



Ike Skelton, 1931–2013

Champion of Military Education

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E ducation is persistently undervalued in most military institutions. This lack of attention is based on two realities of military life: education engenders the habit of questioning, while sound discipline, particularly in combat, requires unhesitating obedience; furthermore, education requires reflection, but war demands action. Thus, the military Services tend to draw broad lines of demarcation between their thinkers and their fighters.

One man other than the 19th-century soldier Sir William Butler who understood the evils of this tendency was a small-town lawyer from Missouri named Isaac Newton “Ike” Skelton IV. Mr. Skelton entered Congress in 1977 and rose to become Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee (HASC) in 2007. But before he reached this position, Congressman Skelton was a key player in congressional efforts to reduce the dysfunctional inter-Service friction so glaringly displayed during Operation *Desert One*, the abortive 1980 attempt to rescue American hostages in Tehran. This effort culminated in passage of the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, which is widely regarded as a landmark of constructive military reform.

But Congressman Skelton sensed that the passage of Goldwater-Nichols was not enough; something else had to be done to assure that America’s warriors could *think* strategically in order for its military Services to *act* strategically. That something was to enhance the Services’ educational systems. Congressman Skelton enlisted the aid of retired Air Force Colonel Archie Barrett, who graduated from West Point in 1957, earned a Ph.D. from Harvard in 1971, and joined the HASC staff after his retirement. With Barrett’s active assistance, Skelton undertook a systematic program to draw attention to the dearth of strategic thinking in America’s Armed Forces, lay out the rationale for education as the primary antidote, survey the state of military education, and propose concrete reforms to enhance it.

The first two phases of this endeavor took place over the course of roughly

6 weeks from October to November 1987, during which Skelton delivered five speeches on the House floor that over a quarter-century later are still worth reading. His theme was contained in a series of rhetorical questions in the first speech: “Where are our strategic thinkers of today? Does our military structure no longer nurture such individuals? Is our professional military education system such that it would be impossible for [an Alfred Thayer] Mahan, [George C.] Marshall, or [Maxwell] Taylor to make a contribution? Does our military spend so much time studying weapons systems and tactics that there is no room for strategic thinking?”¹ In subsequent speeches, he raised important questions about existing trends in military education, argued that it was the “weak link” in America’s defense armor, contrasted American strategic thinking in World War II with that of the more recent past, and described how the soon-to-be-established HASC Panel on Military Education, which he would chair, would go about its work.

Over the next 14 months, Congressman Skelton’s panel conducted 28 hearings in which testimony was received from 48 witnesses, including Admiral Stansfield Turner, the former president of the Naval War College who had fundamentally restructured that college’s curriculum in the wake of the Vietnam War; the commandants of all the Services’ intermediate and advanced educational institutions; the four Service chiefs; and a wide variety of senior commanders and civilian educators. I was privileged to attend one of those hearings. Congressman Skelton was exceptionally knowledgeable about both the past and the present of military education and was capable of exercising the power of his office with persistence and authority.

Congressman Skelton’s panel published its report in April 1989.² It found that the existing military education system lacked the rigor and focus required to equip the Services intellectually to provide for the common defense. It called upon the Department of Defense to focus educational institutions on specified learning objectives, enhance the quality of both civilian and military

faculty, establish a two-phased system for the education of joint officers, form an Institute for National Strategic Studies at National Defense University, institute a CAPSTONE course for the education of newly selected general officers, and require all intermediate and senior educational institutions to adopt essay-based examinations. These recommendations were unevenly implemented at the time, and some have endured longer than others. But their net effect was positive: Congressman Skelton put the Services on notice that Congress considered military education important, even if they did not.

Congressman Skelton’s effectiveness as an educational reformer stemmed in part from his lifelong interest in history, particularly military history. When he was a boy, his father would occasionally allow him to wear the Sailor hat from his service aboard USS *Missouri*. When Ike put it on, “it was as if whispers of warriors floated inside that hat—whispers of important lessons learned through experience in battles past.”³ Congressman Skelton was serious about learning from the past to benefit the present and future, and he always stressed the importance of “lessons learned” through the study of military history. Congressman Skelton strongly valued his lifetime of first-hand military education through participation in staff rides—as both host and guest—to some of the most historic battlefields. In what one might call his valedictory speech, given when he received the 2012 Sylvanus Thayer Award, he approvingly cited President Harry Truman’s admonition, “If you want to be a good American, then you must know your history.”⁴

As America faces a dangerous and uncertain future, as well as significant fiscal constraints, Congressman Ike Skelton’s determined efforts to hold high the light of military education leave a legacy we would do well to emulate. JFQ

Notes

¹ Cong. Rec. H26703 (1987) (statement of Rep. Skelton).

² U.S. House of Representatives, *Report of the Panel on Military Education of the One Hundredth Congress of the Committee on Armed*

Services, 101st Cong., 1st sess., Vol. 4 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1989).

³ Ike Skelton, “Whispers of Warriors: The Importance of History to the Military Professional,” *Naval War College Review* 53 (Summer 2000), 7.

⁴ “Ike Skelton’s Acceptance Speech of the 2012 Sylvanus Thayer Award,” West Point, NY, October 18, 2012, available at <www.westpointaog.org/page.aspx?pid=5186>.