



Dr. Kevin Pollpeter, Director of Research for the China Aerospace Studies Institute, and Professor David T. Burbach, Ph.D., Director of the Naval War College Space Studies Group, answer questions during Naval War College's Future Warfighting Symposium onboard Naval Station Newport, Rhode Island, August 7, 2025 (U.S. Navy/Connor Burns)

Breadth or Depth

The Ongoing Battle in Professional Military Education

By Ryan Wadle and Heather Venable

The subject of military history as taught in the U.S. Army's school system is much in the air of late."

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So the editors of *Parameters* chose in 1981 to reintroduce Michael Howard's timeless article on military education writ large.¹ Such an introduction could serve just as well some 40 years later, when the state of joint professional military education (JPME) remains a heated source of debate. Howard—a combat veteran of the Italian Campaign in 1943 to 1945, in addition to being

an esteemed military historian—urged that the military professional needed to study history in width, depth, and context, in that order.

Even as JPME considers new issues such as how to integrate new technology—for example, artificial intelligence chatbots—the central issue remains how best to study war in width, depth, and context. With this being the case,



Students from Air War College participate in war game designed around Pacific conflict, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, December 21, 2023 (U.S. Air Force/Billy Blankenship)

this article provides some insights into the evolving curriculum of the Air War College to consider how balanced its approach has been amid some critique that JPME has sacrificed depth for breadth, with some contending that “war” has been removed from the war college.² This criticism comes amid the implementation of the new emphasis on outcomes-based education, which calls for ensuring that each student achieves the program-defined learning

outcomes across professional military education (PME) and which will more frequently assess whether schools meet these outcomes by measuring how well graduates were prepared for their next assignments. These new standards mandate little in the way of specific curriculum content. Rather, they provide sound overarching guidance, such as the need to provide students with “diverse and often conflicting perspectives” to arrive at “evidence-based conclusion(s).”³

An appropriate focus on war in the context of JPME should include instruction on war theory, national security, planning, and the various capabilities and limitations of each domain to foster greater joint-mindedness. Grounded in a sound study of history, JPME institutions should also help students consider emerging challenges from a host of perspectives, including technological, economic, political, changing threats, and the like. War consists of military operations, but



those maneuvers cannot be isolated from the larger context in which wars are fought. There should also be a central focus on instilling critical thinking into students that reflects General Dwight D. Eisenhower's vision for the National War College. As he explained, one of that college's roles "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."⁴ War-gaming and other simulations are also essential parts of any PME curriculum, but these should be balanced with instruction to allow students to apply the knowledge they have acquired during their school years.⁵

Approaching the study of war and strategy from several perspectives instills breadth into the system. Depth, however, comes from the multilayered JPME system that considers the staff colleges maintained by each of the Services and focused more explicitly on the operational level of war. Although not every officer who attends a staff college is guaranteed to be selected to attend a war college, this is immaterial as staff and war colleges should be viewed holistically. This is not a new approach; at least as far back as the report of the Knox–King–Pye Board of 1920, intermediate- and senior-level programs have been viewed as distinct stops on a career of learning for well-rounded officers.⁶

The Russian invasion of Ukraine highlights the need for a broad study of warfare. Despite a tendency for casual commenters to fixate on drones destroying tanks, the "war" ranges widely off the traditional battlefield to involve every facet of society. The Black Sea front, for example, has seen economic warfare as Russia sought to stymie Ukrainian wheat exports. Similarly, the appreciation for logistics and the industrial base that underpins it has thankfully soared once the war turned into a highly attritional conflict. Furthermore, there is no aspect of Russian or Ukrainian society that has not been affected in some way by this war. Perhaps more than ever as the reach of both kinetic and nonkinetic weapons increases, the traditional battlefield morphs and expands. For JPME to take an approach focused primarily on the military does not properly prepare officers for the broad range of challenges they must account for in successfully planning and waging warfare.

The danger is that a poor understanding of how military education works may be used to design narrow curricula built excessively around planning and doctrine that could miss many of the critical lessons from the conflict in Ukraine

and elsewhere. The notion that war is somehow not studied at U.S. staff and war colleges has gained traction since the withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021. Senator Tom Cotton (R-AR), for example, commissioned a study on naval warfighting culture in 2021. Among its eight main recommendations, the study suggested removing "all political and sociological topics from professional military education and replac[ing] them with essential warfighting courseware."⁷ An article by Thomas Bruscino and Mitchell Klingenberg with a similar argument added fuel to this fire.⁸ In December 2021, Cotton cited Bruscino and Klingenberg's piece during the confirmation hearings for Admiral Christopher W. Grady to be Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, requesting that he follow up on their claims that implementation of the May 2020 guidance issued by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff had been "lost in a maze of bureaucracy."⁹

Given that the Military Education Coordination Council, a body that advises the director of joint force development, continues to meet and receive directions from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, these criticisms may ripple across the entirety of officer military education. In this vein, it is important to note that war colleges do, in fact, teach war and warfighting and have not strayed from their mandate. This can be seen most clearly by tracing the history of curriculum at Air War College. The composition and content of courses has changed over time, but the study of war has been the core of PME.

The single most important contribution that military education can make to ensure that it serves as a force multiplier is, as MacGregor Knox and Williamson Murray have argued, to help officers "make correct decisions at the political and strategic level." They further explain that "mistakes in operations and tactics can be corrected, but strategic mistakes live forever."¹⁰ A wide range of opinions on PME exists, but we believe that graduates of staff and war colleges must be both creative problem-solvers while always remaining conscious of how to link operational objectives to strategic and policy goals. Balancing those objectives

helps to explain how military education has evolved, and narrowing curricula to focus even more on warfighting could have dire consequences.

How, then, to build depth into the system? It has already been designed that way in a building-block approach. For example, Air Force students attend a 6-week course at the Squadron Officer School as captains, to which those selected for intermediate-level resident education build on with a yearlong course followed by another yearlong course of senior-level resident education, sometimes further supplemented by online education.

The Basics of JPME

It is useful to understand the ranks at which various levels of PME operate. Senior-level education takes place at war colleges and involves lieutenant colonels (or the equivalent), who generally have about 20 years of military service. By contrast, intermediate-level education takes place at command and staff colleges and targets majors (and the equivalent), who typically have about 13 years of military service. Currently, there are 5 intermediate and 11 senior programs in addition to the Space Force intermediate and senior programs operated in conjunction with John Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, DC.¹¹

The greatest difference between the senior and intermediate level of military education is that the former focuses primarily on the strategic level of war, whereas the latter concentrates on the operational level of war, best understood as the waging of military campaigns. This point importantly reflects the fact that education at a war college will be more political in scope by its very nature or focusing first and foremost on how military force can help achieve one's desired political objectives.

Misfired Rounds

Regarding arguments alleging that PME is to blame for America's many failures in Afghanistan, the most significant logical flaw should be obvious: one simply cannot provide causal evidence to link the two. Rarely do monocausal

explanations have explanatory value, especially in such complex cases. Likewise, the contention that a greater concentration on warfighting might have turned the tide in Afghanistan is impossible to establish.

That military education has been singled out as a causal factor is not surprising, however. Dating back to the founding of the Naval War College in 1884 and the birth of PME in the United States, there has been no shortage of opinions on what this education should look like, who should teach it, and who should receive it.¹²

Others debate its value to previous conflicts. Some historical studies argue that PME made a measurable contribution to American victory in World War II by instilling the "applicatory system" and decisionmaking processes through the heavy use of war games.¹³ Others have taken a dim view of interwar military education, arguing that it produced doctrinaire ideas and "school solutions" and rehashed the battles of the past without looking to the future.¹⁴ The divergence of opinions from learned scholars on JPME's effect in past wars demonstrates that its effect on military performance is not easily measured.

New Guidance

Measuring the "outcomes" of PME is part of the Joint Chiefs of Staff's 2020 and 2022 guidance.¹⁵ The tenor of some scathing critiques might suggest that this guidance has dictated sweeping reforms in addition to the new assessment methodology.¹⁶ But the 2020 document's "Summary of Changes" highlights practical aspects of assessment, talent management, and other related matters rather than mandating significant curriculum reform. Indeed, the sole directive regarding academic curriculum requires programs to use the Joint Staff's continually updated Joint Learning Areas—hardly a new development—yet leaves the door open for initiative on the part of individual institutions, explaining that programs should use the document's guidance to "develop mission-unique program learning objectives."¹⁷ In other words,

the Joint Chiefs of Staff's 2020 guidance encourages jointness while eschewing a cookie-cutter curriculum. The 2022 guidance follows in the same vein, only expanding to 142 pages to provide educational administration with the necessary guidance on procedures to demonstrate outcomes-based learning.

The 2020 document exhorts PME to produce "historically informed, strategically minded, skilled joint warfighters." How to interpret this wording is the subject of some debate. Bruscano and Klingenberg take a narrow interpretation of this guidance. In this case, it is useful to consider the six joint learning areas that govern PME.¹⁸ These strike a balance between developing an officer's "advanced cognitive and communications skills employing critical, creative, and systematic thought" with an understanding of warfare in the past and present, the global security environment, and the formation and execution of strategic and operational plans. If there is not enough "war" in our war colleges, then the issue lies with the standards set by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who have embraced a broad understanding of what should be taught to officers yet prescribe areas that still focus on how to wage war.

Change and Continuity

The curricula of war and staff colleges typically focus on four main areas: military history and theory, international relations, leadership and command studies, and joint planning. The balance among these elements differs somewhat depending on the level of education of the individual school. At the intermediate level, for instance, the Army's Command and General Staff College primarily focuses on developing the operational planning process with history providing context for decisionmaking, with only a smattering of international relations.¹⁹ Meanwhile, the Air Command and Staff College devotes about five-eighths of its required curriculum to war, with the remaining three-eighths of the curriculum focused on leadership and international studies.²⁰ It added a 5-day war game to the curriculum



Army Colonel Phillip Cuccia, Army War College academic engagement director, highlights opening actions of Battle of Gettysburg to Air Force field grade officers at Gettysburg National Military Park, Pennsylvania, April 18, 2019 (U.S. Air Force/Michael B. Keller)

for the 2023 academic year as well as a 10-day joint air operations planning course. A greater proportion of the College of Naval Command and Staff curriculum—approximately one-quarter—focuses on international relations through the Theater Security Decision Making course, although a new Perspectives on Modern War course began during the 2024–25 academic year.²¹

The curriculum at the senior programs likewise provides little evidence that the core curricula has devolved into a postmodern pastiche that instills in military officers the notion that “[p]rofessional military education prepare[s] graduates to avoid armed conflict, not prevail in it” as Bruscino and Klingenberg assert. The standards for these schools call for education in national security strategy; theater strategy and campaigning; joint planning processes and systems; and joint,

interagency, and multinational capabilities and the integration of those capabilities.²² As with the variations noted among the intermediate schools, the senior schools accomplish these goals in similar ways, albeit with some noticeable differences. The four legacy Service schools are all built around the four core curriculum elements outlined above, often including capstone exercises that allow students to apply all the elements learned in the core curriculum. Some schools, such as the Army and Air War Colleges, also include core courses on regional and cultural studies intended to foster knowledge and connections with partner countries.²³ The Army War College also offers a course on economics and defense management to give officers a greater understanding of war’s fiscal and organizational underpinnings.²⁴ Even with these variations, the overwhelming majority of graduates

of senior-level programs will have gone through curricula where a majority of the content focuses explicitly on military history, theory, and military planning—that is, the study of war.

A Historical Snapshot of the Air War College Curriculum

Critically, a longitudinal analysis of curricula can help practitioners understand how these institutions have evolved. Some institutions are wary of sharing curriculum information, but the Air War College has valuable data dating back to its founding. The Air War College’s first curriculum, from around 1952, included a core course in international relations. Indeed, international relations and global strategy constituted one-half of the course work, with air warfare the other half.

By the late 1960s, the Air War College curriculum placed a greater

emphasis on warfighting as demonstrated by the increased instruction on military capabilities. Still, it is important to note that the Air Force temporarily began sending fewer of its students to the college because of the Vietnam War.²⁵ This reality helps point out that a deep understanding of PME's trajectory cannot be reduced to a formulaic accounting of curriculum.

During the 1970s, independent study came to dominate the curriculum, albeit still undergirded by an emphasis on military strategy and capabilities. Interestingly, this approach aligns with the French model, which one expert has described as very creative and advanced.²⁶ Still, one commission found that the curriculum contained too much management. As a result, the 1975 Department of Defense Committee on Excellence in Education advocated devoting 33 percent of the Air War College curriculum to aerospace warfare. But, just as Bruscano and Klingenberg cannot establish any causal linkage between PME and the loss of Afghanistan, it would be equally difficult to demonstrate that the increased study of airpower necessarily resulted in the United States winning its only major war since World War II: the Gulf War, in 1991.

The curriculum has continued to evolve since the Cold War's end. After 9/11, the college added a global security core course to assess how changes in the international system affect national security. Most recently, the college has shifted toward an intensified focus on warfighting to support Great Power competition. However, that warfighting emphasis has been characterized by stressing the "intellectual weapons of critical, creative, and strategic thinking over merely regurgitating an argument envisioned by an author or the professor." Meanwhile, the current curriculum has a broad range of areas of interest, including the school's culminating event, the Global Challenge war game, which requires students to "prioritiz[e] threats, develop a comprehensive global strategy, and design an operational approach that responds to a military threat."²⁷ This wargame speaks

to the broad nature of preparing for future warfare, as highlighted by multiple authors including Sean McFate, who cautions that we cannot expect the neat battlefields of the past.²⁸

Change Is Constant

Like every complex structure, PME is the product of a series of tradeoffs. Setting aside many of the other hot-button issues that surround it, what is taught and how it is taught at these schools requires constant give and take. Would it make officers more effective leaders to focus more on warfighting at the expense of the leadership and management courses that have become more common in military education in recent decades? Would limiting curricula's coverage of international relations and regional studies—both of which allow officers to better understand geopolitics and the U.S. roles and responsibilities in various regions—detract from American and allied security? Wargaming from the interwar period may be showered with praise today, but this conclusion assumes that one is designing the right war games to solve the right problems.²⁹

Furthermore, no less a luminary warfighter than Admiral Raymond Spruance, who had taught at the Naval War College during the interwar period and assumed the presidency of the Naval War College in 1946, broadened the curriculum to consider the increasing uncertainty of the Navy's place in the postwar period. Critically, Spruance wanted officers who could fight but also were "strategic types" and creative thinkers. As he described the goal of the college, "If imagination, tempered and guided by common sense and reason is the scarce and valuable quality which I believe it to be, it behooves us to recognize the individuals who possess this disciplined imagination and make full use of them."³⁰

Over four decades ago, a former officer who had survived 2 years of grueling warfare enjoined JPME to first study in width, then in depth, then in context. The study of war in its entirety is alive and well at the Nation's staff and war colleges, and the Joint Chief of Staff's

most recent guidance allows the Services largely to develop curriculum as they see fit, within the confines of broadly focused joint learning objectives. One need only look at the war in Ukraine to see how an interconnected and informationalized world can significantly enhance and even add to the capabilities beyond those traditionally employed on a battlefield. War college students have spent most of their careers employing military capabilities at the operational and tactical levels of war, which is precisely why war colleges concentrate the fulcrum of their efforts at the point where military strategy intersects with political objectives. Tasking PME to double down on teaching "warfighting" that already constitutes the bulk of curricula is likely only to increase the disconnect between using the means to meet the important ends our students may need to apply in the toughest classroom of all: war. **JFQ**

Notes

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