

War College Graduates Light the Path Ahead

By Col. Charles D. Allen, U.S. Army retired

U.S. Army War College students have happily entered the last block of the core curriculum. Their sights are set on June graduation.

Our Defense Management course is commonly referred to as “DM.” One of my seminar students redesignated the acronym to represent “doom and malfeasance” after the opening lessons of the course as we examined the statutory authorities, functions and organization of DoD and the armed services.

As we set this context, students learned that DoD is second only to the Social Security Administration as the most heavily resourced entity of the U.S. government. Accordingly, DoD consumes over half of the discretionary portion of the annual federal budget. For fiscal year 2016, DoD was appropriated approximately \$573 billion of the nearly \$4 trillion spending budget. More eye-opening is the daunting resource competition of defense with the mandatory portions of the federal budget—to say nothing of the specter of the \$19 trillion national debt and the looming “fiscal train wreck” that has motivated debt-reduction measures. The “bullets and beans vs. bread and butter” debate is now accentuated by a “bills past due” discussion.

So our students are eager to understand the Budget Control Act of 2011, which has been twice modified by the Bipartisan Budget Acts of 2013 and 2015 to avoid another round of mandated “sequestration” cuts. They have heard senior defense leaders issue warnings as these leaders itemize the risks to current missions if sequestration measures are enacted once again.

Our students are reminded that the military serves two masters: the president as its commander in chief and as the chief executive of the nation who provides direction; and Congress, whose members provide oversight and authorize spending for defense activities. We hear projections of doom in response to the fiscal challenges and get the foreboding sense that the polarization within Congress is unlikely to result in compromise and resolution.

As we study the calls for defense reform

30 years after the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, current congressional and think-tank assessments reveal that problems persist in building and maintaining a force to protect our national security interests. We have not solved the post-World War II problems of determining, developing and delivering capabilities in the form of ready and relevant forces.



U.S. Army/Carol Kerr

While “malfeasance” may be too strong, challenges in effectively managing DoD acquisition programs for weapons systems and contracted services as well as navigating the Byzantine planning, programming, budgeting and execution process are not for the faint of heart. Defense leaders struggle to make a compelling case for balancing our force structure of people and units, our readiness to sustain current missions, and modernization of the force to address future requirements.

Within DoD, there is inherent competition among the armed services for missions, priorities and resourcing. Recent debates about U.S. military strategic concepts like AirSea Battle and the role of strategic land power illustrate the interservice rivalry for funding and relevance among military professionals. While operations conducted by a joint force have been a necessity in the war on terror, current fiscal realities threaten to revive service parochialism as well as the active and reserve component divide. Indeed, our military leaders are challenged to provide ready and relevant forces to combatant commands while executing the services’ Title 10 responsibilities to develop, staff, organize, train and equip the force of the future.

The Army War College curriculum includes an introduction on U.S. policymaking. It is important for our students to acknowledge and understand the relationships among the elements of the “Iron Triangle” comprised of Congress, the Pentagon bureaucracy and myriad interest groups—each seeking to advance the goals of their constituent members. It is easy to fall prey to cynicism when

watching the policy “sausage” being made by the military-industrial—and congressional—complex that President Dwight D. Eisenhower warned us about in his 1961 farewell address.

U.S. Army War College students learn about the costs as well as the perils of neglecting domestic needs and of excessive defense spending. While we adhere to the principle that military members must remain nonpartisan and apolitical, it is important that our students understand the political tensions that are inherent in our form of government.

Spring is a time of renewal and hope. Upon graduation, our students join the ranks of senior military professionals charged with tremendous responsibilities. In the face of perceived fiscal doom and intimations of malfeasance, they are preparing to provide the advice, management and leadership to light the path ahead. □

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