

Strategic Drift?

The Future of the National War College

By JANET BRESLIN-SMITH and CLIFF KRIEGER



DOD (NDU)

Each year, as students get their assignments to the National War College (NWC), the faculty wonder: Is there a “Kennan” among the group? Would this class produce a strategist in the mold of the college’s first deputy commandant and author of the Cold War containment strategy, George Kennan? It is a legitimate question.

After all, from its beginning, the purpose of the school was clear: “The College is concerned with grand strategy and the utilization of the national resources to implement that strategy. . . . Its graduates will exercise a great influence on the formation of national and foreign policy in both peace and war.”¹ While the call for grand strategists comes but once a generation, the college has a perpetual duty: turning out senior military, diplomatic, and national security officers who can perform problem analysis at the national strategic level and thus support their seniors in taking the decisions needed to achieve our national objectives.

And that certainly was the intention in 1946. The National War College was created to prepare senior military officers and other national security officials for higher professional responsibilities. The brainchild of Army Generals Henry “Hap” Arnold, George Marshall, and Dwight Eisenhower, as well as Admiral Chester Nimitz and Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal, the college had support from the highest levels of government and was essentially an American experiment in professional military education. It would be the Nation’s first senior inter-Service and inter-

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DOD

Above: General of the Army Dwight Eisenhower developed the War College as an institution for inter-Service and interagency education

Right: The Chairman is charged with reclaiming ownership of and strengthening the National War College



DOD (Chad J. McNeeley)

agency school to offer a program in strategic military/political studies on war and politics.

For over 60 years, the college has been at this task and has remained remarkably faithful to the founders' vision for the school. The alumni of the college read like a "who's who" of national security—Chairmen, Service chiefs, combatant commanders, Ambassadors, sub-Cabinet officials. And even though the college has more than doubled in size from its original 100 students, and its core course program has undergone constant review and revision, the genius of Eisenhower and Arnold's concept lives on. On any given day, in any seminar room, we might hear combat veterans and seasoned diplomats grappling with contentious policy issues; academic specialists and intelligence officers stimulating student discussion over tribal issues in the Middle East or new threats from

space; or Army officers comparing wartime experiences with Provincial Reconstruction Team members from the Department of State or the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), who practiced their political or economic skills in the midst of war. It is still a special place.

Indeed, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates could not have designed a better program to develop his idea of the 21st-century national security professional.

All institutions change over time—shifts in the political environment and new bureaucratic forces push, poke, and prod, and attempt to modify the mission, redefine the program, and adapt to changing political currents. The National War College, once a well-known, independent, professional program for national security senior officials, is now but one part of a larger unit, the National

Defense University (NDU), in effect a subset of a multifaceted organization that includes research centers, other schools and colleges, and various outreach activities.

Moreover, the NWC program is no longer distinct. Over time, the other senior Service colleges expanded and shifted their curricula to approximate the joint/interagency orientation of the War College and accommodate the integrating requirements of the Joint Staff J7. The college must once again ask, "Is the college still unique and of value? Has it adapted to meet the needs of a new strategic era? What do the Nation's senior national security officials—in and out of uniform—need to know and be able to do in the 21st century, as strategic leaders?"

These questions take on new urgency with the current Defense Science Board Task Force on Joint Professional Military Education (JPME). It will study both Service-specific and joint professional military education curricula as well as overall steps to make JPME "more effective in preparing U.S. military personnel to meet the uncertainties and challenges of future missions." Buried in this study directive may be an implied conceit. In fact, the Defense Science Board charge may describe a critical fault line. Strategic leaders must give as much premium to "the thinking about" as to the "meeting" of uncertainties and challenges.



U.S. Army



DoD

Above: The War College's first deputy commandant and author of Cold War containment strategy, George Kennan

Left: General "Hap" Arnold helped establish the National War College in 1946

That insight drove the founders to create the college in the first place. Strategic thinking, in their view, had to be given primacy over operational art and tactical actions, or else leaders would not be able to orchestrate and prioritize the application of state powers. Deep analysis of the problem at hand, a global perspective, and profound thinking about vision must drive strategy, decisions, actions, and assessments.

We recently completed a history of the National War College and have reflected on the school's promise and problems. While the college remains remarkably faithful to the founders' vision, it faces challenges unforeseen by those wartime leaders. If the college is to fulfill its original intention as a "school for strategy," it is time for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to reclaim the institution as his own. Both the Chairman and the Joint Chiefs collectively should clarify the NWC mission, enhance its leadership, encourage the Services in their selection of appropriate faculty and students, and provide leadership in

Joint Staff are preoccupied with more urgent matters, and that professional military education falls to the bottom of the list. Understandably, the Services focus on and support their respective colleges—all of which now have JPME II accreditation. As champions of jointness, the Chairman and the Joint Staff need to own the National War College.

Is the school still needed and still unique? Yes. The National War College's special focus on national security strategy, its highly developed curriculum, deep joint traditions, and interagency character set it apart. Over a quarter of the student body comes from the Departments of State, Homeland Security, and Treasury, the U.S. Agency for International Development, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Intelligence Community; the faculty reflects a joint, interagency, and academic mix. There is also a large representation of international military fellows. The college's extraordinary access to Washington policymakers and world leaders is as remarkable now as it was over six decades ago.

deep dedication to the NWC mission. The three-star commandants during this era reported directly to the Chairman and had management control of the school. While Service rotation did not guarantee strong performance in commandants, this abiding tradition brought continuity and accountability. With the advent of the National Defense University in 1976, the commandant's rank was reduced, and over the past few decades leadership stability was disrupted by limited tenures, frequent turnover, and breaks in the rotation between Services.

For the college to thrive, the commandant must be more than the NDU president's administrative overseer for the college. He or she must be his or her own person, with a defined mission and the freedom and resources to accomplish it.

Short tours and ill-defined powers frustrate even the most dedicated leader. Ideally, the commandant position should have a longer tenure, to include teaching responsibility, and attract officers who demonstrate a commitment to lead an institution that is a specialized professional school. This has been an ongoing concern over the years. In a report to the commandant in 1953, a member of an academic review team wrote:

The top management has been less effective than it could be expected to be. The reasons . . . are the relatively brief tenure of the Commandants . . . and their lack of experience in running an institution of higher learning. Men of fine character, excellent minds, and wide experience have served as Commandants. . . . But their previous experience did not equip them to head a major, new, high-level academic institution in the exploratory field of national grand strategy under conditions of possible global, total war. And the shortness of their terms of office prevented them for accumulating very much experience.

To attract and mentor new commandants, an NWC Oversight Board, along the lines of the original Board of Consultants, should be reconstituted. From 1946 to 1976, this board played a vital role in advising, assisting, and providing feedback and evaluations for the commandant and the college.² A revived board would include, as it did in the past, distinguished former general officers, Ambassadors, Cabinet and sub-Cabinet officials, as well as academic leaders. Many should be NWC graduates. This board could

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driving the focus of its curricula. We offer the following observations and recommendations to strengthen the college, so it can better serve the Nation in this new era. We also suggest that the college and the university itself go back to its roots and revive the original concept for joint—and interagency—senior education that Eisenhower and other post-World War II leaders had for the college in 1946.

Mission and Leadership

The Chairman and the Joint Staff need to clarify and support the distinct mission of the college, which began as an experiment in professional military education and had the active support of President Harry Truman, Secretary of Defense Forrestal, Secretary of State James Byrnes, and the Service chiefs. Both the War College and the Industrial College of the Armed Forces (ICAF) anchored a new educational endeavor at Fort Lesley J. McNair in Washington, DC, that earned remarkable official and public acclaim. Now there is a sense that both colleges have become orphans, that the Chairman and the

For the school to fulfill its mission, it needs its senior stakeholders. The college needs the active involvement of the Chairman and the Joint Chiefs in policies that will invigorate the leadership team, give more responsibility and stability to the position of commandant, and reaffirm the standing of the school.

As in the case of any institution, the college needs strong leadership. As former faculty members, we know the benefits of an involved and accomplished dean of faculty, who must bring academic direction and continuity to faculty relations. But we also know that the college thrives when commandants have the discretion to engage fully in the academic program, teach, and have enough tenure to support the college's mission.

As our research reveals, for the first 30 years, the National War College had a set pattern and tenure for commandants: a rotation between Services for full 3-year tours. Admiral Harry Hill, the first commandant, set the standard, with prior combat experience, intellectual curiosity, and a

function as a selection advisory group for the Chairman, defining the criteria for leadership and reviewing the needs of the school.

But leadership goes beyond the selection of commandant to the command structure of the college. In the early decades of its existence, the National War College had an elaborate staffing structure, with 89 support personnel and a multitiered command structure. Currently, the college has but a fraction of its original staff, and overall management duties fall on the dean of faculty and a combined civilian dean of students/chief of staff. Traditionally,

Faculty

Military Faculty. Throughout its history, the National War College debated the criteria and performance of its military faculty. The selection of this faculty for the college is largely left to the individual Services and the criteria lack transparency. As we found in our research, the problem is exacerbated in times of war. The demands of deployments and wartime surges stress the ability of the Services to release combat veterans to come back for advanced education and to return to teach.⁴

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both deans were Active-duty colonel/captain billets. We propose that the dean of students revert to Active duty, separating out the chief of staff function as either a military or civilian billet. We also suggest that the dean of faculty position be open to either military or civilians, ideally NWC graduates with prior teaching experience. Specifically, we think the position of dean should be open to civilians since that position requires a doctorate.³ The Services have been hard-pressed to nominate candidates. As the Active-duty forces are stressed by two ongoing wars and a multitude of other responsibilities, it is hard for military officers to find the time to study for advanced degrees. The Defense Science Board needs to address this issue for all the professional military education (PME) schools.

At a more basic level, do the Services value those teaching at senior PME institutions? We believe that an assignment to the college is critical to our nation's security and should be respected. The college needs intellectually engaged military faculty from a variety of backgrounds to best prepare the next generation of leaders. What matters is not an officer's potential for promotion, but his or her enthusiasm, intellectual engagement, and ability to teach. This has been a perennial challenge at the college. Over the years, a number of recommendations have been advanced in this regard:

- offer selected officers opportunities to pursue a doctorate with a future assignment to the college, and expand these options for minority officers to broaden the diversity of the faculty

- extend the NWC tour to 3 or 4 years
- allow for military faculty above and below the rank of colonel/captain
- work with the Services to recruit officers who would best perform at the college.

Over the years, the college has been blessed with a corps of outstanding military faculty, but it appears to be more happenstance than design. NWC leadership has no insight into the grand plan of any of the Services. Here again, an active Oversight Board could assist with military faculty selection and potential promotion options.

Agency/Department Faculty. In an effort to enhance the quality of Defense Department and agency personnel assigned to the faculty, the college needs to expand its interagency recruitment efforts, to encourage the best match between faculty background and interest in teaching at the college. The standard set by George Kennan was impressive; he taught and spoke at the college over



U.S. Navy



U.S. Navy



DOD

Fleet Admiral Nimitz (left) and Navy Secretary Forrestal (center) helped institute the War College; General Omar Bradley (right) was on college's Board of Consultants

his entire career. Recently, the college was privileged to have Ambassador Ryan Crocker for a brief tour, continuing the Kennan tradition. We need the Department of State, USAID, and the intelligence agencies to increase awareness of the NWC program and to alert younger personnel who might want to make longer term career choices based on an eventual tour at the college.

Civilian Faculty. The civilian faculty presents a series of special challenges. In the first few years, the college had four civilian “visiting professors,” who taught only in the fall semester. As it quickly became apparent, this “visiting” approach provided no continuity or planning for the following year’s course, and within a short time civilian academic faculty was given multiyear contracts. Currently, most of the civilian faculty members are hired under Title 10 of the Federal Code for the Department of Defense, for mainly 3-year renewable contracts. There is no tenure process at the college.

The absence of tenure reflects, in part, the distinct nature of the school and its unique mix of faculty groups. It was clear from the beginning that the college was not intended to be a typical graduate school, not created to produce researchers but policy- and decisionmakers. Given the diverse backgrounds of the faculty—a blend of

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scholars and practitioners (military officers, Ambassadors, and intelligence officers)—we strongly support the NWC tradition of collegiality and mutual professional respect. Appreciative faculty members in our study reported that it was rare in “stovepiped” Washington to work and learn with professionals who are “not in your lane.” Under-scoring this atmosphere, the Chairman’s commitment to academic freedom is deeply valued. The college’s gift to the students is the vibrant exchange of views, a mature and vigorous debate between all communities.

The college is an intellectual refuge that must be protected.

The Student Body

The National War College is designed for its unique student body—men and women in midcareer whom their Services and Departments believe will go on to higher positions in the national security area. But do they? The process for selection to the college as well as the decisions for follow-on assignments has always been opaque. The Services have their own senior school selection boards and tightly control these decisions. In the early 1990s, the college attempted to work with the Services, highlighting the national security strategy focus of the program. We believe this effort should be redoubled. As the Joint Chiefs and the Defense Science Board consider the role of PME and the mission of the National War College, serious attention should be paid to student selection and follow-on assignments. The Nation invests scarce resources into the college, a specifically designed program. It should be offered to the most appropriately chosen student body.

This is easy to say, but is a challenge for each Service to do. Even as early as the mid-1950s, the NWC commandant noted that the Services fought to send their best to their own senior schools. Since the National War College has no “sponsoring” individual Service, the Chairman’s leadership in this area is vital.

The Academic Program

The philosophy of the school’s program has not changed over the years. As the early student handbooks in the 1950s noted:

the best preparation which can be given its students for their future work is an increased capacity to think broadly, objectively, and soundly [about] national security in this increasing complex world in which we live. The emphasis therefore is on the educational process as opposed to the training process. The College does not train its people to be future J-3’s and Counselor of Embassy. But it does strive to make them think in such a manner that they cannot help but be better J-3’s and Counselors of Embassy for having had the experience of attending this College [emphasis in original].

The academic program was established to educate senior military and civilian officials to think broadly and soundly. The program’s focus has always been on grand strategy, all

the tools of statecraft, as well as joint and interagency operations. But each year there is lively debate over a number of key issues that pose challenges for the future. Should the college keep the focus on grand strategy, or should it focus on the operational level? There are two components to this question. The first reflects assumptions about the uniqueness of the college and the strategic nature of its curriculum. While the other senior schools have expanded their own programs to include grand strategy as well as joint and interagency topics, this is the key and central component of the NWC program. Indeed, its curriculum has shifted closer to, not away from, the strategic level of analysis, the broader view of grand strategy using all the tools of critical analysis and statecraft. With the mounting cries that we lack “strategic leaders,” it seems that the focus should remain and deepen.

Secondly, is this focus on grand strategy too abstract, too “next-war-itis” in a world of immediate regional threats? Following the attacks by al Qaeda in 2001, the NWC faculty discussed refocusing the course on the Islamic extremist threat. While some faculty members argued that this indeed was the strategic threat of the era, others held that this was merely the “crisis du jour” and thus should not impact the current course offerings. This has been a continuing debate over these past 8 years. In the context of the early years of the school, the crisis du jour of Stalin’s aggression became the existential threat defining a 50-year period of deterrence and smaller military campaigns. Are we simply in the early stages of another multi-decade challenge?

In this regard, it is useful to go back to the college’s earliest days to get a better sense of strategy and threat. Rather than jumping immediately into courses on strategy, the college focused on an analysis of the threat. Kennan’s study of the Soviet Union led him to three basic, but profound, conclusions:

- the Soviet Union, even if defeated in battle, was too large to occupy—and we do not do occupations well
- a war fought with atomic weapons would have no victors
- the ideological attraction and logic of communism had to be countered.

Acknowledging the Nation’s exhaustion after World War II, Kennan’s lectures at the college focused on “measures short of war.”⁵ This reasoning, and his deep understanding

of Soviet motivations, led him to the elegant and enduring strategy that contained the Soviet impulse to expand, stressed its central planning model, and addressed conditions of poverty that fed the appeal of Marxism.

If Kennan were still teaching at the War College today, we believe that he would be deep into a similar analysis of “the sources of militant Islamic conduct.” He knew the strategist’s first task is to understand motive, causes, and symptoms of grievance. He would be analyzing movements that go beyond the nation-state, centered on tribal traditions and theology. Following along these lines, he would be joined by General David Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker team-teaching courses in advanced strategy for hybrid conflicts.

Of course, this is not the only threat we face, and the college must prepare students to cope with conflicts of any ilk. How do we make time in the academic program to present a thorough study of the host of nations,

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movements, and conditions that challenge us now? Should the intermediate schools begin this study with the college providing booster-shot instruction? Indeed, to do this job adequately would require a 2-year program.⁶

Underscoring this argument is a more basic question of focus. Should the curriculum be U.S.-centric or “other”-centric? That is, should the majority of the academic program consider the United States, its diplomatic history, bureaucratic politics, military history, joint military structures, and foreign policy and crisis management challenges? Or should more time be devoted to the texture and detail of “the other?” As our history project revealed, the National War College did not offer detailed—indeed, any—courses on Korea or Vietnam during those wars: nothing on the politics, cultural traditions, social or ethnic dynamics of these two battlefield nations. Now, there are so many “targets of concern” that the college does not have the time to provide the same depth that Kennan offered in the 1940s.

This argument about focus is not confined to discussions about the NWC curricu-

lum; it can be seen in the larger, lively debate within the military on doctrine. Should the military just concern itself with battles and operations or with political development and governance? Traditionally, military studies concentrated on orders of battle, operations, maneuver, envelopments, emplacements, tactics, technology, logistics, and victory. Armies faced armies over a battlefield, sea and air campaigns subdued an enemy force. But as war gravitated to complex political conflicts, insurgencies, and now tribal and religious conflicts, the military leadership in our nation is calling for new national doctrine and new definitions of center of gravity. In report after report, the Chairman, combatant commanders, and Secretary of Defense have called for “unconventional thinkers to address unconventional challenges.” As this approach is operationalized in the new Army and Marine Corps counterinsurgency doctrine and Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Iraq and Afghanistan, the War College has adjusted its curriculum to reflect this debate in military thought and the larger issues of national security strategy.⁷ In the end, however, the college is not about a single nation or region, but about analytic structures and broad threats. Just as David Kilcullen’s *The Accidental Guerrilla* looks at an analytic structure that is applicable from Timor to Afghanistan to Iraq to Spain and England, so the War College must help its students to see the broad patterns but learn to adapt quickly to local conditions, based upon local expertise.

A final observation is in order. The Departments of Defense and State find themselves in the midst of dynamic intellectual debates over military doctrine, interdepartmental and interagency relations, and the global role of the United States. Frustrations on the battlefield challenge the Obama administration. Underlying the pressures of current operations are lingering questions about the ramp-up to war, the lack of adequate planning, the diminished role of State, and the absence of overall strategy. The spate of books covering Iraq and Afghanistan in the early years was followed by articles from Active-duty troops themselves, as well as blogs and online journal articles in sites such as Small Wars Journal. Some address “failures in generalship”; others focus on poor integration between State, USAID, the nongovernmental organization community, and the military.

Since many generals and higher ranking civilians involved in the current debates and

challenges attended the college during the 1990s, we must look carefully at this criticism. Did the graduates bring their NWC education to the policy arena? Although the college had a well rounded program, we make two suggestions to focus and deepen student preparation.

We suggest that students need the mental discipline that comes from the use of strategic frameworks to guide analysis and that this discipline be repeatedly exercised in complex scenarios. The pressure to respond to attack, to act, to “do something” in crisis is so great that only a disciplined education, with appropriate specializations, can prepare an officer or civilian official to “stand there” and think through the problem, seeing the pitfalls, before recommending the best course of action.

Currently, NWC oral examinations include scenario analysis, and core courses weave case studies throughout. But we have come to believe that this method must be intensified. One approach for teaching as well as student evaluation was designed by Colonel George Raach, a former Army member of the faculty. Colonel Raach took an NWC strategic framework and applied it to what we now refer to as “hybrid conflicts.” He found that if students could answer and grasp the impact of the following questions, they would have the foundation for strategic analysis. Using this framework, a student must evaluate and understand:

- What U.S. interests are at stake?
- How important are these interests?
- What are the risks of acting or not acting?
- What assumptions have been made?
- Is this conflict intrastate or interstate?
- What is the root cause of the conflict or dispute?
- Who are the antagonists and what are their relationships?
- What are the antagonists’ resources, capabilities, strengths, weaknesses, and likely courses of action?
- What are the antagonists’ belief systems, both religious and tribal?
- How willing are the antagonists to compromise?
- Who are the antagonists’ internal and external allies?
- What are the antagonists’ centers of gravity? When did the problem begin? What are the antecedents?
- What is the political, social, and economic context?



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Strategic Forum 245

Iraqi Security Forces after U.S. Troop Withdrawal: An Iraqi Perspective

Former Iraqi Major General Najim Abed Al-Jabouri explains why many Iraqis believe the United States may be making a mistake by not using its remaining leverage to insulate the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) from the incumbent sectarian political parties. He argues that strengthening the national character of the ISF is the best hope for a stable Iraq.

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- What are the significant geographical aspects of the area?
- What are the capabilities of regional organizations?
- How long is the operation likely to last?
- What are the interests, goals, and objectives of coalition partners?
- What wildcard countries or conditions exist?
- Can the policy objectives be obtained with military force?
- How will the economic, political, diplomatic, and social elements of power be synchronized with military operations?
- How will success be measured?

Did NWC graduates—both military and civilian graduates—go through this discipline, planning and preparing for action in Afghanistan or Iraq? Even setting aside this thoroughgoing analysis, and just using the basic components in policy or military campaign planning, did any graduate object when courses of action, branches, and sequels were not adequately evaluated? Were any alumni concerned with how little knowledge decisionmakers had about Iraq or Afghanistan—history, key leaders, culture, political dynamics—the questions that Kennan would have raised at the time?

At a deeper level, did NWC graduates “speak truth to power”? We argue that the students need not only the discipline of the strategic analysis models, but also the mental preparation to present their best military or professional advice, even in the face of overwhelming political pressure. Some may call this ethics or leadership training, but despite the fact that the college had topics on both, past policy failures suggest that we need to confront this issue.

Finally, the Defense Science Board should consider the calls made by the Chairman, Secretary, and President for a “whole-of-government” or “integrated component” approach in national security, with reference to the balance between the military and the nonmilitary instruments of statecraft, the so-called mix of defense, diplomacy, and development. Recent efforts to develop national security professional education should review the original concept for postwar professional education: a national security consortium of schools. As originally envisioned by Eisenhower and the NWC founders, both the War College and ICAF would have been joined by three other senior professional schools: a

State Department College, an Administration College, and an Intelligence College. Our updated proposal would include a College of Diplomacy and Development to complement the NWC program and foster greater institutional strength at State and USAID. We would advocate that the Industrial College also reclaim its roots. This could be ICAF’s day in the sun. It is designed for industry studies, mobilization assessments, and economic analysis. It can help the Nation evaluate the impact of the economic crisis, our industrial contraction, on strategy.

This broader “integrated component” proposal suggests a larger interagency review panel, and the Defense Science Board should propose a side study to this effect. But with or without a broader reform at the National Defense University, the proposals above for the strengthening and focusing of the War College stand.

The school has never been more important, the mission never more vital, and the requirement for strategic leaders never more timely. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Report of Leonard T. Gerrow (1945), Washington, DC, National Defense University Library Special Collections.

² Over the years, the board has included General Omar Bradley, Father Theodore Hesburgh, Dr. Bernard Brodie, and John J. McCloy.

³ The Ph.D. criterion reflects, in part, the Middle States Accreditation requirements for Master’s degree-granting institutions. Some in the field question this requirement, noting that few great strategists in history had advanced degrees.

⁴ A number of the Services are concerned with this issue—particularly the Army, which is addressing this tension and working to bring experienced officers for tours at West Point, Leavenworth, and Carlisle.

⁵ Giles D. Harlow and George C. Maerz, eds., *Measures Short of War: The George F. Kennan Lectures at the National War College, 1946–47* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1991).

⁶ A 2-year program, referencing the past German General Staff structure and its military education system, was proposed by Martin van Creveld, *The Training of Officers, from Military Professionalism to Irrelevance* (New York: Free Press, 1990).

⁷ See Derek S. Reveron and Kathleen A. Mahoney-Norris, “Military-Political Relations: The Need for Officer Education,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 52 (1st Quarter 2009). But with this focus, there is the concern that future opponents will take other tacks, and so the college must cover all aspects of threat.