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Senior Officer Education, Today and Tomorrow

WILLIAM J. CROWE, JR.

Ten years ago the first President of the National Defense University, Vice Admiral "Duke" Bayne, wrote an article highlighting the importance of senior service school education for our rising military leaders.¹ He drew special attention to the role of the war college experience in strengthening the civil-military partnership that has built and protected this nation for more than two centuries, and that forms the centerpiece of our national security posture today.

From my own perspective as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, I see that partnership operating at several levels, every day:

- In the National Security Council arena civilian and military leaders work together to make top-level security policy;
- In the Department of Defense, civilian and military personnel are concerned with preparing our forces for combat and with directing them in war;
- And in our society at large, mutual understandings between citizens and their defenders put down the roots needed to sustain any military establishment over the long haul.

When the American civil-military partnership has been united, with each element conscious of its utter dependence on the other, it has been unbeatable. But when its bonds have weakened, the nation's defenses have withered, and our course on a troubled globe has wavered dangerously. All Americans have a vital interest in the nurturing of the cooperative venture—the civil-military team—that keeps this nation strong and effective on the world scene.

Admiral Bayne's point about military education was that the central meeting ground for the elements of that team—and the bridge across any gap that might develop between them—is in the mind. And our war colleges play a pivotal role in preparing rising professionals throughout the national security community to find that common ground. A decade later his observations still aptly describe the large-scale challenge addressed in the senior service schools. In this article I would like to elaborate on that theme, and to outline my own views on the challenge as I now see it.

Since becoming Chairman I have been deeply engaged in the major strategic issues facing this nation, many of which have also sparked a good deal of public discussion. The subject of defense reorganization, including JCS reform, has been particularly prominent. For a time, it spawned a veritable cottage industry among defense analysts and consultants who aim to straighten out various flaws, real and imagined, in “the system”—that is, in the Pentagon's decisionmaking structure and processes. The President's Blue Ribbon Commission on Defense Management (the Packard Commission) completed its own inquiry last year and offered a number of recommendations, many of which endorsed initiatives that were already underway. The President directed adoption of the recommendations that fell within the Pentagon's authority, and now we are also implementing the recent Goldwater-Nichols reorganization legislation.

All this effort to get the system right is producing some adjustments to the way we do business. But it would be folly to think that these adjustments will make everything easy for us. I see a host of perplexing questions which will continue to dominate the national security debate, and solutions to them will not be made more evident by any organizational scheme we might adopt. Let me cite some representative examples:

- Working to achieve an optimum balance between national security policy and resources controlled by the Congress;
- Devising a consensual formula for stabilizing our investment in defense over the long haul—getting away from those peaks and valleys which wreak havoc with the system;

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- Deciding how our military arrangements with NATO and northeast Asia should evolve;
- Engineering a cost-effective way to cope with Soviet surrogates;
- Dealing with the on-again, off-again problem of international terrorism;
- Fitting arms control proposals into a national security framework; and so on.

All of these challenges lie ahead of us, not behind us.

And no matter how much we tinker with the system, one problem will remain: How do we get the people who can deal with such thorny problems—people in uniform who are expert in their warfighting specialties and also able to assist the National Command Authorities in matters of strategy, policy, resource allocation, and operations?

Part of the answer to this question lies, of course, in the professional background of each officer—in the experiences and assignments through which he or she moves over the years. As a poet once said, men—like stones—are shaped by the places into which they come, and those influences are lasting. But another—and obviously related—part of the answer lies in the education of our officers—in what they learn in schools and from their leaders. And though that subject gets fitful attention from some who have sought to “reform” our military, it deserves much more attention than that.

At bottom, the question we are asking requires us to understand what kind of people we need, and what sorts of qualities we should seek to develop in those who stand at the threshold of senior military leadership. Here it seems to me that we have to take bearings from some of the strategic realities that the United States confronts now and will face in coming decades. Let me just sketch out a few significant ones:

First, we are and will remain an enormously wealthy and productive nation. With five percent of the globe’s population, we account for 25 percent of the world’s gross national product. We can afford a strong national defense if any nation can. But here at home the defense establishment is only one of many competitors for resources and must make its case with an electorate that is absorbed in domestic pursuits. American armed forces will be only as strong as the public wants them to be, and yet without convincing articulation of defense imperatives and needs, our citizens tend to lose sight of the vital role of military strength in the nation’s life.

Second, America is irreversibly involved in world affairs through interrelated political, financial, economic, and military linkages which grow stronger with each decade. In some fashion, we must maintain a global defense umbrella which supports multifaceted national security goals and

objectives in a troubled and uncertain world environment. America's strategic posture is composed of an array of ends and means, and the calculus which creates it must embrace the operator's full knowledge of capabilities, sophisticated understanding of a dynamic international milieu, and intimate familiarity with national policy purposes.

Third, for the foreseeable future, the Soviet Union is the only nation in the world that can threaten the United States singly or the West in general. Moscow shows no sign of abandoning its aggressive intentions or its reliance on—and massive buildup of—military strength. For US planners, effective and credible nuclear deterrence is essential, and conventional force postures must also take into account impressive and growing Soviet capabilities.

Fourth, while the forward defense strategy we have adopted is demanding of US conventional forces, there is no walking away from it without undermining vital collective security arrangements, our overall deterrent stance, and ultimately the security of North America.

Last, we must pay attention to what is happening in the Third World and deny any free ride to state-supported terrorism, subversion, or more direct forms of aggression.

Our policy parameters are fairly well set. In essence, we know what must be done, but how to do it is the central question of our time. It is no mean challenge. If the professional military is to play a meaningful role in this game, these political and strategic imperatives demand truly broad-gauged and enlightened officers who are:

- Skilled military technicians—skilled fighters and supporters of fighters.

- Tested field commanders who can also see the un compartmented Big Picture, understand the relationships among vested interests, and make decisions in the face of uncertainty.

- Adaptable, more than ever before, to changing circumstances. We need people who are “open minded” in every sense of the word. Our minds are like parachutes; they won't help much if they don't open when you need them. But make no mistake—this is a difficult trait to develop, particularly in today's world of phenomenal specialization and compartmentalization.

- Founded in the history of their profession and its role in the world. Genuine perspective springs from the knowledge that little is new and that the past has a great deal to teach every profession.

- Knowledgeable about the situations and concerns of American friends and allies abroad and about the dynamics of bureaucratic decisionmaking in Washington.

Our professional schools play a key, though certainly not exclusive, role in developing these characteristics and in filling the gaps left by

operational experience alone. Our war colleges, in particular, are places where these traits can be fostered and encouraged prior to their students' assumption of key responsibilities. Interestingly enough, these students profit personally as well as professionally from this challenging and mind-stretching experience. But, of course, the services and the country are the ultimate winners.

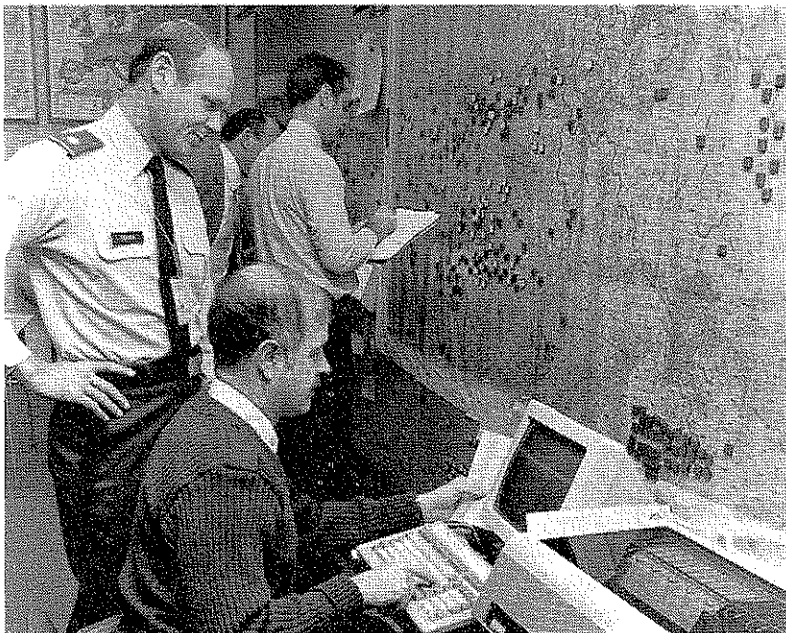
Although what I have just said seems to me perfectly reasonable, there have been others who are skeptical of our ability to produce people in uniform equipped to provide sound advice to the President and Secretary of Defense. The late Bernard Brodie, for example, in his book *War and Politics*, wrote that "there has always been and probably will always continue to be far too much pontificating and posturing on that commodity called 'military judgment,' which taken in itself, without supplemental inquiry and rumination, can be an extremely limiting thing."² Brodie decried what he termed the "primitive" and "parochial" outlook of those who rise to high military positions. They were, he felt, too confident in the efficacy of force, and too uninformed about other instruments of policy and other critical factors affecting the nation's security. Military leaders, he contended, because of their professional upbringing, are simply not likely to be well-equipped to advise sensibly about "the goals and ends of peace and of war."

This critique, published in 1973, is of special interest to us because it depicts the war colleges as institutions straining valiantly to deal with an impossible problem. Brodie himself had helped to set up the National War College, and had served on its faculty and Board of Advisors. He believed that the experience there undoubtedly widened the horizons of the officers who passed through it, but that it was too brief and came too late in life to change basic attitudes acquired in earlier service.

Much has happened since then, in the military schools and in the career patterns of our services, that would no doubt encourage Brodie and soften—if not change—his assessment. Our concern for "jointness" is just one manifestation of that; we have achieved a marked degree of integration in our warfighting capabilities at all levels and are pressing for more. We are raising a new generation of officers who, in their daily professional lives, are sensitized to the joint imperative. Another example is the innovative approach taken by our war colleges to the problem of understanding war at the operational level, where national policy and strategy are translated into large-scale military maneuvers and campaigns. These studies have emphasized our need for senior military professionals—expert warfighters—who can connect political goals to military means, and who in turn can comprehend both poles of that ends-means calculus and assist in their articulation.

I am persuaded that our remarkable progress in such matters has done much to refute Brodie's basic pessimism about rigid, closed, and narrowly focused military minds. But his charges are still too important and the modern world too complex to dismiss his views even today. I would be the first to admit that we still have some distance to go to obviate those classic concerns. Certainly, our war colleges have carried the brunt of the fight thus far, and they still offer the best prospect for filling key voids in professional career patterns—in sum, giving us an officer corps better equipped to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing strategic environment.

But there are, and always have been, important attitudinal obstacles within the national security community and even within the military's own ranks which have not been totally dispelled. I have two particular schools of thought in mind. The first is composed of a group of civilian "strategists"—many from outside the government but some occasionally occupying jobs within it—who write energetic defense reform critiques. Their aim is this: they want to shape US strategy themselves. Using vague references to the honored principle of civilian control of the military, they often work to delimit the substantive spheres in which uniformed people advise and operate. In its more radical formulations, this school would be happy to have military people focus on driving ships and taking hills, leaving other matters to more talented authority. Its proponents get nervous when officers emerge who are comfortable with matters of national policy.



USA WC photo

Computer-assisted wargaming at the US Army War College.

The second school of thought surfaces from time to time within the military itself. It focuses especially on the alleged tension between the warrior, on the one hand, and the manager and diplomat on the other. Military forces, it argues, are for killing people and destroying things, and it is a dangerous distraction to search for other talents in leaders of the armed forces.

Both of the cited perspectives have old roots in our country. The history of our war colleges is a story of a century-long struggle between the widening demands of strategic leadership and the narrow “technicist” inclinations of those who insist that the military has—or should have—little to contribute. Our first “postgraduate” military schools were technical, where officers studied artillery, cavalry, and infantry tactics. By the 1880s, however, European influence plus the need for familiarity with the theory and practice of higher-level operations led to establishment—over considerable objection—of the Naval War College. The Army followed suit 20 years later, responding to the same imperatives and overcoming similar reservations. World War I made evident the need for military instruction in industrial subjects—and we soon established the forerunner of the Industrial College of the Armed Forces. World War II then highlighted the need for education about interservice cooperation. This led to the creation of a joint Army and Navy Staff College under the Joint Chiefs of Staff—which later evolved into the National War College. There has been subsequent evolution, of course, consistent with this long-term expansion of our ideas about what military people should know and be able to do—of what the country needs from them. In 1976 the National Defense University was inaugurated, in a historic pooling of our defense community’s intellectual resources. It builds on the sound traditions and achievements at all our war colleges. In its prominent wargaming focus, for instance, it recognizes what Admiral Nimitz once said: that in World War II, every move in the Pacific—even Pearl Harbor—had already been played out in war games at the Naval War College.

But my point about the war college experience is not only about pedagogy. It is, rather, that in an impatient world the war colleges are refuges for ideas, analysis, and reflection—places where warriors can come to understand not only war, but peace and how to preserve it. And, as “Duke” Bayne noted, they are institutions where we can get beyond training individuals in how things are done, by educating them also in how to decide what it is best to do. We should not underestimate the value of this time for reflection. One of my favorite lines in the movie *Patton* occurs in the scene where George C. Scott, as Patton, is standing on high ground in the North African desert, staring out through binoculars at German armor and infantry which are being repulsed by Patton’s forces. An aide tells him Rommel is on the field, and Patton exclaims almost joyously: “Rommel,

you magnificent bastard, I read your book.” Our war colleges are strategic assets because it is on their campuses that America’s best military professionals are afforded an opportunity to read books (and to write them), to think independently, to test their views against others, to participate in disciplined inquiries that deepen their knowledge of their art, and to widen their horizons concerning how they can best contribute to the nation’s defense.

It is here, also, that they enter what Secretary Weinberger has called an “Exclusive Corps”—the cadre of “Senior Government Leaders.” He did not say leader of this or that organization or service. He said *Government leader*. In my judgment, that is exactly what we look to the war colleges to produce, and what they must produce if the uniformed half of the civil-military partnership is to live up to the expectations and needs of our society. Though some may persist in trying to separate the civilian strategist and the military planner, these people, as Professor Samuel Huntington has observed, are going to sink or swim together.³ The sooner we all recognize this simple fact the better.

The influence of our senior service schools radiates outward from their graduates to succeeding generations of leaders in innumerable ways. Every day we feel the force of their presence more and more. But none of us, unfortunately, can afford to rest on his oars. In Washington, where the tendency to concentrate on immediate policy problems is powerful, programs whose benefits are measured in the long term can often be sadly neglected. Our instincts work all too often in favor of improving capabilities for action, while capacities for reflection languish and atrophy. I can testify that the military half of the great American civil-military partnership is especially vulnerable to capture by these dynamics. In today’s world it would be a tragedy to neglect the intellectual dimensions of leadership, and we must continue the fight to keep the war colleges not only healthy but constantly improving and intellectually expanding.

H. G. Wells philosophized that human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe. We must ensure that the US military stays on the right side of the equation.

NOTES

1. Marmaduke G. Bayne, “The National Defense University: A Strategic Asset,” *Strategic Review*, 4 (Fall 1976), 23.

2. Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1973). The observations noted in this article appear in Chapter 10, “Strategic Thinkers, Planners, Decisionmakers.”

3. Samuel P. Huntington, “Playing to Win,” *The National Interest*, 3 (Spring 1986), 8; reprinted in *Parameters*, 16 (Autumn 1986), 76-82.