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# Growing Strategic Leaders for Future Conflict

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Global operations since 2001 highlight certain characteristics of the US military's emerging operating environment. Future operations will likely take place "amongst the people" in a wide range of unpredictable environments.<sup>1</sup> Managing these conflicts will require extensive collaboration between military and civilian agencies representing a range of governments, intergovernmental organizations, and nongovernmental organizations. Likewise, general-purpose forces (GPF) will make larger contributions to tasks previously reserved to special-operations forces (SOF). These two components will experience greater intermixing and burden sharing.<sup>2</sup>

In ongoing operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, effective senior leaders are those able to grapple successfully with the dynamic emerging environment and its functional implications. Along the way, leaders have developed important insight regarding the characteristics of successful commanders and the measures required to ensure future leaders possess these characteristics. As the Department of Defense seeks to develop a cadre of senior joint force leaders for operational and strategic command in "multi-modal conflicts," these views are worthy of serious consideration.<sup>3</sup>

To illuminate and begin to codify attitudes toward strategic-level leadership development, the authors selected a group of SOF and GPF leaders who have commanded at the colonel or Navy captain level and higher in recent irregular and hybrid warfare environments.<sup>4</sup> In extensive interviews, they reflected on the characteristics required for effective senior-level leadership and provided recommendations for leader development. Their responses highlighted the characteristics, educational experiences, and assignments this cohort considered relevant to success in the unpredictable operating environments of today and tomorrow.

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### ***Characteristics of Strategic Leadership***

The interviewees' reflections on necessary strategic leader characteristics fall into three broad categories: cognitive, interpersonal, and managerial styles. Each style comprises a cluster of qualities, skills, and cultivable traits that the officers associated with each other. With respect to the first style, interviewees focused on cognitive processes aiding in problem-solving. Most prominently, interviewees distinguished between "how-to-think" and "what-to-think" approaches, with the former embracing flexibility of mind and diverse intellectual disciplines. How-to-think approaches emphasize the importance of understanding the parts of a problem in relationship to each other, as well as the different perspectives and needs that problem-solving partners contribute. Such approaches entail developing problem-solving methodologies that serve to reconcile competing viewpoints while remaining focused on the goal. A how-to-think framework also accounts for consequences of decisions, over time and across multiple levels and lines of operations, while tolerating iterative problem-solving in the absence of perfect solutions.<sup>5</sup> As one GPF officer said, "It's being able to look at a problem, think about the influences associated with the problem, think about potential solutions to the problem, and go deeper into the second- and third-order effects."

Officers considered the how-to-think method essential for cultivating other important cognitive qualities, particularly the ability to think analogically from one case to another. Interviewees spoke of stepping outside events and intellectual processes to observe in real time how they and others proceed and learn. One corps-level commander referred to this method as "going up onto the balcony," with one SOF leader similarly emphasizing the ability to turn observations into course corrections in dynamic time. These comments suggest the need for leaders at this level to "see inside their own thought processes" through "meta-cognition," or "thinking about thinking."<sup>6</sup> Interviewees valued such approaches not solely because they helped officers make the switch to operational from tactical, and to strategic from operational. They praised the ability to harmonize tactical actions with operational objectives and strategic goals, beginning with recognizing a decision's implications at each level. Harmonization requires coordinating actions in an attempt to reinforce one another and influence multiple target audiences, while maintaining the necessary strategic long view.

A second cluster of characteristics frequently referenced by interviewees focuses on interpersonal styles. Among them, sociability and a preference for relationship building are regarded as absolutely critical to every aspect of planning, leading, and managing complex operations. In fact, interviewees frequently associated terms such as "communicator," "facilitator," "consulter," and "collaborative space maker" with the term "commander."

In many cases, commanders in combat and other contexts also preferred to “command through influence.” In this respect, a fundamental responsibility of strategic leadership entails building bridges across institutional divides through cultivating sincere personal relationships. One senior Marine put it this way: “This is a people business. Success in this comes from relationships.”

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***Officers considered the how-to-think method essential.***

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Interviewees at every level reinforced the need for cross-cultural capabilities and affirmed the utility of language and foreign culture skills, with SOF leaders acknowledging critical shortfalls in this area.<sup>7</sup> Underlining the critical importance of multiculturalism, one interviewee having an immigrant background emphasized his equal comfort and competence in the “two worlds [and] two cultures” of his parents and the English-speaking United States. He felt that background primed him to be comfortable in operations with other services and branches of government, other countries’ security forces, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Indeed, while endorsing the need to work effectively in the cultures of foreign nations, many interviewees went on to affirm a much broader conception of multiculturalism: the capacity to work comfortably, seamlessly, and empathetically with interagency counterparts, members of other services, and NGOs, in spite of differences in institutional cultures and processes.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, the most senior SOF and GPF interviewees considered the ability to communicate across the SOF-GPF institutional and cultural divide as a key strategic leader characteristic.<sup>9</sup>

Enablers of multiculturalism and relationship focus include a fusion of confidence and humility, which produces openness to different ideas, even from other organizations or subordinates. Humility is also expressed through approachability and humor. Interviewees noted humor as a defining characteristic of their successful seniors, with one combatant commander seeing humor as helping leaders to embrace an “output orientation . . . through a spirit of collaboration” driven by “social energy.” According to a former Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force (CJSOTF) commander and senior service civil affairs leader, this social energy permits “staff guerrilla warfare” or, in the words of a GPF division-level commander, “maneuver warfare in the gaps and seams” of bureaucracies, based on personal relationships and the avoidance of explicit confrontation.

A final set of characteristics considered critical to irregular warfare leadership relates directly to a leader’s managerial style. Respondents noted three characteristics in particular: communication skills, an understanding of organizations, and mentorship. Articulating thoughts logically and clearly was viewed as basic to successful leadership. “The number-one skill at

the senior level, even at field-grade level, is to write.” SOF and GPF educators lamented the absence of this skill among many mid-level officers. Interviewees underscored the importance of tailoring communication to different audiences, inspiring the acceptance of ideas requiring collaboration among diverse partners. Interviewees considered communication a core function of highest-level leadership, involving the generation of a compelling idea; conveying it effectively and continually to stakeholders; ensuring it is appropriately communicated by subordinates to institutional implementers; and reinforcing the idea through action. As one senior GPF leader said, “True strategic leadership is about trying to get the big ideas right, and it is then about communicating those big ideas effectively to your subordinate leadership.”

Regarding organizational skills, officers at every level spoke of coordinating the activities of task-oriented staffs whose members represented multiple organizational interests. This task necessitated understanding organizational dynamics and cultures at the conceptual and applied levels. In fact, some interviewees pointed to a form of strategic leadership that was purely organizational in focus, distinct from but required for combat leadership. They regretted the absence in their professional military education (PME) of a focus on organizational theory.

Finally, interviewees perceived a strong relationship between leadership and mentorship. The majority considered a leader-teacher-mentor functional triad an inherent responsibility of commanders at every level. As such, today’s best leaders consciously guide and teach their juniors, through both explicit instruction and exemplary conduct. Mentors also exercise a tacit though compelling moral suasion; “He [my mentor] was someone you never wanted to disappoint” was a frequent theme in this regard. A significant minority felt that mentorship included guidance of junior leaders toward developmental assignments, and efforts to ensure the availability of opportunities for rising leaders to demonstrate their skills. More significant is the strong valuation placed on mentorship as part of a leader’s managerial style, as well as the oft-heard misgiving that neither individual branches nor services provide adequate channels for its development. Some respondents felt a mark of leadership was the rigorous pursuit of mentorship from senior colleagues: “Mentorship is a two-way street.”

Alongside these three elements of a strategic leader’s managerial style, several respondents, to include two combatant commanders, a theater-level commander, and a commander of global SOF elements, pointed to additional attributes as integral to credible leadership in an operational context. These attributes begin with baseline tactical excellence, partly as a matter of authenticity among juniors; equally, tactical prowess allowed senior leaders to understand implications at the unit level of operational decisions. The higher operational and strategic levels of leadership, however,

require a fusion of physical, mental, and psychological endurance. As senior theater-level commanders put it, physical strength sustains “grinding” intellectual exertion: “You have to have the physical component . . . Soldiering is still an outdoor sport.”

Taken together, interviewees felt these cognitive, interpersonal, and managerial styles typified the best of today’s GPF and SOF senior leaders operating in hybrid environments. Of course, such leadership styles are also useful in conventional contexts. Not only did interviewees note these traits in leaders they had admired since the 1970s,<sup>10</sup> but existing military doctrine also calls for similar characteristics.<sup>11</sup> Yet, at least one theater commander felt these characteristics “highly important, particularly in preparation for being an irregular warfare leader” in environments characterized by kinetic limitations, diverse partners, and different kinds of conflict occurring simultaneously. Furthermore, most respondents felt it possible to cultivate these styles throughout a career. Interviewees asserted it was the duty of individuals to develop these leadership characteristics throughout their career, with military organizations providing the appropriate opportunities and incentives.

### ***Key Experiences***

In explaining the significance of the leadership characteristics they highlighted, interviewees made frequent reference to the paths their own careers had taken. Their collective experiences present a number of important commonalities in the domains of education and developmental assignments. First, a variety of broad educational experiences is found among most senior officers’ careers, including early joint schooling as well as civilian education. Second, most interviewees served in joint billets, not simply once or as a senior field-grade officer, but at various career stages in operational and staff capacities. Third, many officers cited holding a senior-level staff, aide, or assistant position as being significant to the remainder of their career. Along with gaining perspective on organizational dynamics at the macro-level, interviewees felt that being a military secretary to a senior Department of Defense (DOD) civilian, or an aide to a service chief, provided insight into how senior leaders think, plan, and interact, as well as an opportunity for one-on-one mentorship. As one interviewee said, “Being an aide is an opportunity no one else gets to see the man behind the mask and the inner workings of the Army.” Fourth, for many SOF interviewees, a position permitting GPF exposure was significant. One theater-level commander with a SOF background considered an assignment to conventional forces as “highly important” to his development. Finally, substantive international exposure through education or assignments is beneficial. Collectively, these experiences appeared crucial to cultivating characteristics that permit the joint force to counter hybrid and irregular threats.

*Broad Educational Experiences*

The range of education proving useful to interviewees featured service PME, out-of-service PME, and educational experiences beyond traditional military schooling, to include civilian education. While most officers believed service PME was valuable, many suggested a need for improvement. One SOF colonel spoke to deficiencies in the military education system, primarily at the senior leadership level, when he said, “We don’t educate to be generals.” While not all career tracks demonstrated extensive educational opportunities outside the military, specific types of PME were integral to leadership development, particularly when PME for majors or lieutenant commanders was either with another service or some other more flexible version of military schooling. These settings include the College of Naval Command and Staff, School of Advanced Military Studies, and Naval Postgraduate School (NPS). In these experiences, schooling reinforces jointness and how-to-think cognitively in a military context. According to one SOF commander:

At NPS, I learned not what to think, but how to think. When I was a commander [later], we would have discussions where leadership would try to figure out a solution. I would listen and think the solution was easy. But others couldn’t figure it out because they didn’t see the problem the way I did. It was because they hadn’t been taught how to think.

Though commanders’ courses, war colleges, and general officer capstone courses aid in this effort, many interviewees recommended that officers constantly seek ways to broaden horizons beyond the tactical and operational levels, so the services do not “start having generals who want to think like battalion commanders.”

While not all interviewees experienced an education at civilian institutions, those who did found it of the greatest value in their evolution to strategic-level leadership. Presenting ideas to nonmilitary students—and learning to accommodate for civilian approaches to national security—contributed dramatically to thinking, communicating, and relationship-building skills. Civilian education permitted an understanding of the relationship between the legislative and executive branches in the formation of national security strategy and the authorization of military operations. One senior SOF leader felt his civilian experience “was massively valuable because I learned that the military is not the center of the universe. It showed me how much else was out there.”



### *Joint Billets and Interagency Exposure*

Exposure to joint and interagency environments throughout a career facilitated interpersonal and managerial growth for the interviewees and aided in the transition from the tactical to strategic. Referring to his own experiences with a special-mission unit, one officer articulated a consensus in saying that he would have preferred to understand better the interagency process prior to a combat deployment as a commander. That knowledge would have permitted greater leverage and synchronization. A recently deployed theater commander spoke of the value of interagency exposure: “You have to learn to interact with those who have totally different backgrounds and value sets, like [the Department of] State. They have a different value set that they celebrate. SOF should increase its interface in every part of the interagency, to include mid-grade leaders.”

Others spoke of joint billets as important to providing a perspective that embraces diverse military options of equal value. Rather than limitation to the minimum number of mandatory assignments for promotion to general officer, interviewees opined that joint exposure should be frequent. A senior SOF educator said, “You need to get joint as fast as you can. Get in to other units, other opportunities. You are at a disadvantage if you think there is only one way to do things.” While one combatant commander felt jointness should grow from a foundation of service and functional competency, other respondents considered joint exposure equal in importance to service competency, the former necessary for the latter:

Do you wait, and get service competency first? I disagree. Joint and service are part and parcel; how can you be competent in one without seeing the other? We are going to always fight joint at every level. It needs to be the whole career, [and] it strikes me as odd that there is anything but that. It’s all joint.

### *Senior Staff Roles*

A large portion of the interviewees agreed that Pentagon assignments or staff jobs at combatant commands are “essential to gain senior command perspective.” Nearly every three- and four-star interviewee advocated staff time at the Pentagon or a combatant command. Such tours are significant to giving a mid-career officer an understanding of how to coordinate and resource theater-level operations, leverage interagency capabilities, and harmonize the functions of a large organization’s disparate elements. As one former CJSOTF commander said, “It would have made me a better tactical leader if I had understood the strategic side better.”



### *GPF-SOF Intermixing*

For many SOF members, a GPF billet during their field-grade years was instrumental to understanding how large organizations function. Because SOF officers typically lead small, elite teams, this exposure to a large organization is valuable for future leadership assignments. Special operations interviewees also felt increased intermixing and cross-socialization permit better GPF understanding of SOF. A former CJSOTF commander indicated, one “need[s] to be able to explain to GPF leaders . . . how what you are seeing and proposing helps them and their tactical, operational, and strategic goals . . . synching all of this with a theater-level strategy.” As they rise to the theater and global level, SOF leaders will need to coordinate with, and even command, GPF formations, while general-purpose leaders will find special-operations elements under their command or in their battlespace. One special-mission unit commander emphasized this point, noting that “there needs to be a hybrid military.” Individual SOF leaders should pursue GPF billets, and officers in both components should seek to work together in supporting and supported roles. A general-purpose force combatant commander and his special-operations force deputy concurred, “We absolutely recommend GPF billets for SOF and SOF billets for GPF.”<sup>12</sup>

### *International Exposure*

The majority of interviewees placed a special premium on acquiring international exposure in order to foster skills important to the uncertain battlefields of irregular warfare (IW). Interviewees particularly cited recurring training experiences while deployed with foreign militaries as ideal for understanding diverse national security cultures, the United States’ status in regional calculations, and the art of the locally possible. This expertise allows one- and two-star generals or admirals to manage regional security relationships at the DOD level. Equally as significant for theater-level IW, training experiences facilitate first name-basis relationships with local military leaders that prove crucial to multinational operations. While coordinating multinational special operations, one interviewee said, “I knew these guys, from Germany [and the] UK.” Another indicated that his Jordanian SOF liaison had been a classmate. Individuals should seek international exposure at various points during their career, whether with NATO partners, through foreign education, hosting of international officers at US schools, or in more autonomous “Foreign Area Officer-like” contexts.

Some officers also highlighted the utility of pre-accession experiences, such as backpacking in the Arabian Peninsula or extended travel through South Asia. They credited these experiences with making them comfortable in foreign areas and introducing them to those very regions in which they

later operated as senior commanders. One SOF interviewee reflected that in operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan after traveling there as a youth, “I was coming home.” Another SOF commander related, “I have been immersed in foreign cultures for extended periods of time. That puts you outside your comfort zone and forces you to adapt.” These experiences teach officers how to interact with other cultures, cultivating patience, humility, and curiosity. For those without pre-accession multicultural experiences, time in uniform interacting with foreign civilians proved equally valuable. One senior Marine leader commented, “My United Nations Palestine tour prepared me for my leadership post. It was ‘immersion training.’”

### ***Concerns and Cautions***

The interviewees agreed on much of what is required to shape IW leaders—both characteristics as well as essential formative experiences. Yet, more than three-quarters expressed the belief that the career paths preparing them to lead effectively had been anomalous, diverging from service norms. Likewise, many felt their progression to senior command billets relied on happenstance. According to one deputy combatant commander, “My career has been an aberration. I am surprised I have achieved up to this level.” These views emerge from interviewees’ sentiments and perceptions of service institutional preferences, rather than from statistical assessment of the officers’ careers.<sup>13</sup> More significantly, however, these senior leaders acknowledged the underlying value of their particular experiences to career progression, and also expressed the desire for their services to value such experiences institutionally. This concern is significant, as interviewees shared their views at a critical juncture in the life of the organizations they represent. Operationally, the US military is engaged in sustained, complex multitheater operations. Organizationally, both SOF and GPF are experiencing structural growth. The confluence of these operational and organizational trends renders the recommendations of today’s leaders quite relevant to the future.

### ***Kinetic Emphasis***

Operationally, today’s company- and field-grade officers have experienced a great amount and diversity of combat experience far exceeding that of their predecessors, which grants them an unprecedented degree of tactical prowess and operational ability. A former CJSOTF commander said, “In my career [prior to 2001], you’d be lucky if you had one or two live missions in a career. We now have kids [captains and majors] that do four to five missions a night.” The latter’s ability to think and adapt to changing tactical circumstances is much more honed. Likewise, the extended performance of

conventional US forces in increasingly diverse roles has ensured that GPF junior leaders are skilled in core IW competencies.

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***It is critical to provide the right educational opportunities, both inside and outside the military.***

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Yet, combat exposure entails an opportunity cost. Summing up the operational implications of repeated deployments, one theater special operations command leader stated, “We’re paying a price. We have accepted that as the price for defending our country, even if we don’t realize it.

I believe, hope, and pray that we can restore some balance to our deployments and our operational tempo. I hope that group [a Special Forces group] can go back to what really matters, building partner capacity so that those we train can do things for themselves. I look at that now as a transition because we are at war.”<sup>14</sup>

Beyond the operational implications of kinetic operations are those events related to developing required leadership characteristics. In discussing the latter, interviewees often referred to noncombat experiences, considering them instrumental in developing necessary senior-level leadership skills. Due to continuing commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan, today’s captains through Navy commanders or lieutenant colonels may not be able to take part in these developmental experiences. One might argue that it is today’s senior leaders who missed out—on combat. Yet, if noncombat and nonmilitary assignments were contributing factors in the mid-career preparation of today’s senior leaders for theater- and global-level success, it would only seem logical that it is equally important to ensure that tomorrow’s senior leaders receive similar developmental opportunities.

While operations in Iraq and Afghanistan demand diverse capabilities, a sustained focus on a single operational mode (counterinsurgency tinged with counterterrorism) and geographic area (Muslim eastern Middle East and South Asia) can narrow perspectives, at the very stage in a career when they need to be broadened. As one combatant commander put it, “War can be a narrowing education . . . It’s the dramatic instance fallacy,” whereby younger officers come away from an experience feeling “I went to Iraq; I now understand all war.” A deputy combatant commander and career special operator agreed, opining, “We’re so focused on the war that we have people only doing that, and not getting the broader experience . . . Sure, we want guys with that war experience, but . . . we need broader [perspectives].” An early operational career dominated by combat might influence an individual’s understanding of what it means to be a leader in future environments. According to a SOF component commander, “It is easy to be wooed by the siren of the kinetic,” and as the latter becomes the dominant operational mode for both SOF and GPF, it can influence values and career prefer-

ences. The very breadth of their careers and the diversity of their noncombat experiences have taught today's senior leaders, however, that "nothing that direct action forces do is decisive," and that "victory is not in the killing."<sup>15</sup> Interviewees' comments suggest that to become the next generation's strategic, global-level leaders, today's emerging leaders should take advantage of every opportunity to pair their exemplary tactical and operational skills with the educational experiences and developmental assignments examined here.

### *Organizational Growth*

Beyond the influence of current operations on senior leader development are the implications associated with organizational expansion. In response to the diverse security challenges facing the United States, both GPF and SOF are growing in size.<sup>16</sup> This expansion will permit SOF and GPF to maintain operational tempo and gain the time and space for the developmental opportunities the interviewees recommended. This balance is critical, especially as it relates to the socialization process of newly minted special operators. It will permit them to understand important relationships: kinetic versus nonkinetic means, direct action versus "by, through, and with," and SOF specificity versus integration with GPF.

The growth in special-operations forces will be of tremendous benefit to the future joint force if it avoids the systematization and bureaucratization that discourages the diverse experiences responsible for producing today's senior IW leaders. Some SOF interviewees articulated this concern as an instinctual disquiet that "big is the enemy of SOF." More pointedly, a current US Special Operations Command (SOCOM) strategist suggested that the growth of his component might result in "Big Army-like" practices, where specific and narrow command and staff billets might be preferred over broadening assignments.

A final organizational concern relates to the impact of more than a generation of SOF cultures. Over time, different SOF components have come to understand and work effectively with one another, but it was a major concern to at least four respondents, with experience as combatant command, corps, Joint Special Operations Command, and CJSOTF commanders, that there was a real possibility of attitudinal self-insulation of SOF from GPF. One suggested that while today's SOF leaders were "born joint," their younger counterparts might have a more narrow view of what joint means: "I think sometimes in the SOF community, we think of joint as joint with other SOF . . . . It's not the broader joint." Likewise, commanders who have led both "black" and "white" SOF units decried the channelization of special operators into one or the other track, so that, particularly for "black SOF," leaders who are colonels or Navy captains and higher are "myopic" in perspective. As one corps-level commander with a short time in SOF put it, a one-star ad-

miral or general who has spent his whole career in “black SOF” will “be very, very good at running operations. If we want him to run SOCOM as a four-star we would have done him a disservice, [because] he won’t know how to command a large organization.” Along with other organizational changes and the complexion of current operations, narrow career paths in the developmental phase may be precursors of even narrower career preferences at the senior levels, with implications for strategic perspective.

### ***Institutional Changes***

To achieve a strategic perspective equal to their tactical and operational prowess, today’s officers need to pursue the developmental opportunities interviewees highlighted. The joint force and DOD should institutionally support and leverage such choices. The experiences and reflections of interviewees suggest four central institutional recommendations. First, service and DOD leadership should create more “opportunity space” for the educational and developmental assignments that foster the cognitive, interpersonal, and managerial skills previously discussed. Such opportunities will contribute directly to the ability of these officers to succeed in the joint and interagency communities at the highest operational and strategic levels. Second, the DOD needs to institutionally encourage the type of interaction among its subcomponents and the interagency and international partners that are likely to be of strategic value. Third, DOD should implement service-appropriate methods for systematically identifying prospective leaders at the mid-grade point in their careers, thus enabling them to take advantage of developmental opportunity experiences. Fourth, branches, services, and the DOD as a whole should establish institutional policies to support the “out-of-the-mainstream” preferences by officers that support the development of leadership characteristics. This process may require a shift in organizational culture, in terms of consideration for promotion, staff assignments, and command. Ultimately, the objective is for mid-career officers to gain a conviction that far from imperiling their careers, these nonstandard assignments will help them advance.

### ***Opportunity Space***

In order to effectively create opportunity space, it is critical to provide the right educational opportunities, both inside and outside the military. A common thread among interviewees was that PME itself did not provide an adequately broad, liberal education. An Army senior leader opined, “A broad educational base is a necessity . . . It is something that is in most cases the most beneficial to conceptualizing strategy.” Despite the criticality of senior military education to developing a broad background and strategic-

level leadership, most interviewees did not believe their PME alone was adequate to accomplishing that objective.

Interviewees' suggestions to address PME shortfalls centered on "out-of-the-comfort-zone experiences." As noted, this concern can be addressed through civilian education and "broader" PME. The services will need to implement the opportunities for civilian education recently allowed by DOD policy.<sup>17</sup> Given the requirement for today's senior leaders to build and manage complex organizations, organizational dynamics should be part of the curricula at intermediate and senior-level schools. One interviewee explicitly recommended that organizational theory become a core element of military PME, and others endorsed that suggestion.

SOF leaders were concerned with education specifically relating to their community. Though praising initial training, interviewees noted the lack of a career-long SOF continuing education program. As one senior educator stated, "Our training is great . . . I give us an A-. But on the education side, I give us a C+." Some spoke very highly of the Defense Analysis program at NPS, while others touted the benefit of SOF electives at various staff colleges. Most thought, however, that what was missing was clear guidance delineating the type of educational experiences appropriate to SOF. Special operators would benefit if SOCOM or individual service components articulate a "consolidated SOF educational trajectory." While not dictating a single educational path, this program should link existing SOF educational assets in a logical progression, while maximizing out-of-service opportunities in keeping with this new developmental strategy.

### *Interactions of Strategic Value*

The interviews highlighted the need for institutional support of a series of sustained interactions: between general-purpose and special-operations components, "white" and "black" SOF, and the military with the interagency and NGO communities. While these interactions do occur, they often take place during in-theater operations. Interviewees felt it would be much more useful for such interactions to commence prior to deployment. The services and DOD could contribute markedly to leader development by ensuring that this cross-pollination occurs early, possibly through assignments, internships, and training. Many interviewees felt that SOCOM and DOD should diversify the nonkinetic experiences associated with the "black SOF world."

Beyond interactions between contributors to theater- and global-level irregular warfare, interviewees felt US personnel needed to increase their interaction with a broad array of foreign militaries. Reflecting on international opportunities and the gains they provide to cross-cultural understanding, one interviewee remarked:



We need to maximize experiences with foreign officers. We have to get more of them here and more of us over there . . . . We have very few US officers overseas (at foreign military schools). That's a problem . . . . We should fund visits to foreign countries for those officers who became close with foreign officers who came to the United States.

Requiring and incentivizing these exchanges at the individual and unit level will pay dividends in operational capability and military-to-military diplomacy.

### *Diverse Career Paths*

The skills and experiences that the majority of interviewees viewed as critical for leadership development were generally outside standard career paths as officers understood them. Many considered themselves lucky to return to the service mainstream in order to contribute their experience-won skills. To eliminate this paradox, services and branches should use both the stick and the carrot by requiring a combination of educational and developmental experiences and honoring nonmainstream assignments through promotion and consideration for command. According to a combatant commander, "The system . . . has to tolerate nonstandardness. We should celebrate it." A fellow combatant commander concurred, asserting "you want people who specifically come from different career paths." Though some respondents suggested formalizing the consideration process for advancement based on nonstandard merits, most felt "it would be very difficult to do so. You can't create committees. You do it by taking steps to ensure that these individuals are promoted and progress and that there are opportunities for these people." Interviewees affirmed that this "honor[ing]-through-consideration" of nonstandard career paths should also be applied to officers who have developed a regional focus, as well as to noncombat arms leaders whose planning, leadership, and management skills ensure overall IW effectiveness.

### *Officers for Mentorship*

Identifying exceptionally talented leaders remains a challenge. Most interviewees felt "we generally get it right" with respect to identifying prospective future leaders. Some, however, were uncomfortable regarding the lack of rigor in identifying those officers at mid-career with the skill-sets, abilities, and background to excel at leading in hybrid environments. According to one SOCOM component commander, "Sometimes guys who are eye-wateringly good just don't get noticed." Again, while interviewees rejected a formal process, several did advocate a means to identify subordinates with an aptitude for these developmental experiences. For a number of respondents, this would entail services inculcating in senior leaders an un-



derstanding of mentorship that is predisposed toward guiding subordinates who are deemed deserving.

Though not addressed by interviewees, identification and mentorship are also significant from the perspective of the tradeoffs that the developmental and broadening experiences highlighted in this article entail. Such tradeoffs present themselves in terms of increasing specific domain competency and familiarity with one's own service. In confronting the constraints of time—both in terms of career progression and operational tempo—it is doubly important to develop programs and policies capable of identifying the right officers, at the appropriate stages in their careers, for mentorship and experiential broadening, if they are to develop the skills and abilities required to fill senior leadership positions in the joint force. Additionally, any approach to identifying and mentoring a cadre of joint force senior leaders will need to ensure that it provides opportunities for broadening exposure that are balanced against the requirement to focus on specific expertise.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

Interviewees highlighted three clusters of characteristics necessary for successful IW leadership: cognitive, interpersonal, and managerial styles. These characteristics permitted them to understand their operating environment and plan successfully at the theater and strategic level. These same characteristics prepared them to marshal human and organizational resources while also equipping them to lead and inspire subordinates. While indicating a preference for career breadth, interviewees valued similar types of education, developmental assignments, and life experiences that cultivated the characteristics they deemed so important. In particular, they recommended diverse educational exposure, to include civilian institutions; recurrent joint assignments and exposure to the interagency processes and norms; assignments on theater- and strategic-level staffs in proximity to senior military and civilian leaders; substantive mixing between SOF and GPF forces; and repeated exposure to foreign cultures and their militaries.

In order to ensure that current operational tempos and institutional growth permit availability for these experiences, interviewees suggested modifications to institutional measures and policies. These recommendations involved creating billets for emerging leaders that permit them to take advantage of nontraditional developmental opportunities, and institutionally rewarding them for doing so. Interviewees affirmed the need for rigorous and sustained mentoring at the individual level, as well as development of institutional measures supporting mentorship. In sum, interviewees' insight focused on ensuring that individual officers' choices and institutional measures increase the likelihood that the characteristics and experiences identified here

are found among the joint force's future leaders, who will grapple with the challenges of diverse global operations in the midst of organizational change.

#### NOTES

1. See Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 5-6, 280-91.

2. These operating environment characteristics and functional implications have been referred to as "irregular warfare," "hybrid war," and "full-spectrum operations." For these terms and their associated concepts, see *The Joint Operating Environment, 2008: Challenges and Implications for the Future Joint Force* (Norfolk, Va.: US Joint Forces Command, 2008); *Irregular Warfare (IW) Joint Operating Concept (JOC)*, Version 1.0 (Washington: Department of Defense, 2007); Pete Geren and George W. Casey, Jr., "Full-Spectrum Operations in Army Capstone Doctrine," *2008 Army Posture Statement* (Washington: Department of the Army, 26 February 2008), [http://www.army.mil/aps/08/information\\_papers/transform/Full\\_Spectrum\\_Operations.html](http://www.army.mil/aps/08/information_papers/transform/Full_Spectrum_Operations.html); James N. Mattis and Frank G. Hoffman, "Future Warfare: The Rise of Hybrid Wars," *Proceedings*, 131 (November 2005); Frank G. Hoffman, "How Marines Are Preparing for Hybrid Wars," *Armed Forces Journal* (April 2006); Frank G. Hoffman, "Hybrid Warfare and Challenges," *Joint Force Quarterly*, 52 (First Quarter 2009), [http://www.ndu.edu/inss/Press/jfq\\_pages/editions/i52/9.pdf](http://www.ndu.edu/inss/Press/jfq_pages/editions/i52/9.pdf); David A. Fulghum, "Conventional Forces, SOF Could See Roles Reversed," *Aerospace Daily and Defense Report*, 17 December 2008, <http://www.socnet.com/showthread.php?t=82585>.

3. See Michael Evans, "From Kadesh to Kandahar: Military Theory and the Future of War," *Naval War College Review*, 56 (Summer 2003), 136; John Arquilla, "The End of War as We Knew It? Insurgency, Counterinsurgency and Lessons from the Forgotten History of Early Terror Networks," *Third World Quarterly*, 28 (no. 2, 2007), 369.

4. The sample included 37 interviewees. A third were at the three- or four-star level; more than 40 percent were at the one- or two-star level; while 25 percent were colonels or Navy captains. Roughly 60 percent of this pool represented SOF, while the remainder were GPF leaders. As for service, nearly 60 percent were soldiers and 25 percent Marines. Eleven percent were Navy SEALs, and the remaining two interviewees were Air Force special operations senior leaders. In terms of assignments, general officers included combatant commanders and deputy combatant commanders, theater special operations commanders, and component commanders for US Special Operations Command. Interviewees at this level also included corps- and division-level commanders and senior service educators. At the colonel or Navy captain level, in addition to serving or former Special Forces group and battalion commanders, the authors interviewed leaders of combined joint special operations task forces, SEAL teams, and special-mission units, as well as Army brigade combat team and Marine regimental combat team commanders. Interviewees had recent operational experience in Iraq, Afghanistan, US Pacific Command, Southern Command, and European Command. In terms of criteria for selection, 25 were selected by senior policy-makers in the Office of the Secretary of Defense; the remainder was selected based on interviewee recommendations.

5. For further exploration, see John F. Schmitt, "A Systemic Concept for Operational Design," <http://www.scribd.com/doc/1576622/US-Air-Force-mcwl-schmitt-op-design>.

6. See Gary A. Klein, *Sources of Power: How People Make Decisions* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 158.

7. For additional emphasis on challenges of language and culture skills, see Eric T. Olson, "National Security Leaders Forum" (Washington: Center for a New American Security, 3 March 2008), [http://www.cnas.org/files/multimedia/documents/AdmOlson\\_CNAS\\_Transcript.pdf](http://www.cnas.org/files/multimedia/documents/AdmOlson_CNAS_Transcript.pdf).

8. For similar views, see Mark R. Reid, "The Necessity of a Good Fight: A Multi-Cultural Approach to Productive Conflict in Operational Level Staffs," course paper, US Naval War College, 23 April 2008, <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA484371&Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf>.

9. For additional views on this subject, see Carlo Munoz, "More Understanding Urged between Elite and Conventional Forces," *Inside the Pentagon*, 12 February 2009.

10. Notably, recent research affirms the utility in conventional contexts of the cognitive, interpersonal, and management styles examined here, particularly in cases where senior officers occupy leadership positions outside their domain of specific expertise. See Lynn Scott, Steve Drezner, Rachel Rue, and Jesse Reyes, *Compensating for Incomplete Domain Knowledge* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2007), [http://www.rand.org/pubs/document-ed\\_briefings/DB517/](http://www.rand.org/pubs/document-ed_briefings/DB517/).

11. This is particularly true of the content of "mentoring." See Field Manual 6-22, *Army Leadership: Competent, Confident, and Agile* (Washington: Headquarters Department of the Army, 2006), chapters 7 and 8 in particular.

12. For related statements on this subject, see Fulghum. Emergent DOD training policies parallel interviewees' sentiments. See Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Personnel and Readiness), "Strategic Plan for Transforming DOD Training," 5 February 2009, [http://www.defenselink.mil/prhome/docs/T2\\_STRAT\\_PLAN\\_Final\\_Feb2009.pdf](http://www.defenselink.mil/prhome/docs/T2_STRAT_PLAN_Final_Feb2009.pdf), 18-20 in particular.

13. The specific experiences of interviewees do fall within the broad contours of service- or DOD-recommended developmental experiences. See, for example, Department of the Army Pamphlet 600-3, *Commissioned Officer Professional Development and Career Management* (Washington: Headquarters Department of the Army, 2007), 13, 57; as well as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction 1800.01C, "Officer Professional Military Education Policy (OPMEP)," 7 August 2007. Interviewees' developmental paths appear distinct, however, in terms of the number, duration, and graduated nature of broadening experiences in joint, interagency, multicultural, or coalition contexts.

14. For more on this, see Sean D. Naylor, "Special Ops 'Surge' Sparks Debate," *Army Times*, 23 December 2008, [http://www.armytimes.com/news/2008/12/army\\_sofsurge\\_122008w/](http://www.armytimes.com/news/2008/12/army_sofsurge_122008w/).

15. For similar views, see Carlo Munoz, "SOCOM Chief Advocates 'Balanced Warfare' Approach for Future," *Inside the Pentagon*, 12 February 2009.

16. The Marine Corps has recently grown from more than 180,000 Marines to 202,000. See Dan Lamothe, "Corps Has Grown to Nearly 204,000 Marines," *Marine Corps Times*, 15 July 2009, [http://marinetimes.com/news/2009/07/marine\\_204k\\_071309w/](http://marinetimes.com/news/2009/07/marine_204k_071309w/). The Army has programmed overall growth of more than 74,000 soldiers by 2013, while Congress has recently approved a temporary increase of 30,000 soldiers in the active component. See Pete Geren and George W. Casey, Jr., "Accelerate Army Growth," *2008 Army Posture Statement*, [http://www.army.mil/aps/08/information\\_papers/transform/Accelerate\\_Army\\_Growth.html](http://www.army.mil/aps/08/information_papers/transform/Accelerate_Army_Growth.html); and Rick Maze, "Senate OKs Army Increase of Up to 30K," *Military Times*, 22 July 2009, [http://www.militarytimes.com/news/2009/07/ap\\_army\\_endstreight\\_senate\\_vote\\_072109/](http://www.militarytimes.com/news/2009/07/ap_army_endstreight_senate_vote_072109/). Service SOF components are also expanding. See Andrew Feickert, "U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF): Background and Issues for Congress" (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 3 August 2009), <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RS21048.pdf>; and "Statement of Admiral Eric T. Olson, U.S. Navy, Commander, United States Special Operations Command Before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Posture of Special Operations Forces," 4 March 2008, <http://www.dod.mil/dodgc/olc/docs/testOlson080304.pdf>. Also see US Special Operations Command, *USSOCOM Posture Statement 2007* (MacDill Air Force Base, Fla.: US Special Operations Command, 2007), <http://www.fas.org/irp/agency/dod/socom/posture2007.pdf>, 12-15.

17. For policy on broadened civilian educational opportunities, see Department of Defense Instruction 1322.10, "Policy on Graduate Education for Military Officers," 29 April 2008, <http://www.dtic.mil/whs/directives/corres/pdf/132210p.pdf>.

18. The issue of tradeoffs and feasibility with respect to one aspect of broadening experiences, joint exposure, is touched upon in Margaret C. Harrell, John F. Schank, Harry J. Thie, Clifford M. Graf II, and Paul Steinberg, *How Many Can Be Joint? Supporting Joint Duty Assignments* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1996), [http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph\\_reports/MR593/](http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR593/).