

What's the Matter with Being a Strategist?

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We need strategists. In the Army and throughout the services. At all levels. We need senior generals and admirals who can provide solid military advice to our political leadership, and we need young officers who can provide solid military advice—options, details, the results of analysis—to the generals and admirals. We need military strategists, officers, all up and down the line, because it takes a junior strategist to implement what the senior strategist wants done, and it (usually) takes the input of juniors to help a senior strategist arrive at his conclusions. When he was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Bill Crowe said that what we need are people who can deal with “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.”¹ These officers, he said, need to be tested leaders and skilled military technicians, open-minded and adaptable, knowledgeable of military history and the role of armed force in the world, and versed in the complexities of bureaucratic decision-making and the international interests of the United States and its allies.

This seems all too obvious, but if so, where are these strategists?

We can find plenty to read and study on the subject of leadership; in fact, there is a veritable mountain of studies, essays, and books explaining how to build leaders. Not so if one wants to build (or become) a strategist. Here the

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field of instructive works becomes thin. Of course, in some quarters the very idea of soldiers expounding on strategy is viewed with concern. Yet, the interest in strategy and the great strategists is as intense as it has ever been. On the other hand, the creating (a better word might be developing) of strategists is a matter that gets far less attention. The wealth of literature on strategy makes the lack of discussion on how we beget strategists all the more puzzling, for surely the development of military strategists is a vitally important issue which should be subject to the interchange of ideas and constructive critiques, just like that of strategy itself. Strange that it is not.

We owe it to those who follow us to educate them and prepare them to assume the heavy responsibility of providing military leadership and military advice in the service of the state; in other words, to make them (some of them, the best of them) military strategists. And if this is true, we need to ruminate a bit on what it is we are seeking.

A military strategist is an individual uniquely qualified by aptitude, experience, and education in the formulation and articulation of military strategy (*making* strategy and *articulating* strategy are equally important).² He understands our national strategy and the international environment, and he appreciates the constraints on the use of force and the limits on national resources committed to defense. He also knows the processes by which the United States and its allies and potential adversaries formulate their strategies. He has (and to say the least it is hard to work strategic issues without this) a fundamental knowledge of the structure, functions, and capabilities of the military organizations of friend and foe.

There are many stepping-stones on the way to this knowledge. The budding soldier-strategist gains early a firm grasp of tactics and how organizations and equipment function synergistically in war. He grows to understand how units move and how they “live,” because he knows he is not just moving chess pieces but real organizations with real possibilities and constraints. He builds himself a sound foundation, first in the tactical and then in the operational level of warfare. In the process, he becomes aware of the intricacies of staff functions and procedures so that he understands how units will handle themselves and the operational requirements they are given. After a while he knows what things are possible, what units can and cannot do, and what happens to them under various conditions of battle. This includes a good knowledge of logistics because logistics (including the ever-changing military technology) can profoundly shape what is strategically possible.

The military strategist comprehends all that can be summed up as the human dimension, the human element; he understands people and knows how to motivate them. He knows what it means to commit people—in the form of military units—to action in war. The soldier-strategist knows how human beings react to the stresses, agonies, and horrors of war, not only at the lowest reaches, but at the highest levels of government as well. If he is good, he knows his own side intimately and the mind of his adversary as well.

The strategist in uniform provides advice to political authorities in the development of national policy (what is to be achieved) and national strategy (how to achieve it). He has a role in forming national strategy and policy by

explaining military capabilities, the limits of armed force, and how military power can be used as an element of national power. He conveys to his political leaders his sensing of what is achievable and what is not achievable by military means.

He also translates political policy into military plans and actions. Developing an effective military strategy requires thoughtful analysis, creative ideas, and a sense of perspective. It is unlikely that the demands of strategy will become any less complex in the future. Furthermore, the process of building strategy is never really complete. All strategy has to be reviewed often with a critical eye to determine whether it will still accomplish the objective for which it was designed.

Fine. But the question remains whether we have the officers with the necessary skills in the right places in the right numbers to do all this. How many military strategists do we need? The wag may say “None,” and some may feel that the answer could be “One.” You may need only one Alexander, they say, or one Napoleon, or one George Marshall. But perhaps the question really is, “How do we get as broad a leavening of strategic thinkers as possible?” For each accomplished strategist we produce, how many must begin the long period of winnowing and development? How do we produce enough officers to achieve the proper formulation of military strategy? Is there some minimum number for a given organization? How do we create a network of intelligent, experienced, original thinkers who can conceive and implement the many facets of a military strategy?

We can never predict who will be in the key positions of strategy formulation and execution in a time of crisis, and we cannot expect to be able to create “instant military strategists” in time of war. In order to have the ability to expand, we need a structure—or better a matrix—in which at any one time there are officers at all levels experiencing a maturation of their talents as strategists. We need young strategists because we need senior strategists, and we need a lot because when the time comes we need *enough*.

Given the many differences in the backgrounds, environments, personalities, and careers of successful military strategists, how can we expect to create new ones out of whole cloth? Frederick the Great grew up with the advantages and education associated with the life of nobility. He not only led brilliantly in the field, he showed a unique ability to articulate his strategic concepts. Clausewitz had little formal education, never served in command, but knew battle from many perspectives. Liddell Hart left the service early, as a captain, while J. F. C. Fuller’s military career took him to generalship. What message is there in this, what common thread?

Each military strategist reaches his level of skill by absorbing and ordering the unique experiences of his own life—from wartime battles and peacetime training, from his own study of books, from daily life in military units, from the counsels of his leaders and the conversations of his colleagues, from his studies and his teachers in military schools—and from trial and error in the school of hard knocks.

Strategic thinkers do not owe their success to the ability to master certain principles or maxims. War has been fought on shifting sands: battle

can differ enormously from century to century and now even from decade to decade. The way to learn about the enemy (reconnaissance), to move against him (maneuver), or to bring power to bear (mass), is very different down through history. The common thread is an ability to assimilate military thinking (and not necessarily from personal combat experience), to derive from this assimilation a set of ideas, and to fit these ideas to the occasion.

So much for generalizations on the theme. Assuming you are convinced (or always were) that we absolutely must get our priorities right and build more good military strategists, you will agree that the need is for an agenda of action. Our approach should employ three elements: formal schooling, in-unit education and experience, and self-development.

First, schools. Perhaps it is too obvious, but at each level, the schools should seek to broaden the officer's horizon. For example, the command and staff colleges should focus on the operational level of war, stress joint operations, and introduce strategy, while the war colleges should concentrate on the study of strategy. In the past the Army War College focused on developing an awareness of the force development process. It stressed how to work the issues, such as the Planning, Programming, and Budgeting System, to help the Army compete for resources with the other services. Force development is not unimportant, but it was often taught to the neglect of serious study of the use of armed forces in war. Happily, this situation appears to have changed.³

The schools also need a first-rate faculty, especially at the senior service colleges. The faculty at the latter should include a mix of civilian and military professors to provide varying perspectives. This should help prevent the institution from being dominated by a single viewpoint or a single line of reasoning in dealing with strategic issues. The faculty should be composed of recognized experts in strategic studies and military history, professors who know their subjects in depth and can help the students grapple with all aspects of a strategic question. There should be low faculty turnover and long-term instructors. Last year's graduates have no business being on this year's faculty. By the same token, the faculty need not be dominated by people who have been successful commanders in units, but rather by people who can teach.

A good instructor is a special kind of person. The individuals who stick in our memories as good instructors share certain characteristics. They invariably have a sound knowledge of their subject. They also know how to kindle the student's interest, how to get the student to challenge his own assumptions, and how to look at the subject in a new light. It takes uncommon skill to foster understanding and to motivate and intellectually challenge students. In short, we must exercise care in selecting a quality faculty for the schools. And we must create incentives to keep the best teachers for extended tenures. Service as an instructor should be a prized assignment.

In addition, the schools should emphasize education rather than training. They should minimize lectures and stress extensive reading, research, written analysis, and discussion in seminars. Without a solid grasp of practical and theoretical knowledge, it is impossible to take the crucial step—the combining of existing facts in new ways to provide strategic insights. Written analysis is required as well. Writing is an excellent way to build communication

skills, and it also provides a vehicle for sharing knowledge. Writing is not easy because it requires structured thinking—something that takes effort and discipline. But that is also one of its virtues: writing requires us to think logically. The schools must avoid overloading the students with lectures and briefings given by high-ranking VIPs, generals, and flag officers. The treadmill of senior speakers is not as productive and inspiring as it looks, and there is an unfortunate somnolent atmosphere in most of the large, dim auditoriums. It would be better to bring in experts or retired officers with experience in strategic planning (and not constrained by the current “party line”) to talk to smaller groups about strategic issues. Selected television tapes from such seminars might be thought-provoking for the collected student body. The object is to get students to think strategically, not to parrot the “correct strategy.”

Next, the relationship between military and civil schooling should be strengthened. We need to make better use in the military schools of the civilian education we provide to selected officers. For example, we might follow a year or more of study by an officer at a first-rate civilian university with a year as a student at the War College to allow that officer to share his expertise with other students in the class. We must not ignore civilian education. It provides a broadening experience and a cross-fertilization which are essential to keeping the military open to new ideas.

Lastly, the military schools should be in contact with their graduates at all times, helping to form them into a professional society. A school’s job is not complete at graduation. At each level, the school should follow its graduates until they enter the next higher school. Schools should keep the officers up-to-date with new developments and advise them of what is going on in the curriculum, of articles or books worth reading, of courses that can be taken, and of other ways the school can be helpful. This will cost time and resources, but it is important if we believe that developing strategists is a steady, continuous, long-term process.

Second, let’s think about in-unit strategic preparation. While the schools can provide formal guidance, basic knowledge, and practice in critical thinking to the emerging military strategist, experience and education in units are necessary to broaden the officer’s knowledge and provide awareness of the real problems and capabilities of military forces. Rarely can the strategist in uniform gain a complete understanding of military force in some theoretical way; an officer absorbs much of what he knows in the practical, daily world of military units. The “field,” in other words, is more important than the field manual. The budding military strategist takes what he learns in units and connects it to abstract concepts. We may gain our conceptual ideas by thinking, but we learn by doing. But it does not follow that only one category of development is taking place at any given time in the career of an aspiring strategist. It is precisely when the officer is in the unit milieu that we need to encourage personal study and critical thinking. In-unit education is essential, and we do not have enough of it.

There are ways of accomplishing this education in units if we are willing to devote the energy and time to it. Commanders and other leaders can hold periodic training sessions for subordinates. At these sessions, new

doctrine can be discussed, historical readings critiqued, or past and future campaigns analyzed. Commanders can call on historians to speak to their groups, hold seminars with civilian and military experts on a variety of issues, and walk battlefields. More and more unit commanders are providing these kinds of training opportunities, and the Army has taken a small step in this direction by establishing a required reading program for lieutenants,⁴ but more can be done.

An in-depth understanding of armed forces is a prerequisite for the military strategist. He should be fully cognizant of the capabilities and limitations of military force in general and various types of military units in particular. In the present environment, this cannot be limited to his own service. Today's military map is not a flat piece of paper; it has three dimensions—land, sea, and air. Frederick the Great could concentrate wholly on a land strategy and Admiral Nelson on sea power. But the time is long since past when strategists could focus solely on single-service operations. Furthermore, as US wars of this century have demonstrated, the time has passed when we Americans could rely exclusively on unilateral national strategies.

Therefore, in addition to his proficiency in his own service, the military strategist must be competent in joint and combined operations. But a person who understands joint operations is not necessarily a strategist. In training people in joint operations, we often concentrate on procedures. At lower levels of command and staff this is appropriate, since the details of service integration are of great importance. But at the higher level the focus should be on the broader use of air, land, and sea force capabilities. "Gaining a joint perspective" is just a way-station on the road to becoming a strategist.

Today's military is a large organization with practically unavoidable elements of bureaucracy, and the military strategist must recognize this fact. Modern warfare is more complex than ancient warfare, although the principles often may be quite the same. The greater capabilities of command, control, communications, and intelligence, of armaments, and of logistics have demanded organizational changes, as have the speed, intensity, and three-dimensional character of modern war. This means much larger staffs, many headquarters, and special elements devoted to tasks that a short time ago were nonexistent or rudimentary (electronic warfare, air defense, airspace management, fire control). This creates bureaucratic tendencies on the battlefield—which become part of war's realities and have to be dealt with.

Third, and finally, what about self-development? Schools must teach well the elements that build strategists, but leaders in units must understand better than they do today that the units they command are the homes of officers, that part of training is officer development, and that the tactical, technological, and organizational bases for the development of strategists must be given sustainment. But above all, whether in units or in schools or in assignments elsewhere, whether lieutenants or generals, officers must—absolutely must—realize that the development of capabilities as a strategist is a matter of *continuing personal application* more than anything else. Alexander the Great learned about war at the side of his father, Philip of Macedon. He received no formal military education, yet few have matched his insight into combining effective military power with statecraft. Napoleon did receive some formal technical training, but it was

his enormous and voracious appetite for knowledge of military operations—a knowledge that he gained almost entirely on his own—that made him great. A look at history will show that *highly motivated self-development* is the key to producing the best strategists. We must foster and nurture this.

While we teach military history in schools and can emphasize its study in units, the individual must continuously delve deeply into the past on his own. It is fundamental that a military strategist needs a strong and comprehensive knowledge of military history. The collective experience of military forces is the raw material from which he gains insights into the process of successfully applying military force. An officer who aspires to be a strategist must be sustained and nourished by the confidence that he *knows* the history of warfare. He knows how campaigns unfold, how various types of units interact, and how technological progress affects fighting capabilities. Military history is the basis of communication among strategists, the coin of the realm.

But the strategist in uniform must go beyond history and the purely military sphere; he requires a much broader base from which to operate. He must also work to develop an understanding of politics and the political process, for the objectives of strategy and the environments in which it is formulated are political. Politics and culture impose a variety of constraints on strategy. These include limitations on the resources committed to defense as well as strictures on the use of military force. He also has to divine his opponents' strategy and the factors influencing it as well, since strategy is not a single-actor game.

Senior leaders have a particularly important role in the process of developing military strategists. They are the ones who determine the environment, provide the guidance, and establish the structure for our emerging strategists. We need to reach a consensus that strategists in uniform are needed and must be cultivated—in other words, to agree that this is something important to accomplish, something requiring a high priority. Once we agree to that, we should make sure that our officers get the time throughout their careers to develop as strategists. This requires that we put emphasis upon strategic thinking, or other things will usurp the time. In the typical assignment at present, long days are filled up just trying to complete the usual quotidian tasks. We must break out of the pattern in which our officers spend their time in mundane activities with little chance to think, followed by stints in school where they also may not do much conceptual thinking. Senior officers must ensure that there is time in the units for the officer to reflect and absorb the lessons the unit has to offer, so that during subsequent schooling he can develop his thoughts from a strong and practical base of experience and training.

We need to agree that strategy is not an “elective” of the later years of an officer's career—that work in this field has to begin early. The lieutenant does not have to be a strategist, but he must be aware that what he is absorbing will contribute to a knowledge of tactics and operational art constituting milestones on the way to ability in the field of strategy. We need consensus concerning the value of motivating and rewarding self-development at all stages. At the same time, we must afford the promising strategist the opportunity, through such avenues as civilian education or fellowships, to expand his horizons and

connect the knowledge he gains in units to the wider world. We must also make sure that teaching in our schools is deemed a worthwhile assignment.

Our task would be simplified if we had a better grasp of what jobs require strategists, what individuals appear to have the makings of a good strategist, and a way to match the two. While beginning to develop the military strategist at the lowest levels, we need to identify where we need the strategist in the organization and make sure he gets the assignment he needs to grow in his understanding of strategy.

There may be a lesson for us in the interwar period. The officers who served then faced infinitely greater resource constraints than anything we now experience. The Army of the 1920s and 1930s was short of everything—money, people, equipment, ammunition. Yet a significant number of leaders who emerged during that period proved to be exceptionally capable when tested by the Second World War. Some of their education was the result of military schooling—the experience of Fort Leavenworth, for example, was a turning point in the careers of many of the officers of the period. But much of their education came through unit programs and, even more, via self-development—through reading and study on their own, and through discussions with fellow officers. The memoirs and biographies of Generals of the Army Marshall, Eisenhower, and Bradley present a rich picture of professional study typical of that taking place in the officer corps which was to shape the strategy of America during World War II. The way the officers of that era devoted themselves to mastering their profession should serve as a model for all of us in the years ahead.

NOTES

1. William J. Crowe, Jr., “Senior Officer Education, Today and Tomorrow,” *Parameters*, 17 (Spring 1987), 4.

2. Let's establish some common definitions. National strategy is “the art and science of developing and using the political, economic, and psychological powers of a nation, together with its armed forces, during peace and war, to secure national objectives.” Military strategy is “the art and science of employing the armed forces of a nation to secure the objectives of national policy by the application of force or the threat of force.” These definitions have the value of being simple and acceptable for general use. Agreeing on these frees us to range afield in the variables of what makes a military strategist. Both definitions are from US Department of Defense, *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, JCS Pub 1 (Washington: GPO, 1 June 1987).

3. Howard D. Graves, “The US Army War College: Gearing Up for the 21st Century,” *Parameters*, 8 (December 1988), 2-12.

4. Headquarters, Department of the Army, *Military Qualification Standards System, Commander's and Supervisor's Guide*. STP-II-MQS (Washington: GPO, 1987), ch. 3.