

War College Fills Gaps In Leader Preparation

By Col. Bryan D. DeCoster, U.S. Army retired, Col. Charles D. Allen, U.S. Army retired, and Col. Douglas Orsi

With the following words, then-U.S. Ambassador to Britain John Hay summarized the 1898 Spanish-American War: “It has been a splendid little war, begun with the highest of motives, carried on with the highest of motivations, carried on with magnificent intelligence and spirit, favored by that fortune which loves the brave.”

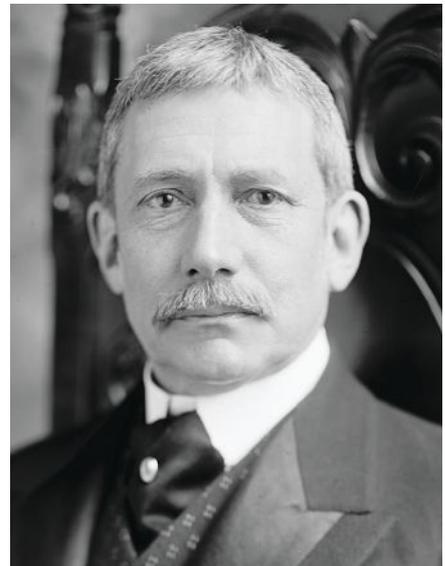
While the war resulted in victory and strategic gains for the U.S., it revealed several flaws in the planning and execution of military operations. Foremost among them was the establishment in 1901 of the U.S. Army War College (USAWC). Here, military officers would “study and confer upon the great problems of national defense, of military science, and of responsible command.”

Arguably, the U.S. viewed the quick regime changes in Afghanistan and Iraq as its two “splendid wars” of the new 21st century. But as the conflicts persisted, shortcomings in the preparation of officers for higher levels of command were revealed. Notably, the greater capability and responsibility of units exceeded the experience and expertise of officers selected to lead them, affirming that professional military education re-

mains a necessary element of development for command. While the War College has consistently focused its curriculum on the first two great problems, responsible command has generally been an afterthought.

In any given year, 40 to 60 USAWC students will assume brigade-level command after graduating, many within 30 to 60 days of graduation. Some of these command selectees will be among the few who advance to general officer ranks and serve as strategic leaders. In addition to developing strategic thinking skills, it is important for these leaders to understand strategic-level issues related to command.

As stewards of the military profession, these leaders will be charged with demonstrating the character, competence and commitment to lead future organizational change. For these reasons, the War College has developed two courses



Above: Secretary of War Elihu Root; left: Before opening at Carlisle Barracks, Pa., in 1951, the U.S. Army War College was located at what's now known as Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, D.C.



Both photos from Library of Congress

to help fill gaps in preparation for command and senior leader assignments.

Responsible Command

Since 2010, the USAWC has taught the 30-hour elective course “Responsible Command” specifically to address perceived gaps in command preparation. In the 2015–16 academic year, 28 students took the course; 15 assumed command immediately following graduation. Since its inception, over 100 students have completed the course.

As with other senior-level college selectees, USAWC students have been highly successful in their careers and previous commands; however, an important part of command preparation is to understand the nuances of advancing to brigade- and higher-level commands. During the elective course, students reflect on upcoming challenges through dialogues with experienced faculty, former brigade commanders and, most importantly, their peers.

Commanders at the brigade and higher level will lead a more diverse workforce than in their prior assignments. This is often the first time commanders will have a significant number of civilian, contractor and potentially foreign-national employees, as well as a mix of organizations that perform unique missions from geographically dispersed locations. Just consider the differences in diversity and span of control between an infantry battalion and a Stryker brigade combat team, or a garrison with more than 40 installations spread across multiple German states.

Additionally, brigade-level commanders have access to and control of greater resources in terms of time, personnel, money, equipment and facilities. In this more diverse and complex environment, brigade-level commanders need to understand and competently apply indirect and transformational leadership skills more so than the direct and transactional leadership that made them successful in the past.

The course also focuses on organizational-level issues related to command for the Army and other services, and for the International Fellows program. Discussions on topics of self-awareness, ethics, Mission Command, culture, command climate, or organizational change, innovation, toxic leadership and stewardship naturally link to the strategic leadership environment.

As students engage in seminar dialogue and record reflections through journaling, they begin to develop personal concepts of how these strategic-level issues will relate to their future positions of command and leadership. For example, how will they accomplish mandatory training with limited time? How will they communicate to their higher command about when they will accept risk? How will they communicate to subordinate commanders what is

acceptable within the philosophy of Mission Command?

The Responsible Command elective is not intended to be a substitute for Army pre-command courses. Instead, it is complementary and provides students the opportunity to truly reflect, synthesize, share and weigh ideas in a small, peer-group setting. Appropriately, the pre-command course at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., provides students with a great deal of critical information and introduces them to the concept of journaling to develop introspection and focus efforts for their transition to command. At the War College, Responsible Command provides a venue for in-depth discussions of command and leadership topics. Reflection is reinforced as a key component, and students are encouraged to share their reflections through journaling.

The command and leadership concepts discussed in Responsible Command serve these future leaders well in brigade command but, more importantly, prepare them to be good stewards of the military profession as they advance to become the strategic-level commanders of the future. In the words of one former student:

The Responsible Command course was very helpful and provided practical information as I prepared to take command. The invaluable dialogue among the students and faculty allowed me to gain new insights that directly aided my preparation. It also provided me with an opportunity to reflect on the leadership lessons learned throughout the year and organize my thoughts headed into command of a [brigade combat team] within two weeks of graduation.

Garrison Command

War College faculty also offer a directed-study elective course for students preparing to take garrison command to help fill a gap in their professional military education. Army centrally selected garrison command began in the mid-1990s. At present, there are more than 70 garrisons under the U.S. Army Installation Management Command (IMCOM). For most brigade-level garrison commanders, this will be their first experience with installation management beyond being customers as on-post residents, members of a tenant unit, and re-



U.S. Army War College classes were taught at Upton Hall, Carlisle Barracks, Pa., until 1967.

U.S. Army/Scott Finger



Collins Hall at Carlisle Barracks, Pa., home of the Army War College's Center for Strategic Leadership

ipients of base services. Accordingly, the Army provides specific orientation and training for these leaders.

However, incoming garrison commanders typically attend the IMCOM Garrison Leader's Course 60 to 90 days after taking command. The War College thus recognized the need for another learning opportunity. While the small number of garrison-command selectees—about five students—in each class does not warrant a traditional elective, students have sought other approaches to prepare for their unique commands.

Through a voluntary directed study, students tailor their research to address specific aspects of command. One year they focused on the topic of leader development for garrison commanders and developed a proposal for a USAWC elective. They presented a 10-lesson syllabus complete with course objectives and suggested reading material.

Another group of students explored joint basing as a recent initiative that is still under scrutiny, facing issues associated with service cultures and expectations. For each year, students assessed the alignment of the IMCOM strategy with the higher Army strategic direction and considered the impact on their future commands. Consequently, a recent student cohort used operational design to analyze the IMCOM campaign plan. Their goals were to understand the environment, identify service and organizational-level issues related to managing installations, and develop an operational approach to address these issues in command.

Students visually mapped out the IMCOM campaign plan lines of effort. In the process, they identified lines of connectivity between related goals and objectives. This helped them identify issues for further analysis. Research included visits with key agencies and officials in installation management. Through independent study, networking with subject-matter experts, and dialogue within the group, they further synthesized possible approaches to the garrison support issues.

Finally, they visited a group of former garrison commanders who are now serving on the assistant chief of staff for installation management staff. They discussed policy implications for these issues and weighed their ideas with those who have wrestled with them before.

Through dialogue and reflection, these future commanders are now better prepared going into command to take on the complex issues faced on military installations. Most important, each student developed a 90-day transition plan for his or her specific command.

Good Stewards

Since its creation to address shortcomings identified during the Spanish-American War, the USAWC has prepared leaders for service at the strategic level. Integral to this is developing responsible commanders aligned with the Army Ethic. Formal pre-command courses are the primary venue for command preparation, while War College electives provide complementary opportunities for leaders to reflect, grow professionally, and apply Mission Command in their decisions and actions. Developing the competencies and attributes for responsible command will pay dividends as these leaders become stewards of the Army Profession in their future strategic roles. ★

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