Congress in 2010 (dying only 3 years later), PME has needed an advocate in Congress. Historians and pundits, however, including the author of this article, have perhaps missed this essential need in their prescriptions for enhancing, or reforming, higher level military education as it exists in the United States today.¹ We cite Ike's name as the basis

for reform but forget his profound role in enabling PME reform in the first place. To better understand that role, we must take a trip, as we historians are wont to do, down memory lane.

Historical Insights and Skelton's Legacy

The first step is to that oft-studied period between World War I and World War II—commonly referred to

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as the interwar period—during which significant insights regarding military education were formulated. Much has been written about the relative advantage conferred by honest PME during this period, particularly in institutions as disparate as the *Kriegsakademie* in Germany (and the Versailles-limited *Reichswehr* in general) and those in the United States (the Naval War College, the Command and General Staff College [CGSC], and the Air Corps Tactical School at Maxwell Field in Alabama). Some was, in fact, written by Congressman Ike Skelton himself.² More often than not, however, the role of Congress in all this is slighted, at least regarding PME. Nonetheless, the Services, and particularly the Navy, had an advocate on the naval subcommittee of what is today the House Armed Services Committee (HASC): Representative Carl Vinson (D-GA), who was the longest-serving member of Congress in the last century. Vinson’s impact on events, however, was indirect. He is most famous for three pieces of legislation that prepared the Navy for World War II—most significantly, the first Vinson-Trammel Bill in 1934 that finally put the Nation on a trajectory toward aligning its means with its strategic ends.³ But there was a second-order effect from building all those new warships: Those students at the Naval War College who wargamed and studied this problem could put their findings into practice during the Navy’s “Fleet Problems,” large-scale exercises conducted each year between 1923 and 1940. In these exercises, U.S. naval forces would engage in mock battles that served as the culmination of the Service’s annual training maneuvers. At the conclusion of each exercise, the Navy cycled the lessons learned back into the schoolhouse, a difficult task in the absence of any force structure.⁴

Our second example, however, set in 1987, involves almost the reverse situation. After helping to craft and pass the landmark Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, Skelton formed a panel—known as the Skelton Panel—to look

at joint PME (JPME).⁵ The work and findings of the panel eventually made their way into the “Bible” of JPME, the Officer Professional Military Education Policy (OPMEP) instruction (also referred to as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff 1800 series). The rather stifling military nomenclature is included here not only to emphasize how a truly transformative and influential document can hide itself behind acronyms, but also to serve as a sort of talisman to ward off the evil spirits who would undermine Skelton’s legacy. It seems that every day brings news of developments that undermine the essential goodness of Congressman Skelton’s great work and the intent of the OPMEP.

Skelton found the PME system in much disarray when he toured the Nation’s facilities in the late 1980s and early 1990s. For example, he wrote about the military history curriculum during his visit to CGSC:

Another area that our panel report stressed was the study of military history, especially in helping to develop strategists. In our visit to Fort Leavenworth in 1988, the study of military history was confined to 51 hours and limited to the American experience of war in the 20th century.⁶

It was just this sort of oversight in curriculum, class mix (of various Service officers), and joint faculty assignments that Skelton jealously monitored and worked with the Services to correct. On the issue of joint faculty, part of his reforms were undermined in 2007 when most of the joint faculty billets at the intermediate- and senior-level Service colleges were “de-coded” in a misguided “reprogramming” of these billets to new joint billets overseas and on joint staffs. These billets have never migrated back to the military education faculty jobs from which they were removed, despite the drawdown of forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁷ As a result, the officers who explain one Service to the future leaders of other branches receive no credit for “joint time,” making joint instructor duty even less respected and sought after than it had been previously.

However, the challenge, especially following Skelton’s ouster from his position as chairman of the HASC by the Missouri Tea Party in 2010, has been who might replace him in his essential role as guardian of PME. That is right—I liked Ike. And so should all those who are committed to honest PME and JPME. Skelton is no longer here, however, so who can take his place? In truth, no one. I believe that this challenge has never been properly articulated as a question by anyone in power inside the Pentagon and by few outside. No one has stepped up to fill his shoes, perhaps because few elected representatives see any political value in assuming the role. It is almost as if the assumption was that, with Skelton gone, the system would somehow police itself. Anyone making this assumption has been proved wrong; large bureaucratic institutions are rarely successful policing themselves. There currently is no authoritative figure in Congress to whom individuals can appeal when the PME train goes off the rails, and the strengths of Skelton’s vision as enacted by Goldwater-Nichols and the subsequent Skelton Panel have been undermined by compromise and rollback.

It is all well and good to have professors working at intermediate- and senior-level Service colleges bemoan the problems with PME, but the real problem is a lack of effective congressional oversight or, more specifically, ineffective and disjointed leadership of congressional oversight. Congress has 535 voting members.⁸ It is critical that someone (and preferably more than one individual) steps up to assume Skelton’s mantle as PME guardian. As cited in a 2010 HASC report, “the society that separates its scholars from its warriors will have its thinking done by cowards and its fighting done by fools.”⁹ Naming a library after Ike Skelton has not been nearly enough. In fact, the only congressional representative who has come to the library named in his honor at Fort Leavenworth was the nonvoting member from the U.S. territory of Guam.¹⁰ That seems to be a strong indicator of the true state of Skelton’s PME legacy.



Instructor inspects Marine's uniform during 16-day Corporals Course, U.S. Marine Corps Enlisted Professional Military Education course, which was taught for first time at Dyess Air Force Base, Texas, August 5, 2010 (U.S. Air Force/Domonique Washington)

America's Got Talent

All is not lost, however. A number of names come immediately to mind—Members of the House and Senate who possess the requisite passion, interest, and talent to take on this exciting but challenging legacy—and they come from both sides of the aisle. Given the flux in leadership inside both the HASC

and the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) due to election cycles, it is inappropriate to name specific Members of the House or Senate here. There are, however, outspoken advocates for military preparedness across a range of issues involving national security and defense who write prolifically as a means to educate the public about

defense concerns.¹¹ These include Congressman J. Randy Forbes (R-VA), a member of the all-important HASC and thus a natural successor in that body to Skelton's PME watchdog legacy.

Who better to pick up Skelton's PME baton and continue to carry it until relieved than perhaps even a Member of Congress from his home state of Missouri? Whoever steps up to the plate will have to use a bipartisan team approach to perform the necessary function of policing PME and to combine forces in the best joint manner. This also has the key advantage of avoiding the sort of single-point failure that happened following Skelton's congressional defeat and would build some redundancy into the watchdog role. Another key task for his replacement(s) will be the ability to mentor others, since shifting political winds never guarantee anyone longevity in Congress. The short-term political payoffs may be small, but such a role would provide long-term benefits to the Nation and meet the real need to protect how we develop our strategic thinkers in the U.S. military.

Conclusions and Recommendations

No one is minding the JPME store. The Department of Defense (DOD) has too large a span of control to do the job. Furthermore, it is somewhat ludicrous to ask the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to do this job, which has been delegated, for all intents and purposes, to the Joint Staff J7, the component that was assigned responsibility for JPME. The military has thus been tasked to police itself and its constituent institutions, none of which are answerable directly to the J7. Although the J7 has the Process for Accreditation of Joint Education (PAJE) portfolio, this portfolio is in actuality on loan from the Chairman, who in turn has received the responsibility from the Office of the Secretary of Defense, which by law is responsible for this function.

The ability of these trustworthy organizations to effectively police PME institutions has been eroded due to

changes in the accreditation process since 9/11, which have minimized the number of PAJE visits institutions receive by comparison to the previous model of annual or biannual visits. This was primarily due to the implementation of further self-policing by “institutional self-studies.”¹² One might reasonably respond that many of these negative things occurred while Skelton was still on watch. This is partially the case. However, they were all implemented for the same reasons: the Nation was at war in both Iraq and Afghanistan and needed some *temporary* relief from peacetime OPMEP and PAJE requirements. Unfortunately, what were once vices are now established habits. In 2010, just as the war in Iraq was winding down, Skelton left Congress. In the 6 years since, nothing substantive has been done to rescind these measures. The most recent House legislation of April 2016 does not include any of the modest education reforms discussed in both SASC and HASC hearings held this spring. In fact, the only two references to PME are for medical trauma and “Small Business Regulations.”¹³ Thus any moves toward reform of PME will have to wait until next year. In the meantime, the J7 has stonewalled any change to the joint duty assignment list, as was discussed in a session of the Higher Learning Commission representatives (who accredit graduate-level education) with CGSC faculty in early 2016.¹⁴

The first step that should be taken by the new Ike Skelton or Skelton-like team would be to immediately return to the more rigorous oversight system in place before 9/11. This means the return of at least biannual PAJE visits, if not annual, as well as the return of the joint billets to PME faculties to make these jobs more attractive and career enhancing—as was the original intent. DOD, however, needs oversight from another branch of government: Congress. It is incumbent upon congressional leadership to step up to the plate. There are many politicians who claim to be strong on defense. This area of PME oversight represents an opportunity for them to “put their money where their mouth is” and do the late, great Ike Skelton proud. JFQ



Professional military education instructor, 62nd Airlift Wing, speaks with students about results of their graded assignment, August 26, 2015, at Julius A. Kolb Airman Leadership School at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington (U.S. Air Force/Sean Tobin)

Notes

¹ See, for example, Nicholas Murray, “Finally, Official Recognition That CGSC Is Broken, Bust and in the Ditch,” *Foreign Policy*, September 25, 2015, available at <<http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/25/finally-official-recognition-that-cgsc-is-broken-bust-and-in-the-ditch/>>; Joan Johnson-Freese, “The Reform of Military Education: Twenty-Five Years Later,” *Orbis* 56, no. 1 (Winter 2012), 135–153; and John T. Kuehn, “The Goldwater-Nichols Fix: Joint Education Is the Key to True ‘Jointness,’” *Armed Forces Journal* (April 2010).

² Ike Skelton, “JPME: Are We There Yet?” *Military Review* 77, no. 1 (January–February 1997), 6–7.

³ James F. Cook, *Carl Vinson: Patriarch of the Armed Forces* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004), 87–88.

⁴ Barry Watts and Williamson Murray, “Military Innovation in Peacetime,” in *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*, ed. Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 300–402.

⁵ House of Representatives, Subcommittee of the Committee on Armed Services, *Another Crossroads? Professional Military Education Twenty Years After the Goldwater-Nichols Act and the Skelton Panel*, Publication No. 111-67 (May 20, 2009). See also Johnson-Freese, 135–136.

⁶ Skelton, 6.

⁷ Kuehn, 32. These billets are known as joint duty assignment list billets and qualified as joint qualification billets toward the joint qualified officer required for all flag officers under Goldwater-Nichols.

⁸ See GovTrack.com Web site, available at <www.govtrack.us/congress/members>.

⁹ Cited in Johnson-Freese, 135.

¹⁰ The Combined Arms Research Library that services the Command and General Staff College (CGSC) was renamed the Ike Skelton Combined Arms Research Library in 2013.

¹¹ See, for example, “Committee Assignments” at Congressman J. Randy Forbes’s Web site, available at <<http://forbes.house.gov/biography/committees.htm>>. See also J. Randy Forbes, “Rebalancing the Rhetoric,” *Proceedings* 138, no. 10 (October 2012), available at <www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2012-10/rebalancing-rhetoric>.

¹² Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Joint Military Education: Actions Needed to Implement DOD Recommendations for Enhancing Leadership Development* (Washington, DC: GAO, October 2013), passim, and reference to self-studies, 18. The annual Process for Accreditation of Joint Education (PAJE) visits seem to be a feature of the past that is not well documented in the 2013 GAO report. The author’s personal experience involved PAJE visits to Fort Leavenworth from 2001–2005.

¹³ U.S. House of Representatives, *H.R. 4904 FY17 National Defense Authorization Bill, Chairman’s Mark*, April 2016, 3–11, available at <<http://docs.house.gov/meetings/AS/AS00/20160427/104832/BILLS-114HR4909ih-FC.pdf>>.

¹⁴ This information was passed to the author at the meeting of the Higher Learning Commission members with CGSC faculty on February 29, 2016. One representative was well versed in the recent initiative by the Military Education Coordination Council with Joint Staff J7 regarding joint duty assignment list reprogramming or expansion. The author also obtained verification of this information in conversations with James B. Martin, the assistant dean of CGSC.