

Teaching Strategy in the 21st Century

By GABRIEL MARCELLA and STEPHEN O. FOUGHT

With a good strategy, even the weak can succeed; with a weak strategy, even the strong will struggle.

Strategy is, and will continue to be, the linchpin to military success. Unfortunately, professional military education (PME) does not develop strategists very well.¹ This long-standing deficiency needs to be corrected. The war colleges are the proper institutions to take on the task, even though their current approaches are more descriptive than prescriptive in teaching strategy. We need to reverse that emphasis.

The first step is to remove self-generated obstacles, beginning with the concept and definition of strategy.² Strategy is stratified roughly according to the major participants within each partition: grand strategy (and its

scion national security strategy) is artful and the purview of kings and Presidents; military strategy, while subservient and linked to grand strategy, is more mechanical and has its roots in military science; tactics, which also stem from military science, are quite prescribed and situation-specific and belong to the military—in particular, the company grade ranks.³ Somewhere along the line we get theater and/or campaign strategy, which we attribute to the generals and, eventually, operational art.⁴

This partitioning is comfortable, perhaps because it is attuned to modern Western idealistic portrayals of the division of labor between civilian political and military leadership, and even between domestic and foreign policy. By the same token, it is academically appealing because it encourages independent examina-

tion by political science or military history scholars without forcing the two disciplines to integrate their research, results, or teaching.

This approach is nicely suited for teaching *about* strategy. However, it is not reflective of the real world and may be a dysfunctional, self-fulfilling prophecy. That is, by partitioning the definition so carefully into levels to serve theoretical or academic purposes, we come to believe that strategy is actually partitioned in that manner in the real world—and thus treat grand strategy, military strategy, theater strategy, campaign strategy, and even tactics as separate and distinct when they actually are similar and can be researched and taught by way of their similarities rather than against a backdrop of assumed divisions.

After all, in the real world of war and peace, generals are heavily involved, along with

Marine Corps officers attend Command and Staff College at Marine Corps University



U.S. Marine Corps (James R. Richardson)

senior statesmen of the national security team, in what we have labeled grand strategy. Political leaders are similarly engaged in military strategy—one does not need a dissertation on Vietnam, Operation *Desert One*, Lebanon, or even the Gulf Wars to appreciate that conclusion. In the field, those lieutenants and captains who are said to be engaged in tactics firmly believe that they are developing strategy (albeit with a limited horizon)—and, if asked, might say they believe their platoons, flights, or department members are executing tactics. Indeed, in practice, every level believes (and, we think, *accurately* believes) that it is involved in creating strategy, subject to limits to their horizon imposed from above (and beyond).⁵

In a similar manner, the term *policy* has been malpartitioned, and along the same lines as the partitioning of strategy. The current use of the term eventually establishes a difference between policymakers and operators that divides, roughly, the politicians from the generals.⁶ Yet in reality, “operators” do a lot of policymaking and policymakers get their hands deep into the well of operations—and each shapes the other to a great degree.

One can clear away all of the aforementioned dirt, debris, and confusion about strategy, and policy, with the following universal definition: *Strategy is the art of applying power to achieve objectives, within the limits imposed by policy.*

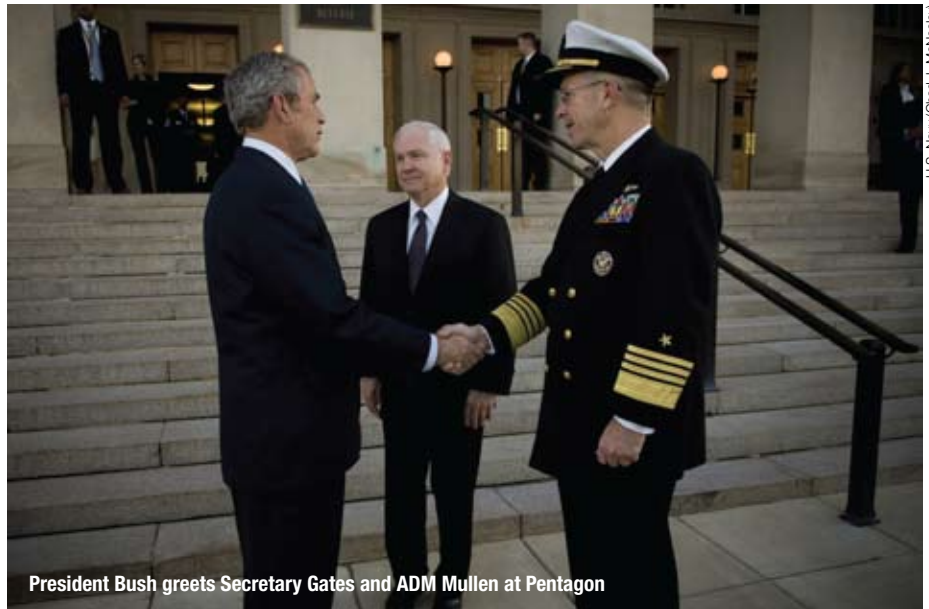
Strategy exists and is developed at every level. It is developed with the purpose of connecting political purpose with means, which are always constrained. Absent constraints, there is no need for strategy. Limits to freedom of action exist at every level and must be accounted for by those who develop strategy. These limitations are, collectively, called policy. When one develops strategy, one develops limits (hence policy) on other levels—certainly on levels below, quite often on collateral levels, and at times on levels above. Sometimes these limits are imposed purposefully and sometimes they are generated quite by accident—the latter being what Carl von Clausewitz might have called the “fog of strategy.”

Perhaps the most important aspect of the proposed definition is that strategy is common to every level of the organization (and activity). However, the variables that

comprise the challenge of developing strategy are not. In the arena where company-grade officers are likely to be involved in developing and executing strategy, the variables are fewer and quite likely to be known with a reasonable amount of fidelity and accuracy, especially in terms of objectives, available means, and policy limits. At this level, the variables on the “means” side of the process will probably be under the control of the group that must develop and execute strategy. By the same token, the duration or horizon (or both) of the strategy is more likely to be short.

strategy is essentially the same—one has to meld political purpose with means, within the boundaries of the situation.

The bottom line is that, much like other human behaviors, the fundamental behavior of developing strategy is similar in all situations, but the situations differ in terms of the variables. Thus, teaching strategy is parallel to teaching leadership—the fundamentals of leadership are the same, no matter where one is in the organization or the situations faced. One can, and perhaps must, build on prior skills as one rises in the organization and



President Bush greets Secretary Gates and ADM Mullen at Pentagon

U.S. Navy (Chad J. McNeelley)

As one ascends the organizational ladder or engages in more expanded or protracted conflicts, more variables enter the process—in terms of goals, means, and policy. For the same reason, these variables are less

takes on more challenging leadership tasks. Teaching strategy should be no more difficult or complicated than teaching any of the other subjects addressed by the war colleges or, in fact, across all of PME.

strategy is the art of applying power to achieve objectives, within the limits imposed by policy

likely to be well understood, the means are less likely to be under the control of those who would develop/execute strategy, and the time dimension is likely to be longer (either in terms of the time period in which the strategy must be executed, or the likely period where the strategy might have an effect on other areas). The limits are also likely to be more and more complicated, and in some cases even contradictory. But the process of forming

Strategy at All Levels

At the company-grade schools, strategy ought to be taught and practiced around scenarios that are fairly well defined. Ends ought to be spelled out in reasonable detail (and probably focused on a specific battlefield and the well-defined time horizon). Means (resources such as manpower, offensive and defensive capability, command relationships, intelligence, and so forth) should be reasonably well bounded. Policies (limitations) should be spelled out and reasonably consistent and understood. The physical situation (terrain) should be well described and

Dr. Gabriel Marcella was a Professor of Third World Studies at the U.S. Army War College and International Affairs Advisor at U.S. Southern Command. Dr. Stephen O. Fought is Professor Emeritus and former Dean of the Air War College.

ADM Mullen addresses 2008 graduates
of U.S. Army War College



U.S. Air Force (Adam M. Stump)

probably limited, as should the political variables (alliances, coalitions). The enemy should be defined and the intelligence should be rather pristine. Students should be expected to generate in-the-court solutions, but given opportunities to innovate—to push the limits, use resources in creative ways, and/or define ends as appropriate. There should be freedom of action within well-described scenarios. At the company grade and subsequent levels, the scenarios would include all of the instruments of national power and a complexity and uncertainty appropriate to the scenario.

Intermediate Service schools should introduce uncertainty into each dimension as well as increase the number of dimensions. The mid-rank schools should challenge students to develop strategy in situations where the means are not entirely under their control (such as needing resources from coalition partners in exchange for changes in the rules of engagement or beyond). Purpose, means, and policies might be mildly contradictory (for example, take the military objective but minimize casualties). There should be a challenge to contain the battlefield (keep the conflict from expanding). The enemy might not be well described, or even known, at the outset. Intelligence should not be pristine.

“Political” intervention would be introduced (for instance, “military” decisions in overseas conflicts driven by domestic politics). Moral hazard and ambiguity should be introduced to challenge decisionmaking. Ends might change as time and events move ahead. Freedom of action, and consequent innovation, would be not only encouraged, but also expected.

*moral hazard and ambiguity
should be introduced to
challenge decisionmaking*

War colleges (and beyond) should expand the number of variables and confound the existing variables. For instance, consider situations where the chain of command is obscure, overlapping, and contradictory, where resources are transitory and objectives either vague or in motion, and where intelligence is yet to be gathered, at best. The point is that the problem is essentially the same at every level: forging the many variables into a coherent plan of action with the available set of resources, mitigating risks where possible, and connecting political purpose with means within the boundaries set by policy. Strategy is the common process, and it can and should

be taught at every level. What differs is the number of variables, the characteristics of those variables, and the internal/external relationships among them.

Case Studies Approach

The second step in teaching strategy is to shape the curriculum. Students in PME are mature and accomplished. They are confident, capable, impatient with theory, and distrustful of history. They learn best by being given problems to solve, being allowed to flail against those problems, and absorbing professional and other scholarly wisdom when they are convinced they need it, and not before. A strategy for teaching strategy begs for a case study approach around a current and relevant curriculum that is prepared and executed by a multidisciplinary faculty steeped in practical experience. Neither the curriculum nor the faculty comes out of thin air nor, for the most part, out of conventional academia; they almost certainly have to be created out of whole cloth. The following points seem axiomatic to a successful strategy for teaching strategy.

1. Case studies should dominate the curriculum. Case studies force students *into* the problem; they put a face on history and

bring life to theory. Case studies should pace the curriculum, not simply be appended here and there. Historical case studies abound, as do examples from business and law schools. But in the long run, the best case studies will be developed internally and involve contemporary issues in national security. They will be written around the military commanders, not a chief executive officer, not a trial attorney, and not a social service organization.

2. The organizing principle should be regional studies, not military or diplomatic history, not political science, not great power politics, and most certainly not a loose collection of electives whose primary reason for existence is faculty interest rather than student needs. By using regional studies as a framework, the curriculum can easily incorporate various aspects of strategy, diplomacy, economics, the military, and so forth, as well as all elements of the interagency process. Strategies can be developed and tested against the real world, measured against existing engagement strategies and circumstances, and be immediately useful.

3. Within this case study/regional study framework, the pace and content of courses need to be adjusted to emphasize problem-solving to include the writing of strategy. This will require more time for students to research, analyze, and write. Of all the forms of learning, writing is second only to actual experience. Problemsolving tasking should be introduced early in the curriculum and completed at logical intervals along the way. For example, students could be tasked to develop strategy for conflict termination and post-conflict reconstruction or for dealing with the challenge of failing states. The intellectual challenge will have them evaluate and apply the gamut of strategic principles from realism to idealism, center of gravity, just war, policy by other means, the integration of the instruments of national power, and so forth.

4. The lecture/seminar-centric model for teaching should yield its dominant grip on the curriculum. Lectures are an efficient way to impart significant amounts of common information to a broad audience. Seminars promote bonding and mutual learning—qualities essential to cohesive military organizations. Interactive learning can bring out the best among seminar mates. But these methods are not the end-all, be-all to teaching methods—other methods exist and the war colleges should be open to considering them. In particular, the task of teaching strat-

egy may not lend itself to a group approach because strategy formulation requires deep, often prolonged considerations of sometimes narrowly focused topics—an approach that does not sit well in a seminar environment. The war colleges should rebalance seminar-based pedagogy with scheduled time for individual study and one-on-one, or very small group, interaction with professors, scholars, and mentors.

Importance of Faculty

These proposed curriculum changes are major. Part and parcel with changes in the curriculum come changes in the faculty, which translate into faculty development. The faculty development initiatives that we propose spill over into major changes on the academic schedule to allow faculty time to develop the curriculum and create/maintain their own expertise as well as prepare for the immediacies of teaching. Implementing these initiatives will require a different form of faculty preparation because the pedagogical emphasis would be on analyzing problems and developing strategy while maintaining a sufficient foundation in theory. Such an approach to teaching would be demanding on the faculty's creativity because it is a different way of imparting learning.

Accordingly, it would require moving away from a curriculum sequence that is heavy in continuous seminar instruction and student recitation. Because of the 10-month accelerated master's program at the war colleges, the faculty maintains a relentless pace more in keeping with the training culture of the military than with the educational culture needed for strategic pedagogy. The pace is hard to sustain, notably for new instructors who must master a vast amount of multidisciplinary material and the Socratic method of pedagogy to be effective. These considerations reinforce our point of departure that the faculty owns the curriculum. To build a faculty capable of executing a strategy for teaching strategy, war colleges should:

1. Send faculty to periodic professional development tours in the policy and strategy communities to gain experience and confidence in strategizing—in making the link between policy, strategy, and operations. Such tours would also benefit the agency, bureau, or office in which the tours take place, thereby projecting the prestige of the colleges. The payoffs in development are extraordinary; faculty will learn how to link strategic theory

with practice and understand the boundaries that policy places on means or, as is common, the mismatch between policy and means caused in either direction. They will also gain a respect for the plenitude of human and institutional variables that constitute the fog of making strategy.

2. Develop a senior mentor program. Invite creative strategists to make presentations to students on the intellectual process for making strategy in given historical circumstances. Currently, such presentations by senior military officials address more the “what” (often a PowerPoint briefing on operations) than the “how” of strategy. An effective initiative is to establish senior mentors from the retired and perhaps even Active-duty ranks, as well as civilians (both U.S. and foreign), who would provide wisdom on how to make strategy. For senior leaders, the occasional immersion in a war college seminar would provide the opportunity to influence the successor generation of officers. Each seminar should be assigned a civilian and military senior mentor.

the pedagogical emphasis would be on analyzing problems and developing strategy while maintaining a sufficient foundation in theory

3. Create a Ph.D. program in strategy. Despite the excellence of American graduate education and various distinguished doctoral programs in history, political science, and international relations with emphasis on security studies, few deal with strategy. Strategy is many disciplines fused into art and science, with emphasis on the former. The Royal Military College of Canada in Kingston, Ontario, has a superb Ph.D. in War Studies, which has produced high-quality practitioners and scholars in matters strategic.⁷ The war colleges have the mandate, resources (such as faculty and library), and potential market to put together a small, quality doctoral-level program in strategy, which would capture the principal disciplines the curriculum deals with. Such a program would engender a level of academic excellence that the faculty would aspire to, as well as attract scholars of high quality to the faculty. Because 3 years are normally required to complete the Ph.D., which is difficult for military careerists to accommodate, the program could recruit civilian students on a

tuition basis. The program would fill a serious void in American graduate education. Finally, because the various war colleges have unique resources and similar mandates, they could creatively combine efforts into a consortium to support the Ph.D. program.

The Path and Payoff

These are broad-based changes in both the curriculum and the faculty. Organizational change is difficult, particularly in large, mature, bureaucratic organizations, and especially when those organizations believe that they are already successful. Changes such as those proposed here usually come as the result of object failures, acknowledged within the organization, and around which a powerful consensus can be built or from a powerful outside force (for example, a hostile takeover in the business world, or a new commander with a task order to “fix the problem” in the military). Neither of those impetuses exists in the case of the war colleges; they are fine, well-functioning organizations. But they need to change from teaching about strategy to teaching it—for the purpose of producing graduates who are strategists. So, where to begin?

Lacking the necessary driving forces for simultaneous major change, it is prudent to seek incremental change, through which a learning curve can be created and a momentum of success can be built. The faculty comes first, and then from the faculty comes the curriculum. The faculty owns the curriculum and is the custodian of academic rigor and institutional accreditation. Within the faculty, begin with the senior mentor and Ph.D. in strategy programs. Every warrior tribe asks its elders to teach those who would follow and lead in battle; the senior mentor program fits that mold. Every serious profession has a Ph.D. level within academia; the doctorate in strategy fits that mold. The senior mentor and Ph.D. programs are both modest expenditures. From these programs curriculum changes could flow, including, at a minimum, a wealth of case studies focused on integrating the elements of national power in the service of strategy. The remainder of the suggested curriculum changes would follow naturally, part and parcel with case study development, and as they prove their worth (or not).

The war colleges are at an interesting juncture where their traditional approach to the definition of strategy, which has served reasonably well for years, is out of date and

potentially dysfunctional to teaching and developing future strategy. This position is similar to the great schools of administration of the 18th and 19th centuries, formed to relieve royals of the tedium of everyday governance by building a corps of professional administrators. The overarching assumption of these schools was that politicians (in particular the royals) did politics and administrators did administration, and never the twain should meet. But by the early 20th century, it became obvious that successful politicians did a lot of administrating, and successful administrators did a lot of politicking. The great schools of business changed—bringing the study of politics into the education of any administrator, and adding administration/implementation into the education of any senior executive. The parallel in our arena is to bring the instruments of power into the education of all levels and to develop a definition of strategy that spans all of the levels of PME—around and through which we can build a coherent, current, and relevant curriculum.

The major change proposed through this article is to reaggregate the various partitions of strategy. Strategy exists at *all* levels. And all aspects of strategy and all elements of power are similarly present—in different degrees and forms, to be sure, but they exist and should be taught. This aggregated approach offers a more workable framework for teaching strategy. It also requires some changes in curriculum and makes demands on war college faculties—demands that will have to be met with resources. The key is a common thread—the definition of strategy—around which a curriculum can be created and executed by a faculty that is tailored to the mission. **JFQ**

The authors thank General Frederick F. Woerner, USA (Ret.), Lieutenant General David W. Barno, USA (Ret.), Major General David H. Huntoon, Jr., USA, Michael Matheny, Antulio J. Echevarria II, Douglas Johnson, Tami Biddle, Nathan Freier, Clair Gilk, and Michael George.

NOTES

¹ Stephen D. Chiabotti makes this point in “A Deeper Shade of Blue: The School of Advanced Air and Space Studies,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 49 (2^d Quarter 2008), as he relates that the Air Force’s School of Advanced Air and Space Studies had to be carved out of, and held separate and distinct from,

the PME architecture in order to focus on producing strategists.

² Joint Publication (JP) 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, September 2006), defines *strategy* as “a prudent idea or set of ideas for employing the instruments of national power in a synchronized and integrated fashion to achieve theater, national, and/or multinational objectives.” This definition is bureaucratically appealing, politically correct, and relatively useless. The definition makes no mention of strategy’s conjoined twin, policy. The definition suggests that a prudent set of ideas not synchronized and integrated is something other than strategy. Finally, it portrays strategy as an idea, which is elevated to the status of strategy on the basis of its prudence alone—not its boldness or its necessity, but its prudence. “Prudent,” “synchronized,” and “integrated” are scarcely more than semantic lubricants to aid the aged and dry joint publication coordination process.

³ Doctrine is not strategy. Doctrine, which exists in the military community and among the world’s great religions, stands apart from all other aspects of strategy, except to serve as a sort of memorandum of agreement between the most contentious factions—the Service chiefs, combatant commanders, and the joint world. To be sure, and not unlike disputes among monastic orders and Western and Eastern Christianity, there have also been great schisms among and within the Services, combatant commands, and joint community at large over doctrine that had to be resolved by higher authority.

⁴ Somehow all of this is hinged together by *operational art*—a term born of necessity. The necessity was that the division of activities into strategic, operational, and tactical was becoming increasingly frustrating to all concerned.

⁵ There is a broad section of our professional literature that would support the contention that the partitions of strategy, and differentiations between strategy and tactics, are out of date. If tactical situations can have strategic consequences, then what is the difference between tactical and strategic? If Charles Krulak’s “strategic corporal” in a three-block war is an accurate portrayal of the modern battlefield, then does the strategic, operational, tactical partition make any sense?

⁶ Of note, JP 1-02 does not even define the term *policy*.

⁷ The Royal Military College has a master’s level program and a Ph.D. program. It includes such fields as international relations, war, defense economics, diplomatic history, strategic planning, intelligence, ethics, civil-military relations, World War II and total war, armed forces and society, interagency process, modern warfare, insurgency and terrorism, conflict termination, and reconstruction.