



The National War College

Celebrating 70 Years of Developing Strategic Practitioners

By Darren Hartford and David A. Tretler

I came here to study war, and while I learned about war, I learned even more about the importance of finding peace.

—GENERAL COLIN POWELL, USA (RET.)
National War College, Class of 1976

At the end of September 2016, the National Defense University (NDU) and National War College (NWC) celebrated the 40th anniversary of the University and the 70th anniversary of the War College by dedicating the West Wing of Roosevelt Hall on Fort Lesley J. McNair to General Colin Powell, USA (Ret.).¹ The epigraph above is inscribed over the entrance of the Powell Wing and expresses General Powell's thinking on his War College experience. Perhaps unbeknownst to General Powell, his words echo a statement by Lieutenant General Leonard T. Gerow, USA, president of the 1946 board that recommended the formation of the

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National War College: “The College is concerned with grand strategy and the utilization of the national resources necessary to implement that strategy. . . . Its graduates will exercise a great influence on the formulation of national and foreign policy in both peace and war.”² The charge implicit in General Gerow’s conception of the college, and in General Powell’s later experience there, is that despite its “War College” moniker, the school’s course of study is more than just a look at war; it encapsulates whole-of-government solutions to the entire spectrum of national security issues. That charge continues to inform both the college’s sense of itself and the guidance provided to it by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS).

Since 1996, the Chairman has provided that guidance via CJCS Instruction 1800.01, *Officer Professional Military Education Policy* (OPMEP), the latest edition of which is dated May 29, 2015.³ As the name implies, the document’s purpose is to “distribute the policies, procedures, objectives and responsibilities for officer professional military education and joint professional military education.”⁴ While the document stipulates several educational standards applicable to all professional military education (PME) schools, it offers a caveat that there will be differences in application “since no particular organizational pattern or application strategy applies in all settings.”⁵ Likewise, to address the distinct nature of each senior-level college, the OPMEP dictates that “PME institutions will base their curriculums on their parent Service’s needs or, in the case of the NDU colleges, on their CJCS-assigned missions.”⁶

Resident senior-level PME only lasts 10 months. Each senior-level PME institution has to balance the breadth of education that a senior official needs in order to provide effective strategic leadership with the need for depth in essential areas in order to generate critical expertise. The OPMEP addresses this tension by tasking the various senior-level PME schools with different missions and focus areas. The end result is a senior

officer corps that is a mosaic of groups of senior leaders, each of which has special expertise in a particular dimension of strategy—from operational strategies and campaign plans to Service strategies to national military strategies to national security strategies. One can see the variety of skills that the Joint Chiefs and other government stakeholders desire in senior officials in the focus areas the OPMEP lays out for the various senior-level schools. For example, the OPMEP stipulates that the focus for the Service war colleges is to address “theater- and national-level strategies and processes. Curricula focus on how the combatant commanders, Joint Staff, and Department of Defense use the instruments of national power to develop and carry out national military strategy, develop joint operational expertise and perspectives, and hone joint leadership and warfighting skills.”⁷

For the Joint and Combined Warfighting School at the Joint Forces Staff College (JFSC), its focus is to “further develop joint attitudes and perspectives, joint operational expertise, and hone joint leader potential and warfighting skills.”⁸ The Joint Advanced Warfighting School at JFSC focuses on the military art and science of planning, preparing, and executing campaign plans for joint, interagency, international, and multinational participants across the full range of military operations. The Dwight D. Eisenhower School for National Security and Resource Strategy’s distinct focus is “on developing the national security strategy and in evaluating, marshalling, and managing resources in the execution of the strategy,”⁹ while the College of International Security Affairs “provides a senior-level perspective on which to base strategic response to terrorism, irregular warfare, and other contemporary security challenges.”¹⁰

Within this mosaic of skill sets, the OPMEP charges the War College to focus “on national security strategy—the art and science of developing, applying and coordinating the instruments of national power to achieve objectives contributing to national security.”¹¹ This focus on national security drives the mission

the OPMEP assigns to the college: “to educate future leaders of the Armed Forces, Department of State, and other civilian agencies for high-level policy, command, and staff responsibilities by conducting a senior-level course of study in national security strategy.”¹² General Powell, as CJCS, first assigned this mission to the War College in his 1990 *Military Education Policy Document*, the predecessor of the OPMEP.¹³ Subsequent Chairmen have reaffirmed this mission six times. This is the fourth mission statement the college has had, but all have had the same essential thrust: producing senior military and civilian leaders with special expertise in national security strategy.

Program Aspects

In shaping the NWC program, the college leadership has focused on what it has seen as the four crucial aspects of the mission statement. First is the charge to conduct a senior-level course of study in national security strategy. This is the distinct *raison d’être* of the college. NWC is singularly—and solely—tasked with focusing on national security strategy. Other PME schools include national security strategy in their curricula as part of the foundation or context for their own distinct field of study, but no other school spends its entire 10-month program focused solely on national security strategy. NWC understands its purpose to be to create a cadre of officers with special expertise in national security strategy that, when blended with cadres of officers with special expertise in other areas of national security affairs, creates a synergy far more powerful than could be achieved by any uniform, standardized program of education for all officers. Every aspect of the NWC program is shaped by the goal of producing graduates who, given a particular national security challenge, can assess that challenge and develop a credible, comprehensive national security strategy to deal with it.

Second is the task to educate. The OPMEP defines *educate* as conveying general bodies of knowledge and developing habits of mind applicable

to a broad spectrum of endeavors.¹⁴ As the OPMEP directs, NWC aims not at enhancing its students' capacities to perform specific functions and tasks, but rather at fostering their breadth of view, diverse perspectives, critical analysis, abstract reasoning, comfort with ambiguity and uncertainty, and innovative thinking, particularly concerning complex problems.

Third is the charge to educate future leaders for high-level policy, command, and staff responsibilities. In designing and executing its curriculum, NWC looks beyond its graduates' follow-on assignments to the highest, most important strategic responsibilities they will hold during the remainder of their careers. As the OPMEP stipulates, NWC concentrates on developing the habits of mind, conceptual foundations, and critical faculties graduates will need as strategic leaders or as key strategic advisors in the Department of Defense, Department of State, and other U.S. Government agencies.

Finally, there is the charge to educate future leaders of the "Armed Forces, Department of State and other government agencies," as well as International Fellows. All aspects of NWC are thoroughly joint and interagency—its origins, its programs, its faculty, and its students. Because a joint and integrated perspective permeates and informs the entire NWC program, the experience forces students out of their intellectual and cultural comfort zones. The nature of the NWC environment ensures that all graduates are able to transcend their particular Service, operational, or intellectual frame of reference and can operate from a truly joint perspective.

Desired Program Outcomes

Given the NWC mission, its aim is to develop national security strategists who are expert in the dynamics of force, diplomacy, economics, and information, and the orchestrated employment of those instruments in pursuit of national interests. Thus the College has set for itself two goals:

- First, improve the quality of applied strategic thinking of all its graduates, shifting their intellectual and professional perspectives from the tactical and operational to the strategic, and developing the analytical ability and judgment they will need to function in the gray areas that characterize the complex, civil-military, multinational interactions at the national-strategic level.
- Second, produce within each class a cadre of highly skilled strategic practitioners—bona fide strategists and strategic advisors who demonstrate the high degree of expertise, conceptualization, and innovation in national security strategy formulation that will be needed to lead the Nation's strategic efforts in the future.

Working from its mission and its two goals, the college has formulated six core educational outcomes that define the essential concepts our graduates must master and that serve to integrate the entire academic program:

- apply the logic of strategic and critical thinking in national security matters
- analyze the practice of strategic leadership in national security
- analyze how domestic, transnational, and international factors shape national security strategy and policy
- analyze the nature, character, and conduct of war
- evaluate the nature, purpose, capabilities, limitations, and principal concepts for use of the instruments of national power—diplomatic, informational, military, and economic
- develop national security strategies for situations of peace, crisis, and war.

The National War College achieves its learning outcomes via an extensive core curriculum, taught sequentially, that constitutes 80 to 85 percent of the overall program. That core curriculum examines the fundamentals of thinking strategically, the elements and instruments of national power and influence, the theory and practice of war, the domestic and international

context of national security strategy, and contemporary military capabilities and doctrine. Students cap their studies with a year-long Individual Strategy Research Project (ISRP) in which they select a contemporary national security challenge, research and analyze it, develop a strategy to deal with it, present their strategy in a strategy paper, and then present and defend that strategy to a two-person faculty team. In essence, they end the year demonstrating they can do what the college has set as its purpose: produce graduates who, given a national security challenge, can assess that challenge and develop a strategy to deal with it.

Measuring Success

The National War College has produced approximately 11,300 graduates over the past 70 years. As stated previously, its mission is to educate future leaders for "high-level policy, command, and staff responsibilities," and if measured by the high-level responsibilities alumni have achieved, then the college has achieved this goal. Among its alumni are a U.S. Senator, Senator John McCain (Class of 1974), and a Secretary of State, General Colin Powell; 3 National Security Advisors, General Powell, Lieutenant General Brent Scowcroft (1968), and General James Jones (1985); at least 2 State Department graduates who have achieved the highest Foreign Service Officer rank of Career Ambassador, Ambassador Stapleton Roy (1975) and Ambassador William Brownfield (1993); and 7 of the 19 Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, starting with the 6th, General Earle Wheeler (1950), and including the 18th, General Martin Dempsey (1996). Since the college's founding, 29 graduates became a Service chief (out of the 106 who have held those positions), and 30 graduates became combatant commanders (out of 97). And as of this writing, 26 percent of the Active four-stars and 18 percent of the Active three-stars are graduates. This record of achievement, from a student body that for the past several years has represented approximately 14 percent of the military officers who attend senior-level PME in a given year,



President Obama jokes with Vice President Biden and former Secretary of State Colin Powell following meeting in Oval Office, December 2010 (The White House/Pete Souza)

is a testament both to the quality of the college's incoming students and to the effectiveness of the college's efforts to hone those high-quality students' abilities as strategic practitioners.¹⁵

A review of the alumni rolls shows that of the 8,249 military officers who have graduated from the college over the past 70 years, 2,167 (26 percent) have made general or flag officer rank. A similar percentage of Foreign Service Officers (309 of 1,189 State Department graduates) have gone on to become Ambassadors. Not included in these numbers are the countless civilian agency members who attended the school as GS-14s and GS-15s and went on to join either the Senior Executive or Senior Intelligence Service ranks. Nor does it include those military members who may have retired from Active service and then chose to continue to serve the government as civilians. Two such examples are Colonel James Baker, USAF (Ret.) (2006), who currently serves as the Director for Net Assessments in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and Colonel Troy Thomas, USAF (Ret.)

(2010), who currently serves as a special assistant to the President for National Security Affairs.

U.S. students who reach the highest level of government service after graduation are just one mark of the college's success. The college also is a springboard for the careers of its International Fellow graduates. Since 1990, 541 International Fellows have graduated from the institution in support of the Chairman's vision to engage and foster relationships with foreign partners. While most of these graduates have achieved general or flag officer rank in their respective countries' services, many have gone on to become service chiefs, chiefs of defense, or ministers of defense. The University's International Student Management Office recognizes these officers by inducting them into its International Fellows Hall of Fame, and, at last count, 19 NWC International Fellow alumni have received this honor.

Faculty performance also factors into the college's success, both as contributor and product. Given that the use of the

Socratic method in small-group seminars (no more than 13 students per seminar) is at the heart of the college's educational approach, its faculty members are critical to the college's success. While all faculty contribute inside the college, however, and are recognized experts in their fields, some of them contribute well beyond the classroom and shape the discussion of strategic issues on the national stage. For example, the first deputy commandant for international affairs was Ambassador George Kennan, who shaped the country's containment strategy. On the faculty the same year as Ambassador Kennan was Dr. Bernard Brodie, who went on to shape U.S. nuclear strategy. Other luminaries over the years include Colonel John Collins, USA (Ret.), Dr. Bard O'Neill, Dr. Terry Deibel, Dr. Martin van Creveld, and Dr. Bud Cole, to name just a few.

Challenges

With the overall drawdown of personnel and budgets over the past few years, some Services struggle to fill their quotas of students and faculty at

the school. Part of NWC's success has depended on the OPMEP's requirement that there be equal representation of officers from all three military departments in both the student body and on the faculty so that no one military culture shapes the discussions in and out of the classroom.¹⁶ The inability of one or more military departments to fill their quotas upsets the balance among the departments, which is a central pillar of the distinctive form of joint education the college provides. While there are plans to address this, it currently remains an issue that requires monitoring.

Budget reductions have also cut into the college's ability to send students overseas to conduct on-the-ground field research for their year-long capstone strategy projects, the ISRP. While the students do extensive research and analysis for their strategy projects stateside, conducting research on the ground overseas is critical because, as former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has stated, you travel "because you just have to see and hear some things in person to understand them fully."¹⁷ The college groups the students into small research teams (8 to 11 students), each focused on one of 16 to 20 strategically important countries selected by the college. Each student then selects a particular security challenge related to the country assigned to his or her team, and that challenge becomes the subject of the student's capstone strategy project. Working together under faculty tutelage and through the U.S. Embassy in their assigned country, students arrange a series of meetings with various agencies and entities that can help them more clearly understand the strategic situation in the country. With less funding available, the college has had to halve the amount of time students spend on their overseas research, and this affects the quality of their strategic assessments and the strategies that rest on those assessments.

In addition to the effects of budget reductions, the college also faces challenges concerning facilities, information systems, and academic technology. As part of its own effort to deal with reduced funding allocations over the past several years, NDU has sought ways to maintain

the effectiveness of its colleges and components while maximizing the efficiencies where possible. NDU is also seeking ways to free up funds to invest in academic technology for the future to maintain the quality of the student experience. This is leading to changes in support and staffing at the component level that NWC needs to adapt to in order to face fiscal realities and to continue successfully fulfilling its mission.

The Way Ahead

As the common wisdom about mutual funds avows, "Past performance is not an indicator of future results." Despite its success to date, NWC is always examining possible ways that it can do a better job educating future leaders for high-level policy, command, and staff responsibilities. The past 15 years of conflict indicate a U.S. propensity for use of force, with less reliance on orchestration of all the instruments of power, to achieve or protect the Nation's interests. Over the past year, the college has undertaken an extensive review of its approach to how it conceptualizes and presents the instruments of power. The goal is to ensure graduates can employ the diplomatic, informational, and economic instruments with just as much facility as they can the military instrument. To do that, graduates must understand the fundamental nature of each of those nonmilitary instruments; the capabilities and shortcomings of each; how each produces effects and with what certainty under different conditions; and how to combine, coordinate, and integrate them to produce strategic synergies.

The faculty is undertaking this task to prepare students for the leadership roles they will fulfill in the years to come. Over the course of their 10 months at the college, students will examine classic theory, analytical frameworks, important historical cases and analogies, and emerging concepts central to understanding and employing all the instruments of national power. It is crucial that they leave the college with a firm grasp of not only the enduring nature and changing character of war, but also how to craft creative,

effective whole-of-government solutions to national security challenges short of war to ensure and sustain the peace. JFQ

Notes

¹ Portions of this article come from the National War College (NWC) submission for the Process of Accreditation for Joint Education.

² Leonard T. Gerow, *Report of War Department Military Education Board on Education System for Officers of the Army* (Washington, DC: War Department, May 27, 1946), available at <<http://cgsc.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/p4013coll11/id/1266>>.

³ Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction (CJSCI) 1800.01E, *Officer Professional Military Education Policy* (OPMEP) (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, May 29, 2015), available at <www.dtic.mil/cjcs_directives/cdata/unlimit/1800_01a.pdf>.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, E-1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, B-1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, A-A-7.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, A-A-8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, A-A-7-8.

¹² *Ibid.*, E-F-1.

¹³ CJCS Memorandum CM 344-90, "Military Education Policy Document," May 1, 1990.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, A-3.

¹⁵ This percentage does not include those officers who attend fellowships or who participate in an exchange program with an international partner's senior-level War College. A review of one Service's senior developmental education list indicates almost 20 percent of the annual professional military education (PME) students attend a fellowship, foreign, or other nontraditional PME. The 14 percent referred to in the text is calculated from data in a January 2015 Center for Naval Analyses report, "JPME in the Current Fiscal Climate," conducted for the Joint Chiefs of Staff J7, Director for Joint Force Development.

¹⁶ CJCSI 1800.01E; per the OPMEP Enclosure B, Paragraph 5 (3), "NWC, ES [Eisenhower School], JAWS [Joint Advanced Warfighting School], and NIU [National Intelligence University] must have approximately equal representation from each of the three Military Departments in their military student composition/seminars which award JPME credit."

¹⁷ Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Vintage Books, May 2015), 35.