

# To Ph.D. or Not to Ph.D....

**I**t stands to reason that at a time of significant change in the parameters, methods and social context of war there should be a debate about how best to advance professional education in the U.S. military. A significant aspect of that debate concerns the relationship between the Services and the civilian academy. The American Interest is therefore pleased to present two pointed views on this topic, one by U.S. Army General David H. Petraeus and one by Ralph Peters (Lt. Col. USA, Ret.).

## Beyond the Cloister

*David H. Petraeus*

**T**he most powerful tool any soldier carries is not his weapon but his mind. These days, and for the days ahead as far as we can see, what soldiers at all ranks know is liable to be at least as important to their success as what they can physically do. Some key questions before the U.S. military in changing times therefore must be: How do we define the best military education for the U.S. armed forces, and what are the best ways to impart that education? What should be the ideal relationship between soldiering and the schoolhouse?

This is a vast and complex subject, involving many different skill sets in various settings. I want to focus here on just one aspect of that subject: Do military officers benefit from attending a civilian graduate school after having learned their trade as warfighters and during a period in their careers that permits them to spend a year or two "away from troops?" The short answer is yes (while noting that we must,

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again, first focus on being competent in our warfighting skills). The benefits of civilian education are substantial, and I have been and remain a strong proponent of such opportunities for officers. I have applauded vigorously as the U.S. Army has begun implementing a new program to allow several hundred officers from the so-called basic branches—infantry, armor, field artillery and so on—to attend civilian graduate schools each year, with full funding, and to then be able to rejoin a tactical unit without having to first do an academic or staff tour that "employs" the skills they've gained in graduate school, as was the case in the past.

There are at least six reasons that civilian graduate schooling is valuable for our officers. The first and most important is that a stint at graduate school takes military officers out of their intellectual comfort zones. Such experiences are critical to the development of the flexible, adaptable, creative thinkers who are so important to operations in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. Warfighting must certainly remain the primary focus of military leaders. However, as the U.S. Army's new leadership manual explains, our officers need to be capable of more than that. They need to be "pentathlete leaders"—individuals who, metaphorically speaking, are not just sprinters or shot putters but can do it all. We



*AF's Gary Linger*

## **We in the military tend to have our noses to the grindstone. We don't often have the time to pause and look up.**

need officers comfortable not just with major combat operations but with operations conducted throughout the middle- and lower-ends of the spectrum of conflict, as well.

That is why it is so important to get the officers who will be our future commanders and leaders out of their intellectual comfort zones. Most of us in the military live an existence that is beautifully captured by the "grindstone/cloister" metaphor that an old boss of mine, General Jack Galvin, used to use. What General Galvin meant was that military professionals often live a cloistered existence that limits what we experience first hand. At the same time, we have our noses to the grindstone, which tends to make us unaware of what we're missing. We don't pause and look up often enough, because we don't have the time. When I was his aide as a captain, General Galvin often urged me to raise my sights, to look out beyond the "max effective" range of an M-16 rifle. He was the reason I went to graduate school, and I have

been indebted to him ever since.

Of course, officers can—and do—go outside their cloisters and

prod those in the younger generations to stretch their minds and imaginations without going to civilian graduate schools. We bring provocative speakers to our war colleges and staff colleges. We develop ambitious curricula to stimulate our officers' thinking. We publish thought-provoking, sometimes critical, articles in our military journals. And we provide assignments deliberately designed to broaden our officers' development. At the end of the day, however, few if any of the experiences we can provide within our military communities are as intellectually stimulating, challenging or mind-opening as a year or two at a civilian graduate school. One reason for that is simple enough: When an officer leaves a lecture or a seminar room within a military environment, he or she returns to the familiar cloister and grindstone. When that officer leaves a lecture or a seminar room in a civilian graduate school, he or she is living an experience beyond the cloister. Just as the best way by far to learn a foreign language is to live

in the culture where the language is spoken, the best way to learn about other worldviews is to go to and live in another world.

The second reason civilian grad school is so beneficial for those in uniform flows directly from living outside the cloister. Through such schooling our officers are often surprised to discover just how diverse and divergent views can be. We only thought we knew the contours of debate on a given subject. We discover not only that some very smart folks see the world very differently than we do, but that they also see it very differently from each other. Debates we imagined to be two-sided turn out to be three-, four- or more-sided.

This is a very valuable experience in and of itself for those of us in uniform who will work and live in other cultures overseas. If the range of views within our own country is greater than we supposed, that can only help prepare officers for an even wider range beyond our shores. It is also worth pointing out that the array of foreign students in civilian graduate programs is far broader than in our military education institutions, even greater than the relatively diverse (for military schooling) student populations at the National Defense University at Fort Leslie McNair in Washington, DC, the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California or any of the others. That's another plus.

None of this is meant to imply that all those in uniform see issues uniformly. But we probably do tend to be less diverse in our thinking than those on most college campuses. After all, in the military, teamwork is not only a virtue, it is a life-and-death prerequisite of success. It is natural, therefore, that the trust soldiers must have in each other limits somewhat the boundaries of disagreement. That's not true on a college campus. The academic world at its best is supposed to push the envelope of inquiry as far as it can, whatever dissensus may result. Being part of a wide-open culture of discovery can be a very stimulating, challenging experience for those of us who attended West Point, which (tongue in cheek) we felt represented 150 years of tradition unhampered by progress. Of course, West Point has changed enormously over the years and it is a true national treasure, but despite the varied curriculum and experiences it provides, it is not an institution that

puts creativity, individuality and discovery before all else.

A third reason grad school is good for our officers is that, depending on the program, such study provides a fair amount of general intellectual capital and often provides specific skills and knowledge on which an officer may draw during his or her career.

It is sometimes said that the study of history, or government and politics, or other social science and humanities disciplines can help us ask the right questions, but cannot provide us specific answers to contemporary challenges. Certainly, a typical grad school experience—especially an interdisciplinary one like that provided at Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School or SAIS at Johns Hopkins or Harvard's Kennedy School—does help us to ask the right questions. However, in many cases, graduate school also provides real skills, knowledge and expertise on which one can draw in developing answers to those questions. I can give examples from my own experience.

When I first went to Iraq in 2003, my colleagues and I were repeatedly greeted by Iraqis—in the case at hand, in Mosul—who would say to us in the course of conversation: "We love democracy!...What is it?" I particularly remember being pulled aside after a provincial council meeting by an Iraqi business professor from Mosul University who cautioned, "You know, general, this idea of free markets scares some of these individuals." I was not surprised, because as a Princeton international relations/economics Ph.D. (and later an assistant professor at West Point) I was well aware of the uneven spread of liberal ideas. And I was not totally at a loss for answers, for I found myself recalling concepts from political philosophy and government courses. I knew how to convey basic ideas about majority rule and minority rights; about the exercise of basic freedoms and the need for limits to avoid infringing on the rights of others; and about the virtues of market-based economics.

Basic concepts from Econ 101 helped me plenty. Had I not remembered, for example, that injecting more money into an economy without increasing the amount of goods in the marketplace does nothing more than produce inflation, our early effort to get Iraqi

government salaries paid would have been for naught. We would not have re-opened the border for trade with Syria as soon we did. By the way, we did ensure, in re-opening that border, that all existing UN Security Council resolutions governing trade with Iraq were observed—thanks to some of the 28 great operational lawyers we had with us and a vague recollection of international legal concepts left implanted somewhere in my brain from a grad school course (and in this case also from a stint on the Joint Staff).

More than that, it was clear to me from my first days in Mosul that we needed to provide some basic instruction on concepts we take for granted in the United States—in our national version of a cloister. So we brought to Iraq Colonels Mike Meese and Rich Laquement,

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two fellow Woodrow Wilson School Ph.D.s, for several months in the summer of 2003 to help the new provincial council establish small business programs, put together investment deals and so on, until the formal USAID and Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) initiatives, like the Research Triangle Institute's democracy program, could be established. Those two officers joined Cornell Ph.D., Major Ike Wilson, our Division Plans Officer. Major Wilson demonstrated "pentathlete" leadership capabilities in adapting the Bosnia Multi-year Roadmap to northern Iraq and creating a campaign plan for northern Iraq relatively quickly after our arrival there. And there are plenty of other stories of how grad school helped a number of us—for example, about the value of knowledge that officers picked up in writing about past counterinsurgency operations, especially about lessons learned from Vietnam and Central America.

**A** fourth benefit of graduate school is that it helps our officers develop and refine their communications skills. As officers progress, their ability to communicate effectively—oral-

ly and in writing—takes on increased importance. Expressing oneself clearly, concisely and effectively is of obvious importance to leaders of all sorts, and it grows in importance with seniority. Indeed, if there is one area in which the students in our professional military education programs probably need to improve across the board, it is that of writing skills. That is a concern outside the military, as well. Several civilian graduate programs now provide writing coaches and former magazine or newspaper editors to grade papers on their grammar and effectiveness in presentation, in addition to the grade given on the substance of the paper.

Fifth and very much related, graduate school inevitably helps U.S. military officers improve their critical thinking skills. This is, of course, not just a result of specific courses

designed to develop research and analytical abilities. Students learn not only from books and professors; they also learn from each other. The

debates and discussions inside seminar rooms and in every grad school coffee room, cafeteria and hangout are invaluable to all students. That is also why the intellectual development of our officers is best facilitated by graduate programs that do not have too many members of the military in them, so that those from the military can't hide behind their buddies. Officers should be repeatedly challenged, and they must develop their own intellectual arguments and positions.

In my own experience, I found the most valuable situations to be those in which exceedingly bright senior professors held views substantially different from my own. I developed a particular friendship with one such professor at Princeton, one of the country's leading international legal scholars at the time—even though we truly saw the world through different lenses. In the end, we decided that we never disagreed on anything but substance.

I happened to be taking a course with him when the United States invaded the island of Grenada in 1983. Now, some of you will remember that the legal underpinnings for that

action were not the most robust to have ever justified an American military operation. Indeed, it later turned out that U.S. officials had actually written the request for American intervention that the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States submitted back to the United States to get us to intervene against one of their own member states. Nor was the action anchored in the most rock solid of ground when it came to traditional norms associated with the just war concept. Nonetheless, I wrote a paper for that professor entitled, "The Invasion of Grenada: Illegal, Immoral, and the Right Thing to Do." It was great fun to write, and decent enough to earn an "A" despite a conclusion I know the professor did not share.

The sixth way grad school produces better military officers is that it typically imparts a degree of intellectual humility—not at all a bad quality in those who may be charged in the future with some very weighty responsibilities. I certainly found my own experience at grad school to be quite humbling at times—starting with the "D" I got on my first advanced microeconomics exam. This frankly surprised me, for I went to grad school following a year at the Army's Command and General Staff College, during which I won the so-called "white briefcase." I stood first in our class of a thousand or so students, so as I entered grad school I believed I was a reasonably thoughtful fellow. The econ exam was followed quickly by a comment by Professor Richard Ullman, who was also the editor of *Foreign Policy* magazine at the time and eventually became my dissertation adviser, on a paper I wrote for him: "Though this paper is reasonably well written and has some merit, it is relatively simplistic", he observed, "and I am left feeling that the whole is less than the sum of the parts."

I eventually did fine in Professor Ullman's seminar and even got an "A" on the final exam in advanced micro, but grad school has a knack for taking one down a peg, and I found the experience quite salutary. Put differently, grad school forces a person to redefine upward one's own internal standards of excellence. That's a very healthy experience, so much so that I especially recommend it for all young captains who think, to any degree, that they're the stuff—which is to say, every young infantry captain. Of course, I

also recommend it for aviators of all ranks and services—that should almost go without saying.

**S**ending American military officers to graduate school also benefits our country as a whole by helping to bridge the gap between those in uniform and those who, since the advent of the all-volunteer force, have had little contact with the military. The truth is that, just as the military has developed certain stereotypes of academics, journalists and other civilians over the years, these groups in turn hold certain stereotypes about those in the military. It's important that we in the military understand those we serve—the American people—and it is equally important that our citizens understand those in uniform who have raised their right hand and sworn to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies foreign and domestic.

That's a big reason I was willing to speak on a number of college campuses between my tours in Iraq. My own experience represents a bridge between the two worlds of the military and the academy. I plan to make similar trips again once my present tour is ended. And I also plan to speak to my junior colleagues often as General Galvin spoke to those of my generation, and with a similar message. The future of the U.S. military requires that we be competent warfighters, but we cannot be competent warfighters unless we are as intelligent and mentally tough as we are aggressive and physically rugged. We will become that way not merely by observing the differences between the military and the civilian academic world, but by experiencing them first hand. 🌐

## Learning to Lose

*Ralph Peters*

**H**amlet thinks too much. Chewing every side of the argument to mush, he lacks the courage to swallow hard and kill an as-

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sassin at prayer—a philosophical “war crime.” The archetypal academic, theory-poisoned and indecisive, Hamlet should have stayed at the university in Wittenberg, where his ability to prattle without resolution surely would have gained him early tenure. Mistaking himself for a man of action, he remains self-obsessed throughout the play, taking less interest in the rest of the world than the most narcissistic blogger. To put it mildly, his perception of others is faint, as Ophelia, Polonius and a platoon of others might testify. Hamlet loves players, because real human beings perplex him (not least his mama, who seems too meaty a woman to have given birth to such a scrap). The unmanly prince dithers, stalking himself, until his belated action—inevitably, too complex in its conception—leaves the stage covered with bodies, including his own.

Henry V, by contrast, was a real king who won battles because he wasn't afraid to get close to the enemy and kill him. Both Shakespeare's titan and the historical figure triumphed militarily over bowel-draining odds, yet neither propounded a high-flown theory of warfare. Both Henrys believed in the doctrine of kingship, but doctrine guides action, while theory inhibits decisiveness. Henry led from the front and checked up on his troops in the dead of night, unlike the slothful chain of command responsible for the Abu Ghraib debacle. In contrast to Hamlet, Henry's violence was prompt and always had a point. King Harry could make a decision. His leadership inspired and he never lost sight of his essential requirement: to win, at any cost. First he won militarily, *then* he negotiated from a position of strength.

How easy it is to imagine Hamlet scheming for a higher chair within an Ivy League faculty. If Henry V showed up in the quad, the first graduate assistant to spot him would speed-dial the campus police.

What do Shakespeare's polar-opposite characters have to do with the education of the officer corps of the U.S. Armed Forces—apart from the fact that Shakespeare has to do with nearly everything? Only this: Our military needs Henrys, yet for half a century it's been hell bent and determined to turn out Hamlets with stars on their shoulders.

Setting aside practical training, a task at which the U.S. military is incomparable, an officer's formal education after commissioning comes in two varieties (one is tempted to write “comedy and tragedy”): In-house courses conducted by the services, for the services; and advanced civilian education for officers selected for specialized roles, for those identified as likeliest to rise in rank, and, not least, for those who don't really want to be soldiers and scheme to cajole a free education out of the bureaucracy. (A fourth category is composed of officers who gain a master's degree or the equivalent on their own, in their scarce free time and at far more expense to their personal lives than to the taxpayer, but no officer who saves the government tens of thousands of dollars can be taken seriously.)

The in-house courses, of which there are many, do a competent job of preparing officers for their previous rank. The most effective of the courses through which all officers must pass is the Basic Course (for simplicity's sake, we'll use the nomenclature common to the Army and Marines, since service terminology can vary). The students are lieutenants fresh from a service academy, from the Reserve Officers' Training Program on a civilian campus, or from Officer Candidate School, which commissions soldiers harvested from the enlisted ranks. The Basic Course, followed by a block of specialized training, welcomes the young officer into the service and provides a grounding in his or her branch (Infantry, Military Intelligence, Ordnance and so forth). It functions as a transition stage before the young officer is thrust into the never-enough-time atmosphere of a battalion. Along with the follow-on specialized course, the Basic Course gives the second lieutenant a professional vocabulary and a sufficient sense of what he or she will have to do “in the field” to allow the officer to get started in a first assignment—where the real education of any officer begins.

At the conclusion of their apprenticeships, captains attend the Advanced Course, where the system begins to fray. With at least two assignments behind them, student officers arrive with a disruptive knowledge of how things actually work. They are then instructed by a

faculty not always selected from the military's strongest performers on how their branch's doctrine insists they should have done what they did successfully but incorrectly. Some Advanced Course programs are better than others, but few officers learn much of use from them. Their greatest value comes from giving the officer a bit of time with his or her family in a not-quite-serious environment, and in bringing peers together so they can sniff each other—an important matter for those who inevitably will need to rely on one another in future assignments.

The next educational gate is Command and General Staff College (C&GSC) for majors and captains on the promotion list. Once selective, the Army program is now inclusive—and healthier for it. C&GSC's purpose is, as the name suggests, to prepare officers for higher command and staff positions. Once again, the student is asked to forget what he

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or she has learned in practice in order to master obsolete or obsolescent doctrine approved by a hierarchy of committees, few of whose members have the recent wartime experience common to the students. While elective courses can have real value, major end-of-term exercises in the past have been so far divorced from military reality that only the most careerist students pretended to respect them. As with the Advanced Course, the real value of C&GSC is the gathering in of the tribes, the opportunity for peers—this time from all of their service's branches, as well as from sister services and foreign militaries—to get a sense of each other, to learn from each other and to build relationships that can have profound effects in future years.

The last formal phase of in-house officer education is the War College, where largely civilian faculties instruct colonels and lieutenant-colonels on the countless theories academics have devised for avoiding war. Failed theories of international relations form the core curriculum, augmented by courses on how to

lose wars politely and lectures from government functionaries who never rose quite high enough to discount such ego-boosting appearances. The value of the officer's year at the War College depends overwhelmingly on whether he or she is interested in learning. This is a year for those who recently relinquished command—an all-consuming endeavor—to read. The best thing that has happened to the various service war colleges in recent years has been the assignment of new war veterans and more creative officers as seminar leaders, but the tenured academics will surely wait them out.

At all levels above the Basic Course, veterans are challenging faculties composed of academics, aging military retirees and administrators who would rather lose a war than attract uncomfortable attention by exploring controversial subjects (one war college journal has been forbidden from mentioning religion when discussing our current conflicts, which means interpreting Is-

lamist terror as a virgin birth).

A few innovators have infiltrated the system and

hopeful signs have increased, but one suspects that the force of tradition and the bureaucratic might of the institutions will continue to prevent the military education system from being all that it could be.

As any officer above the rank of second lieutenant knows, our military's real education occurs in units and on their staffs, where doctrinal manuals are only consulted to ensure that a piece of paper has been paragraphed properly before being transmitted to higher headquarters. Although the reality can be opaque to outsiders, the U.S. military is remarkably supple once it escapes the classroom—considering the institution's behemoth size and complexity. Frankly, we can continue to prosper under the current mediocre system of in-house military education as long as practical *training*, from infantry patrolling to flying combat aircraft, is superbly conducted. Talent, commitment and field experience carry us through. Yet we could do far better. The problem is that, to construct an incisively useful military education system for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we would need to discard

most of the current system and start afresh. That would mean taking on hallowed traditions (the Army's C&GSC has its roots in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) and gutting deeply rooted bureaucracies. Iraq is easier.

What might a more effective in-service education look like? That depends on what we really need it to do.

At present, captains and above are taught dubious schoolhouse solutions to problems they have already faced and resolved under fire. The war colleges offer the potential to raise an officer's perspective to the strategic level, but faculties are trapped in dysfunctional 20<sup>th</sup>-century theories of international relations and conflict (often in jealous emulation of their civilian-campus peers). Unless he draws a strong, uniformed seminar leader, the officer may, indeed, learn a great deal at the war college: most of it wrong.

If you queried commanders in Iraq, Afghanistan or elsewhere as to what additional skills would be of the greatest benefit to the officers under their command, you initially might get muddled answers. Their subordinate officers are already very good at the applied combat and support skills at which the U.S. military excels. You would have to calm them down a bit and press them, perhaps even leading the witness. Given time to think it over, thoughtful line-unit commanders probably would agree that nothing would give their officers a greater additional advantage than better language skills.

Anyone who has witnessed a lieutenant, captain or lieutenant colonel interacting with Iraqis through an interpreter immediately grasps the problem: Even with the best hired help, information is filtered and nuances disappear. The officer may be as good as any combat leader in the world when it comes to combat, but he's crippled in his ability to read the signals that may be leading to a fight. As signals intelligence operators used to put it, he's condemned to "reading externals", making judgments based upon outward manifestations, as opposed to deciphering the immediate human message.

While not every infantry officer can be trained as a fluent Arabic, Pashto or Farsi

speaker, nor should he be, the inability to communicate and understand, to activate the magic that comes to those who master the opponent's language, leaves us in the role of eternal outsiders. The widespread dismissal of the importance of language skills for officers in command positions is simply astonishing given the nature of the conflicts we have faced in recent years and will likely face for decades to come. You will find hundreds of senior officers who have been immersed in theories of civil-military relations or (obsolete) deterrence models for each one who can construct a sentence in Arabic or Farsi (or Chinese, for that matter). But nothing could be more irrelevant to today's and tomorrow's enemies than Western theories of statecraft, while the language skills and cultural grasp that foster adroit (and swift) evaluations of the multi-dimensional conflict environment comprise, in military jargon, a major "combat multiplier." Wars are won by officers who know the smell of the streets, not by those who swoon over the odor of political science texts.

Under the press of tradition and inertia, we continue to train officers according to dreary patterns established decades or even centuries ago. Yet we have been selective (and often penny-wise, pound-foolish) about the educational traditions we chose to preserve: U.S. Army officers on the eve of the Civil War were far more likely to be able to read professional texts in at least one foreign language than their counterparts today. Our military education system for senior officers, especially, concentrates more energies on teaching them about Washington than on exposing them to the world beyond our shores; thus they rise through the system better prepared to fight for additional funding on Capitol Hill than to fight our enemies abroad.

If we could reform the in-house military education system to make it relevant to the requirements of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it would first require a great sweeping away of the current system's deadwood. Military *leaders* need to set aside emotion and the force of habit to ask themselves honestly which current courses and institutions are a waste of time. If the issues are "staffed", the bureaucracies will always justify themselves. We need military-education



reformers in uniform. Unfortunately, we're likeliest to get more sheep in wolves' clothing—the best description of today's general officers I can offer.

To get a sense of the current misplaced priorities, let us return for a moment to the issue of language skills. At present, language training goes overwhelmingly to enlisted personnel on the unspoken assumption that officers don't have time for that sort of triviality. And even the enlisted personnel who receive language training are almost always from the Military Intelligence Branch. Certainly, MI needs all the linguists it can get. But so do infantry companies—and platoons. Yet the few officers who do receive serious language training of sufficient length to allow conversational fluency are Foreign Area Officers (FAOs) destined for strategic or embassy assignments. While FAOs make an enormous contribution to our military, there are never

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enough of them to go around—and certainly not enough to beef up ground patrols in Baghdad or the badlands on Afghanistan's border with Pakistan.

The current military leadership—children of the Cold War still—simply cannot bring itself to take foreign language skills for line officers seriously. In a recent dinner conversation, a certain Army Chief of Staff agreed that, yeah, developing language skills is important—right, got it, sure. But it isn't a “wartime priority.” Well, first, this struggle we are now in is going to be a very long one, and second, war is the *only* time when you really can change a military. In peacetime, the bureaucrats always win.

There are many other 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills that officers require, some of which are being learned the hard way. But the reluctance to send officers for language and cultural studies programs of serious length in lieu of other time-wasting military-education programs (such as the Advanced Course or C&GSC) reflects institutional prejudice at its most hidebound and

destructive. Consider how many American soldiers and Marines may have died in Iraq because their leaders didn't understand what the locals said or scrawled on a wall. Imagine how much more effective our forces might be if language skills were rewarded with increased promotion-board advantages (the crucial link in making any reform stick).

Of course, military officers needn't master every last tribal language, and could not do so in any case. We live at a time when the key languages officers should study are finite in number: Arabic, Farsi, Urdu, Chinese, Swahili, Spanish, African-French, Portuguese, Turkish, Russian and a few others. And as all those who ever mastered a single foreign language know, the ability to live in another tongue opens new mental horizons transferable to still other cultural environments. Foreign language skills, taken seriously, teach us not only how to communicate, but how to think like the other side,

how to see differently and, sometimes, even how to feel differently. But instead of studying the world

and how it communicates, we continue to teach officers how they should have formatted that staff report in their assignment before last.

**T**he current status of in-house military education is suboptimal but bearable because even if it doesn't much help officers, it doesn't ruin them either. The graver problem is our habit of sending talented officers to “top” civilian universities, where their critical-thinking faculties are destroyed and their common sense is retarded. Can it be coincidental, after all, that across the half century during which the cult of higher civilian education for officers prospered, we have gone from winning wars to losing them?

The basic question regarding university and postgraduate education for military officers is, “How much is enough?” Certainly, every officer should have a four-year degree, without which he or she would not be sufficiently attuned to the broader frequencies of American society. For many officers, a master's degree or the equivalent makes sense, as



**Real officer training: The U.S. Army's 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division on the hunt in Afghanistan**

well. But a Ph.D. is deadly (if not to the officer receiving it, then to his subordinates). I know of not a single troop-leading general—not one—whom I believe is a more effective combat commander because he holds a doctorate. On the contrary, too much formal education clouds a senior officer's judgment, inhibits his instincts and slows his decision-making. I have watched with dismay the process of unlearning necessary for the too-cerebral officer to become the visceral killer any battlefield demands. For the better sort, war does eventually knock the Hamlet out of them, but at what interim price? Even Schopenhauer, hardly an illiterate, warned that an excess of theoretical knowledge obscures reality.

Certainly, we need *intelligent* generals. But we should fear *intellectual* generals. America won its wars largely by avoiding the soldier-butcher theories of warfare concocted by

French and German staff officers with too much time on their hands. Pragmatism is at the heart of America's cultural and economic success, and it long remained the key to our military success. When we began to theorize, we began to lose. In the military context, theory is a killer.

Theory kills both actively and passively. The horrific massacres perpetrated in the name of political theory in the 20<sup>th</sup> century should be revelatory to officers with intellectual pretensions, but the lure of theory is simply irresistible to certain breeds of officers. Having pursued an active profession for decades, the sudden exposure to the theoretical world of the campus enchants them through its novelty—like the new girlfriend who clouds the devoted husband's judgment. Ill-equipped to navigate the murky waters of theory, they jettison their common sense and the lessons of

experience to doggy-paddle behind professors who couldn't swim in real world currents without dragging down every lifeguard in sight. You should never let any full-time university professor near any form of practical responsibility, and you should never let a rising officer near a professor.

My own experiences with officers who pursued doctoral degrees have ranged from the ludicrous to the horrifying. One lieutenant colonel, upon receiving his doctorate, took to smoking a bent-stem pipe and wearing a cardigan. I would've had him shot. Another, more recent experience with an officer who let his education pervert his judgment involved a discussion about how an Army doctrinal manual had gone so terribly wrong. A lieutenant colonel responded to an observation of mine by puffing himself up and beginning, "Speaking as a social scientist—"

"You're not a social scientist", I told him. "You're a soldier."

## No soldier, no real soldier, would ever define himself first as a social scientist or as anything else.

He looked startled. "Well, I'm a social scientist *and* a soldier."

"No. You can't be both. Which is it?"

To a lay reader, this conversation may strike no chords, but soldiering is a vocation akin to a religious calling. One may have other skills, but no soldier—no *real* soldier—would ever define himself first as a social scientist or as anything else. All else is secondary to the calling, and when the calling fades, it is the soldier's last duty to shed his uniform before shaming it.

The conversation got worse. The "social scientist" had published a book based on his academic work on campus. Having addressed mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century counterinsurgency operations, he was determined to apply "his" solutions to radically different 21<sup>st</sup>-century conflicts. In the best academic tradition, he had no intention of letting the facts interfere. Unfortunately, this officer had been tasked to write Army doctrine. The draft manual he produced was utterly out of touch with reality. Its irrelevance was the topic of our meeting.

Confronted with the utter nonsense the manual propounded, the officer was challenged to defend his winning-hearts-and-minds, don't-shoot, negotiate-with-the-sheikh-and-don't-hurt-his-feelings approach to defeating insurgents (one is compelled to add that the officer and his associates also honored the academic tradition of writing very badly). Pressed, the officer admitted, in front of several of his peers, that the most effective technique employed by the unit with which he had served in Iraq wasn't handing out soccer balls, but strapping dead insurgents across the front of their tanks and driving around for the locals to get a good look—after which the relatives had to come to the military base to ask for the bodies.

"Well, why isn't that in the manual, if that's what worked?" I asked.

It was a rhetorical question. The manual in question wasn't about defeating insurgents, but about political correctness. The officer isn't a bad man nor even the worst sort of careerist—on the contrary, he's quite talented. But he was determined to defend

his thesis to the end, no matter if we lost the struggle in Iraq. He couldn't see that his airy theorizing was going to get soldiers killed for nothing. He had compartmentalized the techniques that actually worked for him and his peers in Iraq from those which he knew the military and political establishment wanted to hear. No conscious decision was involved: This is what the campus had done to him.

The military's adulation of dead theorists at the expense of current experience would be laughable were it not costing the lives of our soldiers and Marines while failing to accomplish the missions assigned to our forces. Even the most talented general with a doctorate must go through the process of unlearning to rid himself of the last century's intellectual baggage, finally enabling himself to see "*das Ding an sich*", reality itself.

In speaking with officers during their classroom courses, I warn them that, when confronted with a reality that contradicts the theories they have studied at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, they should

believe the reality. Most think I'm just making a joke, but I'm not. That officer who wrote dishonest doctrine to protect his dissertation's reputation had lost all perspective on his profession and his duty. In yet another hallowed academic tradition, he was determined to cram the vast complexity of the world into a neat theoretical briefcase.

Perhaps the most perverted romance of recent decades (Lord knows, that's quite a standard) is the love affair between the military and civilian academics. I challenge any reader to cite a single example of a social science professor's work contributing to any military victory. On the contrary, we have produced generations of officers so diseased with theory that some no longer possess the mental health to grasp the reality unfolding before them. It has been heartbreaking to watch our timid military leadership tie itself into knots in Iraq as it tried to wage the sort of conflict academics assured them was necessary. And then, for ill measure, the academics they revere solemnly warned the public that the generals they had castrated were an unruly threat to the republic. We had, simultaneously, generals who lacked the guts to tell the President the truth and stay-at-home academics who insinuated that coups were just around the corner. The contrast between cowering generals and crowing professors was surreal. And our troops died from the blindness, incompetence and cowardice of leaders who knew everything except how to make war.

Worse, they didn't even know they were in a war. Many still don't. But the academics who seduced them with fairy-tale theories will prosper from writing texts explaining the failure of the generals.

Imagine how much better it would be to train an officer in a useful language, then launch him into a foreign country for a year to perfect his fluency, instead of sending him to Yale or Princeton. Not one of the generals and admirals who won our nation's wars had doctorates, but they often had extensive experience of the world beyond our shores. A young George Marshall spent months inspecting Russo-Japanese War battlefields on

the Asian mainland, while a not-yet-vinegary Joe Stillwell literally walked across China. Douglas MacArthur had long years of service in the Philippines before the first Japanese aircraft appeared over Luzon. Would they have served our country so well if their time had been spent on a campus instead of getting Asian dust on their boots?

Again, it's a question of the right level of education. A master's degree is useful because it broadens horizons, but a doctorate usually narrows them. Moreover, one should always be suspicious of a line officer willing to spend so much time away from troops. If he wants to spend his life pondering the modern astrology we term "social science", let him take off his uniform. Officers don't need to study elaborate theories of conflict resolution (none of which work, anyway). They need to know how to fight and win wars. They need to have the guts to do what it takes. Above all, they need integrity, which is a hallmark of good military units, but certainly not of the contemporary American campus.

Should we really send our future generals to Princeton, instead of shipping them off to Pakistan for six months or a year? If we are going to use tax dollars to send officers to graduate school, we should at least refuse ever to send them for degrees in political science or sociology. With special exceptions for officers destined for technical assignments, future leaders should study history, languages and foreign cultures (a bit of anthropology, but light on the post-modernist mumbo-jumbo). In current practice, a master's degree in marketing counts as much for promotion purposes as does a degree in Middle Eastern studies. It's about the merit badge, not the merit.

The natural charge against the arguments advanced here is "anti-intellectualism." And the accusers would be exactly right. Our military should prize intelligence and broad learning, but should abhor intellectual posturing. At present, intellectual posturing trumps practical intelligence. Personally, I value the officer who painstakingly builds a library of cherished books, but fear the officer who revels in academic credentials. The most admirable general officer I've known—a brilliant man and a ferocious battlefield leader

who also writes with unfashionable clarity—mocks the master's degree the Army forced him to get as worthless. He's a member of a dying breed.

Reading to aid thinking is a habit usually acquired early on. One of my favorite memories is of sitting in a cavernous classroom as an instructor droned on at Officer Candidate School and thinking myself awfully smart as I read a German translation of Solzhenitsyn under my desk—only to be humbled when I realized that the officer to my right was reading Tacitus in Latin, while the officer to my left was reading medieval poetry in French.

The issue of the future of military education, either within the services or on civilian campuses, comes down to what we expect of our military. If we want our generals and admirals to continue to lose wars while fearing to tell the president the truth, by all means

continue with the present system. If, however, we imagine that we might want senior leaders who understand the real and dangerous world beyond our shores, who realize that wars are not won with good table manners, and who believe it their duty to tell the truth to our country's elected leaders, then it's time to stop trying to turn first-rate officers into third-rate academics.

What kind of men do we want to lead our military? Do we want generals who understand the importance of "a little touch of Harry in the night", or Hamlets who spend the night contemplating what they aren't going to do in the morning? Do we want battlefield leaders who inspire their men to "imitate the action of the tiger", as Henry V does before the walls of Harfleur, or do we prefer generals who wring their hands in the face of deadly enemies and ask, "To be, or not to be?" Now *that* is the question. ❁

Sending people into battle isn't something a good person does with detachment. Before the Iraq war, when the Army chief of staff, Gen. Eric Shinseki, testified that the postwar occupation would require hundreds of thousands of troops, he was showing not just prudence but devotion. He didn't want his soldiers needlessly imperiled.

As a reward for his devotion, General Shinseki was disparaged by Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz. Rumsfeld wanted to show how cheap war can be, and now our soldiers are paying the price. I wish some people on the left had a deeper respect for the military, but lately the left isn't where the most consequential disrespect has come from.

The crowning indignity was Abu Ghraib, an outrage that was initiated by civilians high in the Bush administration and has stained the U.S. military's hard-earned honor, strengthening stereotypes that I know are wrong.

My father, Col. Raymond J. Wright, retired . . . having given three decades to an institution he loved. He died in 1987. There are lots of things I wish he had lived to see, but the way the Army's been treated recently isn't one of them.

—Robert Wright, "My Life in the Army", *New York Times*, April 3, 2007