

U.S. Naval War College student participates in National Security Decision Making seminar (U.S. Navy/James E. Foehl)



# Quo Vadis? The Education of Senior Military Officers

By Charles D. Allen

This article considers approaches to teaching senior military officers at the U.S. Army War College (USAWC). It reviews the results of several studies and surveys from the employers of our graduates and from recent graduates themselves on how best to prepare for future assignments. It examines the tensions between theoretical and utilitarian education in strategy and concludes with a recom-

mendation that USAWC faculty design and implement a portfolio approach to provide students with the opportunity to demonstrate the benefits of senior-level education.

## Introduction

Over the past decade, the U.S. military has encountered challenges and difficulties in providing governmental services to indigenous populations. Lessons from post-World War II Europe and Japan should have informed recent U.S. policy and operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Donald Kettl and James Fesler describe public administrators as unelected public servants who work

in public departments and agencies, including the Department of Defense (DOD), at all levels of government.<sup>1</sup> Arguably, the U.S. military plays a substantial role in the public administration of the will of the American people. Accordingly, its educational programs should prepare them for this role. DOD consumes over 50 percent of the Nation's discretionary budget as it employs a uniformed and civilian workforce of over 3 million people. Its military officers have significant responsibilities as public administrators. Given the vast responsibilities of this largest executive branch organization, it is curious that military education

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Colonel Charles D. Allen, USA (Ret.), is Professor of Leadership and Cultural Studies in the Department of Command, Leadership, and Management at the U.S. Army War College.

programs have been generally ignored in public administration literature.<sup>2</sup> Like other U.S. public administrators, DOD officers both at home and abroad assume responsibilities in public security and law enforcement, in public works, and in emergency management and services. Thus, DOD senior-level education should prepare its graduates, among other things, to serve as effective public administrators.

The U.S. Army War College is one of DOD's senior-level colleges and provides the capstone of joint professional military education for U.S. military officers. Mostly in their mid-40s and with more than 20 years of service, these military professionals are high performers with extensive experience in leading and managing organizations. This formal professional development opportunity provides them a foundation for future high-level service. Each year approximately 300 officers from across the Armed Forces participate in USAWC seminars of the Resident Education Program (REP) throughout a 10-month opportunity to "confer on the three great problems of national defense, military science, and responsible command."<sup>3</sup> The Distance Education Program engages over 700 students in two 2-year cohorts. Like the other senior Service colleges, USAWC programs are designed to equip graduates with critical thinking skills that facilitate analysis of strategic situations, enable them to provide sound assessments and advice to senior leaders, and prepare them to manage complex national security organizations in the joint, interagency, international, and multinational environment.

The USAWC REP curriculum is delivered by three academic departments: National Security and Strategy; Command, Leadership, and Management; and Military Strategy, Plans, and Operations. The curriculum currently consists of five core courses followed by two terms of electives, along with special programs providing in-depth study of selected areas. Seminar cohorts of 16 to 17 students are led by a three- to four-person faculty team. As of academic year 2012–2013, there are 24 seminars with standardized lesson plans designed by

the faculty (up from 20 seminars in 2011). Each faculty team has leeway in the delivery of content and is responsible for achieving lesson objectives for each session.

As an educational institution, USAWC should be the role model of a learning organization<sup>4</sup> within DOD. Organizational scholar Peter Senge asserts in *The Fifth Discipline* that a learning organization is "continually expanding its capacity to create its future."<sup>5</sup> The future we seek to create is one of relevancy to the military members of our society who are charged with protecting U.S. national values and interests. Thus, we continually assess the design and delivery of the curriculum to provide graduates with the best possible preparation for future service. The faculty conducts an examination of each core course and individual lessons therein—a crucial and often painful experience. My experiences in these "hot washes" or "after action reviews" generated this article on the education of USAWC students.

### The Stimulus

At an end-of-course review with teaching colleagues for the REP, I was the leader of a small group for a subset of lessons of our core course on Strategic Leadership. What followed was a pointed discussion on the faculty role in educating our students for senior-leadership responsibilities. One faculty member argued that our teaching philosophy should seek to provide graduates with tools that can be applied in their assignments immediately following graduation. One teaching method put forth in *The Adult Learner* was the use of adult learning models as the guiding process in seminars.<sup>6</sup> The other was based on *Education for Judgment*.<sup>7</sup> The faculty member decried the practice of providing students with multiple frameworks and theoretical perspectives without first giving them tools to use in the "real world." He asserted that not allowing students the opportunity to apply the perspectives to case studies was a waste of time given his perception of theoretical discussions with limited or no application.<sup>8</sup> With passion, the faculty member commented that such discussions could be purely academic exercises

that would argue distinctions without differences. This contention caused us as educators to revisit the assumptions of adult learning or andragogy:<sup>9</sup>

- Adults have the need to know why they are learning something.
- Adults learn through doing.
- Adults are problem-solvers.
- Adults learn best when the subject is of immediate use.

In a larger forum, the debate continued on what our approach should be—to provide a framework with an application of the concepts presented in each of the lessons or to present multiple frameworks so that students would have a broad understanding of the topics. The battle lines seemed drawn superficially between faculty members with postgraduate educational experience and those with traditional operational "field" or functional experience within the military. It would be convenient but wrong to characterize the debate as "how to think" versus "what to think." The essential question faced by all faculty is how to teach "how to think" in the limited time we have in seminar. The USAWC faculty represents a range of educational and military experiences (it is a mix of civilian academics and predominantly military Active-duty and retired officers). With that in mind, our faculty members have preferred teaching styles for delivering our diverse curriculum.

### Stakeholder Surveys

This is not a unique debate for us, or for educators writ large.<sup>10</sup> Our institution has explored this question through external and internal studies to determine the needs of future military officers and study approaches to educating military leaders for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>11</sup> Recent reviews of the USAWC curriculum focused on educating strategic leaders and educating strategic thinking.<sup>12</sup> Each study addresses presenting specific knowledge to develop competencies for near-term assignments—a pragmatic and rational approach to meet the short-term needs of the officers and their gaining organizations—as well as providing students with several tools that can be



Retired Ambassador Robert B. Zoellick, chairman of Goldman Sach's International Advisors, speaks to students, staff, and faculty during evening lecture at U.S. Naval War College, October 2014 (U.S. Navy/James E. Foehl)

useful in handling myriad situations. The goal is to develop within our graduates the ability to create their own ways to address the unforeseen circumstances in any environment.

Each study recommends that students receive a broad exposure to concepts that enhance development of their adaptive capacity—their ability to cope with a wide range of conditions. The Office of the Secretary of Defense study suggests future military leaders need “an appreciation for adaptability and flexibility. . . . Officers have to be comfortable with thinking in terms of the art of the possible. They must be able to take in multiple points of view and different perspectives.”<sup>13</sup> However, some faculty members counter that students, as adult learners, need a tangible framework that can be applied to anticipated problems. The use of frameworks is commonplace in Army culture. Prior to senior Service schools, military education is based on standardized curriculum delivered uniformly. However, successful USAWC graduates must be able to determine

when current doctrine is ineffective and then to develop new doctrine appropriate to the circumstances at hand. For example, our contemporary military experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq led to the development of a counterinsurgency doctrine that diverged greatly from the previous doctrine that focused on large-scale conventional operations.

Surveys of military leaders in operational and institutional positions have considered this educational issue. U.S. general officers reported that developing breadth of knowledge was more important for USAWC graduates than having depth of knowledge in specialized areas.<sup>14</sup> General officer respondents in 2012 indicated that USAWC graduates were well prepared to understand how to operate in the strategic environment, address current missions, and deal with complex problems.<sup>15</sup> External observers and employers of our graduates suggest that a broad education with exposure to many perspectives enhances their adaptability as senior leaders.

Nonetheless, some students and faculty perceive the need to provide graduates with more specific ways to overcome both the predictable and unpredictable challenges of their next assignments. This can be accomplished by providing them with different frameworks or models that explain organizational phenomenon (descriptive) and also expose them to various approaches to accomplish organizational goals (prescriptive). If a tested theory becomes widely accepted, the resulting model is adopted to provide predictable results. However, when we can only rely on competing theories, each of which may describe the organizational phenomena for only certain conditions, then it becomes imprudent to assume that a single framework will suffice. Our recent graduates are best positioned to validate this assertion.

Our USAWC students, by virtue of their past successful performance and high potential, have been selected to serve in higher levels of the national defense establishment. They have real-world experience within their organizations that they can bring to bear on the issues that arise in their seminars. As an institution, we must convey the relevance and utility of the material we teach to our students who are archetypal adult learners.

Our military educational mission mirrors that of a public administration educational program. For this kind of education, Patricia Shields reminds us of the tradition of classical pragmatism. She discusses the applicability of the “four Ps”: practical, pluralism, participatory, and provisional.<sup>16</sup> Our USAWC should likewise be *practical* by demonstrating the link between theories and our students’ broad experiences. The diversity of our constituents as well as the interdependence of policy and decisionmaking systems reveals *pluralism* in the realm of national security. Developing a clear understanding of the problem space and potential solutions requires the *participatory* engagement of all members of the national security enterprise. Lastly, adopted policies are rarely “best” permanent solutions given the changing nature of the environment. In our realm, all policies and practices are *provisional*.

This reflection on USAWC education began with a forceful nudge by colleagues to examine how we should attempt to educate our USAWC students. I came to realize that we are faced with several paradoxes: We must educate both broadly and deeply. We must not only expose them to proven ways to address known challenges but also enhance their ability to adapt and create their own tools for new situations. We must encourage students to share their experiences while helping them view situations through different lenses. Each of these paradoxes presents a challenge to our faculty, who want to fully equip our students for the future while enabling them to perform effectively in their next assignment. One colleague called this “educating for certainty.” But we must acknowledge that we are unable to do that. The future provides both continuity and change. So our educational approach should account for both and prepare our students to operate in the strategic landscape they will encounter.

A portfolio approach may be the most pragmatic way to meet our institutional goals. The portfolio curriculum design and materials offers established frameworks and theories combined with opportunities to explore emerging theoretical constructs. During a visit to USAWC seminars, a noted journalist and military historian challenged our students to use their year as “an opportunity to get bigger.” Through historical examinations, he discerned that successful military leaders had the uncanny abilities “to accommodate other opinions” and “to be open to other points of view.” These abilities help inform “bigger judgments” that senior leaders have the responsibility and obligation to make.

I realized that we as faculty must also accept the challenge to get bigger and move away from our own areas of comfort. We have to accept that we may not always have the right answer to provide to our students to solve problems that have yet to materialize. In designing courses and lessons, we should bridge the gap between preparing students for their next assignment and preparing them for their roles in an uncertain future. Some lessons will lend themselves to a tried and

true framework and allow students to test their understanding of its concepts and applications in a case study. Even then, we faculty must encourage students to challenge even approved solutions. There will be other lessons where tried and true is not a viable approach and may even be counterproductive. These are better addressed by working through multiple perspectives. Faculty members who are responsible for specific lessons must keep in mind the deliverability of the lessons by the collective faculty and to the students. The overarching goal is to provide our graduates with the best possible preparation for future service to the Nation through this educational experience.

Implicitly, this goal must be sought at each of the DOD professional military education institutions, whereby its attainment will support success of the joint force. With the persistent challenges in the joint, interagency, international, and multinational environment, it is doubly important that the Armed Forces resist the pull of parochialism in the face of policy and fiscal uncertainty. Successful graduates of joint professional military education programs will have learned “how to think” and pragmatism in collaborative planning and execution of operations to support national security interests.

These reflections are intended to prompt the public administration and leadership education communities to also reflect on how to assist the U.S. military in its functions and responsibilities. The breadth and depth of research in these fields offer knowledge and practical applications that can be useful in national security matters. Further engagement and collaboration—a conversation—between the public administration, leadership education, and defense communities would benefit all. JFQ

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Donald F. Kettl and James W. Fesler, *The Politics Of The Administrative Process*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: CQ Press, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Jeffery A. Weber and Johan Eliasson, eds., *Handbook of Military Administration: Public Administration and Public Policy* (London: CRC Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Elihu Root, “The Army War College, Address at the Laying of the Cornerstone, Washington, DC, February 21, 1903,” in *The Military and Colonial Policy of the United States, Addresses and Reports by Elihu Root*, ed. Robert Bacon and James B. Scott (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916), 121–129.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Argyris and Donald Schön, *Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (Boston, MA: Currency, 1990), 14.

<sup>6</sup> Malcolm S. Knowles, Elwood F. Holton, and Richard A. Swanson, *The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (San Diego: Elsevier, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> C. Roland Christensen, David A. Garvin, and Ann Sweet, eds., *Education for Judgment: The Artistry of Discussion Leadership* (Boston: HBS Press, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> Louis B. Barnes, C. Roland Christensen, and Abby J. Hansen, *Teaching and the Case Method*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Knowles, Holton, and Swanson; Peter Renner, *The Art of Teaching Adults: How to Become an Exceptional Instructor and Facilitator*, 10<sup>th</sup> ed. (Vancouver: Training Associates, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Frans-Bauke van der Meer and Arthur Ringeling, “An Education Strategy for Practitioners in Public Administration Master’s Programs,” *Journal of Public Affairs Education* 16, no. 1 (2010), 77–93.

<sup>11</sup> “The Military Officer in 2030: Secretary of Defense 2003 Summer Study,” slide presentation (Newport, RI: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2003); and William T. Johnsen et al., “The Army War College: Educating Strategic Leaders in an Age of Uncertainty,” in *The Future of Military War Colleges*, ed. Jeffrey D. McCausland (Carlisle, PA: Dickinson College, December 2005), 22–185.

<sup>12</sup> Harry R. Yarger and Charles D. Allen, *Educating Strategic Leaders: Report of the Elective Program Review Working Group* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2007); and Harry R. Yarger, *Educating Strategic Thinking in JSOU* (Washington, DC: Joint Special Operations University, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> “The Military Officer in 2030: Secretary of Defense 2003 Summer Study.”

<sup>14</sup> 2012 *U.S. Army War College General Officer Survey* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>16</sup> David H. Brendel, *Healing Psychiatry: Bridging the Science/Humanism Divide* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006); and Patricia M. Shields, “Rediscovering the Taproot: Is Classical Pragmatism the Route to Renew Public Administration?” *Public Administration Review* (March/April 2008), 205–221.