



The National War College

Marking 70 Years of Strategic Education

By Janet Breslin-Smith

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Seventy years ago, a war-weary Washington struggled with uncertainty and alarm. Exhausted after years of global conflict and still carrying memories of the Great Depression, America yearned for home and prosperity. Yet barely 6 months after victory in World War II, Washington faced troubling signs of danger ahead. A past ally was becoming a threat.

Soviet aggression shattered postwar dreams of peace. With the dawn of 1946 we entered a new strategic era—the bipolar struggle with the Soviet Union.

The Nation responded. Testifying to the resilience and creative pragmatism of American leadership, Washington's alarm and uncertainty soon were replaced by productivity and accomplishment. Key



Senior American commanders in Western Europe, 1945; seated, left to right, William Hood Simpson, George S. Patton, Carl A. Spaatz, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Omar Bradley, Courtney Hodges, Leonard T. Gerow; standing, left to right, Ralph Francis Stearley, Hoyt Vandenberg, Walter Bedell Smith, Otto P. Weyland, and Richard E. Nugent (U.S. Army/National Archives and Records Administration)

political, military, and diplomatic leaders encouraged and embraced experimentation, and within a year of war's end, they had created new institutions, formulated new strategy, and developed new congressional support.

In today's climate of bureaucratic gridlock and institutional rigidity, it is worth noting that the Nation's capital once welcomed new ideas that challenged past assumptions, and worked across party lines with the Executive Branch. Washington quickly set aside entrenched interests and readied itself for what was to be called the Cold War.

Creativity did not emerge overnight. It was forged from years of executive and congressional engagement during the New Deal era, and benefited from national wartime unity and the specific talents developed during the war, especially by the Army, for rigorous planning. The war had made Washington a marketplace for fresh thinking and institution-building. The history of the postwar period reflects the stature of military leaders such as George C. Marshall, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Henry H.

“Hap” Arnold, the experimental heritage of the Franklin D. Roosevelt years, and fresh opportunity presented by the new Harry Truman administration. There was also a special urgency to these years, as dramatic new technologies disrupted the tried and true notions of war and peace. Atomic weapons, missile technology, breakthroughs in the speed of flight, and new forms of communication jolted Washington into action.

Any sense of complacency, “the stovepipe” constraint in our current terminology, was replaced by a shared belief that this new threat required new national security thinking. The military, diplomats, and scholars had to work together. But first they had to study together.

First Attempts at Joint Professional Military Education

As early as 1943, in the midst of war, Generals Eisenhower, Arnold, and Marshall and Admiral Ernest King were looking ahead to redesign and improve professional military education and, ultimately, create a new architecture of national security. In

that year, these men developed the first “joint” evolution in professional military education—the Army-Navy Staff College, a 12-week program for selected officers for command and staff duty in unified or coordinated commands. This idea caught on and by 1944 there was growing support, not only for enhanced joint senior officer education but also for a larger institutional reorganization cutting across the Executive Branch.

Within months of war's end, these military leaders, working with officials in the Truman administration and with Congress, began to develop the component parts of what was to become the National Security Act of 1947. There was an active give and take over suggestions to consolidate the Departments of War and the Navy, to create an independent Air Force, to centralize and improve national intelligence, and to create a coordinating National Security Council for the President.

Underlying these structural changes was a shared vision that the Nation needed a new and broader focus on strategy, grand strategy, the “interrelationship of military and nonmilitary means in the promulgation of national policy,” to meet the challenge posed by an aggressive Soviet Union and its economic ideology of Marxism. This vision found its home as the foundational concept for the National War College, which celebrates its 70th anniversary this year.

Today the United States, and indeed the world, struggles with a different challenge. We are confronted with a complex religious, political, and cultural struggle, a self-conflicted mass movement embracing terror tactics and an aggressive religious ideology. We are not even sure what to call it.

Indeed, Washington has been amazingly slow at, if not incapable of, finding new strategy and being open to new ideas. Given this prolonged failure, it may be useful to examine the late 1940s and 1950s, the early years of the War College, for lessons that can be applied to today's search for a new and more effective strategy. It may also remind us of a time past, “when government worked.”

The Idea for the National War College

Eisenhower, Marshall, and Arnold's vision for the new War College was clear from the beginning. They wanted to experiment with a 10-month program for military and Foreign Service Officers at the 20-year mark of their careers. They wanted to break down Service-culture barriers by educating officers together and they wanted a student body that included the broader national security community.

The original mission statement of the College reflects these early concerns:

1. to prepare senior military officers, foreign service officers and other national security professionals for higher levels of responsibility
2. to foster greater understanding and cooperation between the services and agencies.¹

But Eisenhower's vision went beyond the bureaucratic. He wanted to change the way officers thought. Writing in January 1946, he stated his intentions for the school:

Since [the College] is at the top of the military educational system, one of its primary functions should be to develop doctrine rather than to accept and follow prescribed doctrine. . . . The War College approach to any problem should not be bound by any rules or accepted teaching. If this is not done, the War College loses one of its most valuable and essential assets. The course should be designed to develop officers for high staff and command positions in both peace and war.²

As Eisenhower and Arnold discussed the new school, they urged that the student body include not only military and Foreign Service Officers, but also "personnel from non-military agencies other than the State Department." As he sketched out his ideas, Eisenhower wanted to pave the way for the new national security organization that was being developed in those transitional months following V-J Day. He proposed that a new joint and interagency college, a National War College, would be the culmination of an officer's professional military education. Eisenhower wrote that

"it is the War Department opinion that eventually graduation from the College should as a rule be a prerequisite for selection for higher commandant and staff positions."³ He believed the National War College should be a unique joint school for select graduates of the Service-specific colleges.⁴ He also looked beyond the military to see the school as offering professional executive education for the newly imagined larger national security community.

Eisenhower, Marshall, Arnold, and King had taken the first step for joint professional military education with the formation of the Army-Navy Staff College (ANSCOL) in 1943. Cementing this idea in a new institution required political skill and attentiveness to Service sensibilities on the part of General Eisenhower and Admiral Chester Nimitz, Chief of Naval Operations. The National War College would initially be commanded by a naval flag officer, Vice Admiral Harry Hill, with deputy commandants representing the other Services on rotation. A new Armed Services Staff College, for midlevel officers, would be located at the Naval Base in Norfolk, Virginia, while the War College would be on an Army post. And it was not just any Army post. As the first annual report of the War College noted, "In February, 1946, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Chief of Staff of the Army, designated the Army War College, Washington, DC, as the site of the new college. The necessary alterations were made possible through the contribution of \$140,000 by the War and Navy Departments."⁵

In that same month, another panel on postwar education, chaired by Lieutenant General Leonard Gerow, recommended a broader vision for professional education. The Gerow Board proposed a new National Security University, including:

- an Administrative College
- an Intelligence College
- an Industrial College
- a new joint National War College to replace the Army War College
- a State Department College, which would be the senior school for Foreign Service Officers.

All of these colleges would be collocated at the tip of Greenleaf Point, the Old Washington Army Arsenal in Southwest Washington, now known as Fort Lesley J. McNair. However, the early promise of joint and interagency education was not to be. While the Industrial College and the War College held down two sides of an imagined academic quadrangle at Fort McNair, the other colleges—and thus hope for coordinated professional development—were postponed.

The Role of the State Department

The State Department did not develop its own college, either for lack of funds or interest, much to the dismay of Eisenhower, Marshall, and Arnold. After a year of inconclusive discussion, State decided to simply be included with the War College. A 1970 letter to National War College historian James Stansfield recounted State's quandary:

There were continuing efforts in 1945–1946 to obtain the participation of the Department of State and its Foreign Service Officers in the postwar ANSCOL. We never could find anyone in State willing to make a decision on this. Sheldon Chaplin, then Director of the Foreign Service, supported the idea in principle, but could not move his superiors to make a basic decision. Hence the new National War College was organized primarily as a military operated school.⁶

In January 1946, both the Secretary of War and the Secretary of the Navy wrote to Secretary of State James Byrnes, advocating State participation. Byrnes complained that State was shorthanded at the Department, but he later concurred with their proposal to include Foreign Service Officers as students and faculty.

Both Eisenhower and Nimitz were delighted. In Eisenhower's words, the military needed "a little training in diplomacy." Indeed, the first commandant, Vice Admiral Harry Hill, told the students in 1946 that "never before had the need for mutual understanding and teamwork between the State Department and the Armed Forces been so necessary."

To mark this understanding, the War College would have a special deputy commandant for foreign affairs. In an inspired choice, George Kennan, a long-time Soviet expert, most recently Deputy Chief of Mission in Moscow, was selected for this position. Actually, his selection was quite extraordinary, reflecting a rare Washington insider serendipity. Just months before the War College opened, Kennan had been tasked, as were other senior diplomats, to analyze Joseph Stalin's new aggressive posture and statements. Kennan's thorough evaluation of Soviet culture, history, and Stalin's worldview caught the attention of then-Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal, who circulated it among his Pentagon colleagues. In a fortuitous chain of events, by late summer in 1946, President Truman and George Marshall had reviewed and approved of this analysis. Kennan was called back from Moscow, and as a result of Forrestal's support, he was appointed the first Foreign Service Officer to be part of the leadership at a military institution.

Kennan and the Development of Strategy

George Kennan brought to this assignment great enthusiasm and intellectual production. As he recalls in his *Memoirs*, "The College was intended as the senior establishment for in-service training in the problems of national policy, military and political. This being only the inauguration of its existence, the program for the first year was necessarily experimental. We were in a position to try out new ideas of method and substance in teaching and this was in itself exciting."⁷ Kennan underscored the creativity of that period in Washington:

It was the first time the United States Government had ever prescribed this area of inquiry for study at an official academic institution embracing in its student body and teaching staff all three services as well as the State Department. Not only were we all new to this subject, personally and institutionally, but we had, as we turned to it, virtually nothing in the way of an established or traditional American doctrine

*which we could take as a point of departure for our thinking and teaching. It was the mark of the weakness of all previous American thinking about international affairs that there was almost nothing in American political literature in the past one hundred years on the subject of the relationship of war to politics.*⁸

Kennan treasured his association with the command leadership of the college as well as the unique student body:

*Most of the officers from the armed services were men with recent distinguished war records, but they had by no means been chosen for this alone. Mature, thoughtful, keen, pleased to be there and anxious to make the most of it, they were a joy to teach. One learned from them as one taught.*⁹

As he looked back at that first academic year at the War College, Kennan felt it was "the occasion for a veritable outpouring of literary and forensic effort on my part. I look back today with a slightly horrified wonder on the energies this frenzy reflected."¹⁰

It was certainly a most understandable frenzy, given his observation that many in Washington were falling into despair over Soviet actions and "jumping to the panicky conclusion that this spelled the inevitability of an eventual war between the Soviet Union and the United States." With the advent of atomic weapons, their destructive capability being developed by both superpowers, Kennan searched for a strategy, to avoid what would come to be known as "mutually assured destruction." He led in the effort to find "measures short of war,"¹¹ which would advance national interests. He argued that the United States should take advantage of "the weaknesses of Soviet power, combined with frustration in the external field, to moderate Soviet ambitions and behavior." Kennan wrote that the Soviet leaders "were not supermen. Like all rulers . . . they had their internal contradictions and dilemmas to deal with. Stand up to them, I urged, manfully but not aggressively, and give the hand of time a chance to work."¹²

Kennan's conceptual work at the War College contributed not only to a new

strategic framework for the United States but also to the course of study for that first academic year. In the months preceding Kennan's arrival and the opening of the college, Admiral Hill reached out to academic leaders around the country and regional area specialists. All offered suggestions of the curriculum and teaching style. The initial 10-month program was divided into two semesters. The fall term was focused on U.S. foreign policy, "measures short of war," and was taught by Kennan and temporary faculty from major universities and research centers: Hardy Dillard from the University of Virginia, Walter Wright from Princeton, and Bernard Brodie and Sherman Kent, both from Yale. The spring term focused on "military elements of national power as a means of attainment of United States policy objectives" and was taught by the military faculty. Thus, the new War College curriculum gave equal weight to war and measures other than war.

As Kennan again reflected in his *Memoirs*, this course of study itself was new:

*The War College course, particularly during the autumn term, was focused on the interrelationship of military and non-military means in the promulgation of national policy. It was a course, in short, on strategic-political doctrine. . . . This was the first time I had personally ever had occasion to address myself seriously, either as a student or as a teacher, to this subject. It was also the first time the United States Government had ever prescribed this area of inquiry for study in an official academic institution embracing in its student body and teaching staff all three of the armed services, as well as the State Department.*¹³

Throughout the year, the class would be confronted with a series of strategic dilemmas, designed "to increase students' capacity to think broadly, conceptually, analytically, and critically as they involve themselves in grand strategy and the United States national security policy—its formulation and implementation."

The First Academic Years

When the War College opened on September 3, 1946, everything was in place for this academic experiment: A provocative course of study, a faculty and student body of combat veterans, Foreign Service Officers, academic leaders, and agency professionals at the midpoint of their career. Standing on the stage in what is now Arnold Auditorium, Commandant Hill welcomed the inaugural class. His message captured the excitement of this new educational experiment. He began, “It is a great honor and privilege for all of us to be associated with this new college, particularly at this stage in world affairs, where every day new problems of state are rising, the solution of which is of vital concern to this country and the world.” Hill urged the students to “keep your minds flexible and free from preconceived ideas,” and prepared them to think anew: “Wars cannot be considered only in light of their military objectives. World events today are highlighting the fact, more clearly than ever before, that political and economic objectives have an equal or even greater import than those of a military nature.”¹⁴

Embracing this change in his own thinking on the subject, Hill shared with the students his own transition from theater commander to commandant:

Last year when I received orders to this duty, I was in Manila preparing to take the 6th Army into Japan. General [Walter] Krueger was embarked on my flagship, and I had many pleasant and instructive discussions with that outstanding warrior about the problems of military education. And I will always remember his basic admonition: ‘make ’em ponder.’ That is exactly what we propose to do here—to give you practical problems upon which to think—and ponder—and arrive at individual conclusions you are ready to defend against all attacks.¹⁵

As the War College began, that admonition—to “make ’em ponder”—established a tradition and atmosphere that attracted the highest leadership in

the land. President Truman and Secretary Forrestal attended lectures in Roosevelt Hall, members of the Cabinet and senior military leaders spoke in Arnold Auditorium, Representatives and Senators often met with speakers and students. The commandant’s residence became the gathering point for policy luncheons and dinners. It could be said that these conversations began the firm foundation for new grand strategy. Away from the press, in the private intimacy of the War College and the refuge of Fort McNair, key political and military leaders could join with academics to better understand national security challenges and think through strategy. As Kennan observed at the time, “Officers of Cabinet rank, generals, and Senators sat at our feet as we lectured. The college came to provide a sort of academic seminar for the high echelons of governmental Washington generally.”¹⁶

Rekindling the War College Contribution to Thought and Strategy

Today, Washington once again struggles with uncertainty and alarm. Almost 40 years into a struggle expressed both within Islam and between Islam and the West, the United States still searches for strategy. While the 40-year Cold War began with strategy, this new era seems adrift and reactive. What aspects of War College history might provide guidance? Is there something about the atmosphere of collegial interaction, the encouragement “to ponder,” to look for the “sources of conduct,” to understand the nature of the conflict, that might inform the incoming administration as it prepares for responsibility, much as the Truman and Eisenhower administrations did in the early years of the War College?

It is worth consideration. The tranquility of Fort McNair still beckons the weary bureaucrat and politician. The access to both military and agency professionals, as well as academic leaders, is unique in the country. Indeed, Eisenhower returned to the War College in 1953, not as a military leader but as a recently elected President, to make new use of the institution he had inspired.



George F. Kennan, 1947 (Library of Congress/Harris & Ewing)

Realizing that his own Cabinet and the national security community were divided on policy, Eisenhower wanted a thoughtful review of past strategy, assumptions, and projections. For security and logistical reasons Eisenhower called upon the War College to host this strategy exercise in June 1953, shortly after graduation. Named Project Solarium, the exercise was an outgrowth of discussions in the third floor White House solarium, among Eisenhower, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, and George Kennan, reviewing strategy regarding the Soviet Union.

Eisenhower wanted to hear alternative strategies and consider his options, so the exercise required separate task forces to develop three approaches to strategy. Each task force included experts, working with background documents on Soviet politics, history, economic and military capabilities, Soviet leaders, and Soviet motivation for action. Team A was headed by Kennan himself and considered primarily a political strategy, alliance structures, following along the initial concepts of “containment.” Team B considered an expansion on the “containment” idea by hardening opposition to the Soviet Union, using the prospect of war and possible nuclear retaliation. Team C analyzed and advocated the “roll

back” concept, current at the time, to counter Soviet expansion and diminish its influence through a variety of military, political, and economic means. Over that summer, the various task forces had time for analysis and deliberation away from the pressures of daily work and politics. Kennan and Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Goodpaster were the in-house experts. Each group submitted its recommendation to the National Security Council. It was on the basis of these analyses and recommendations that Eisenhower decided to generally follow Kennan’s approach. The strategy known as “containment” endured, even with adjustments, throughout the Cold War. There was no direct military attack and no use of nuclear weapons between the two national protagonists throughout this period. And in 1991, the Soviet Union did indeed succumb to its own “internal contradictions and dilemmas.”

How might such an exercise be recreated today? Although many others have advocated new Solarium exercises, most have focused on the bureaucratic, budgetary, and interagency aspects of strategy. But there is a case to be made to go back to the original genius of the original Solarium model—a focus on the history, culture, motivations, actions, and psychology of the opponent, with area experts informing the debate.

In 2017 a newly elected administration faces a challenge much different than the Cold War Soviet threat. In the midst of modern technology and ever-growing globalization, today’s challenge, ironically, seems somehow ancient and uncomfortable. As Secretary of Defense Robert Gates argued in 2007, our past focus during the Cold War

*covered over conflicts that had boiled and seethed and provoked war and instabilities for centuries. . . . Ethnic strife, religious wars, independence movements. . . . These old hatreds and conflicts were buried alive . . . but like monsters in science fiction, they have returned from the grave to threaten peace and stability around the world.*¹⁷

In the 10 years since Secretary Gates’s warning, the threat to peace and stability

around the world is unabated. Voters are looking for new approaches, new policy. The incoming President should follow Eisenhower’s example and commission a deeply informed and competitive strategic review.

Is it time to inaugurate a new Project Solarium? Given the specific conundrum of an expansionist, violent, religious ideology, an Arab world beset by crisis, is this not even more perplexing than Cold War puzzles? A reimagined Project Solarium would not be a highly classified and secret exercise, but rather an innovative unclassified exercise, bringing together new scholarship and new experts on Islam, the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia. Muslim American scholars, Middle East studies scholars, business leaders, and diplomats with long-term experience in the region could come together once again in the quiet of Roosevelt Hall “to ponder” this new religious movement and the crisis across the Muslim world. They could recapture Kennan’s belief that the War College could be a seminar for the city.

Following past experience, this exercise should begin with an intensive foundational discussion and analysis of Islamic and Arab politics, political Islam, regional history, culture, and worldview. The group could assess the impact of sustained low oil prices, sustained conflict in the region, and the next generation. The exercise should include both younger and experienced scholars and policy experts, mirroring the role played by Goodpaster and Kennan in the initial exercise. The challenge to the group will be, as it was in Eisenhower’s era, to consider “measures short of war,” using Kennan’s wording, an intellectual challenge in contrast to existing tactical and operational military approaches.

Following this exercise and review, the President’s new National Security Council would assess the Project Solarium foundational assumptions and alternatives. As a follow-on to the exercise, the next entering class at the War College—military students fresh from deployment, Foreign Service Officers, and agency students experienced in the policy world—would incorporate the findings of

the exercise into the academic program as they did over six decades ago.

The new administration will struggle to find a way to defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. Even 15 years on, strategy can emerge anew. Washington can once again welcome new ideas, rethink past assumptions, and work together to find long-forgotten peace and opportunity in the world. JFQ

Notes

¹The National War College (NWC), *Annual Report 1946–47*, Special Collections, National Defense University Library, Washington, DC.

²“Memorandum for the Commandant, Army and Navy Staff College,” January 28, 1946, signed by Dwight Eisenhower (emphasis in original). Reprinted in Janet Breslin-Smith and Clifford R. Krieger, *The National War College: A History of Strategic Thinking in Peace and War* (Washington, DC: NWC Association, 2006).

³“Memorandum for the Commandant, Army and Navy Staff College.”

⁴Dwight D. Eisenhower proposed that all existing Service colleges be closed and the new joint National War College be the only senior professional military education institution. Both the Army and Navy resisted this idea, which eventually died.

⁵National War College, 2.

⁶Robert L. Clifford, “Letter to George J. Stansfield, April 29, 1970,” Special Collections, National Defense University Library.

⁷George F. Kennan, *Memoirs, Vol. 1, 1925–1950* (New York: Pantheon, 1967), 306.

⁸Ibid., 308.

⁹Ibid., 307.

¹⁰Ibid., 307–309.

¹¹Hence the title of Kennan’s lectures at the War College: Giles D. Harlow and George C. Maerz, eds., *Measures Short of War: The George F. Kennan Lectures at the National War College, 1946–1947* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 1991).

¹²Ibid., 364.

¹³Ibid., 308.

¹⁴Harry W. Hill, *Convocation Address to the National War College Class of 1946–47*, National Defense University Library, Special Collections, 1.

¹⁵Ibid., 2.

¹⁶Kennan, 306.

¹⁷Remarks by Secretary Robert M. Gates, Landon Lecture, Kansas State University, November 26, 2007, 2.