

# Improving Strategic Leadership

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**T**HE CONTEMPORARY operational environment (COE); force design; political and military complexity on the battlefield; joint and combined operations; and mission execution have caused changes that require leaders who can understand strategic implications earlier in their careers than has been required in the past. Therefore, the U.S. Army must begin educating officers for strategic leadership positions earlier in the leader development process. The context within which the U.S. Army executes its responsibility under *U.S. Code*, Title 10, "Armed Forces," has expanded in an unprecedented fashion.<sup>1</sup>

The increase in the number, variety, and complexity of missions places a greater demand on the Army than ever before and creates great ambiguity in the methodology for successful mission accomplishment. Therefore, the Army must redefine its traditional paradigms of leader development associated with traditional echelons of execution. In fact, the boundaries between echelons of leadership have become so blurred that they overlap almost to the point of invisibility.

The need to develop tactical leaders into strategic leaders and to empower them to lead in such a challenging environment has never been more apparent. Strategic leaders responsible for large organizations, thousands of people, and vast resources cannot rely on lower level leadership skills for future success.

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Developing strategic leadership skills using a set of finite leader competencies with broad application as a foundation is necessary to provide a common direction that transcends all leadership levels. Broad competencies span boundaries and provide continuity for leaders when they must function at multiple levels simultaneously. The Army needs competent, confident, adaptive thinkers to exercise battle command. Senior leaders must develop the skills and confidence necessary to apply military means in a strategic environment of global economies and instant communications.

Leaders must acquire operational- and strategic-level skills earlier in their careers to successfully meet future challenges. The Army must begin strategic leader development sooner to prepare leaders to understand and execute successful strategic leadership and to accomplish the mission.

The COE is now more complex and unpredictable, and the future operational environment (FOE)

promises to be equally so. The ambiguity of contemporary crises and military events demands that the Army begin developing officers early in their careers who can—

- Predict second- and third-order effects.
- Negotiate.
- Understand globalization.
- Build consensus.
- Analyze complex and ambiguous situations.
- Think innovatively and critically.
- Communicate effectively.

The COE has been becoming more complex and unpredictable for some time. An asymmetrical environment or a noncontiguous battlespace was as much an experience during the Vietnam war as it is in the post-11 September 2001 world. The Army needs an officer corps that can operate in any environment, not just the current one. The Army must prepare for future environments as well. General officers clearly need such skills, but company commanders and field grade officers must also be aware of the strategic implications of their actions in a complex COE.

Former Chief of Staff of the Army (CSA) General Eric K. Shinseki's comment about the NATO Stabilization Force (SFOR) in Bosnia applies as well to the need for better professional development in strategic skills. He said that being SFOR commander is "the most difficult leadership experience I have ever had. Nothing quite prepares you for this."<sup>2</sup> In Bosnia and other peace operations, even junior officers face challenges in which their tactical decisions are likely to have immediate strategic consequences. Therefore, they need to develop strategic awareness that lower levels of institutional education and training do not offer.

Army leadership research is consistent with Shinseki's observation; it must do more to improve how it develops strategic leaders, thus improving strategic leadership. Studies, reports, and analyses of Army leaders corroborate that there is room for improvement at all levels of leadership, especially at the strategic level.<sup>3</sup> Improvement is essential for the success of Army Transformation.

Managing revolutionary change in a transforming Army and commanding soldiers in an ambiguous, noncontiguous battlespace requires strategic leadership skills, such as envisioning and consensus-building, and key leadership competencies, such as self-awareness and adaptability. To develop these skills, the Army must introduce broad-based, doctrinal competencies during accession and precommissioning.

## Why Change is Required

Army culture contains many challenges and obstacles that hamper the development of strategic leaders and can sometimes be a double-edged

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sword—facilitating efficient tactical military operations while stifling the communication necessary to operate effectively at the strategic level. The traditional hierarchy often teaches officers to protect their turf and to stovepipe, filter, and control information.

At the strategic level, communication requires—

- Sharing information, not controlling it.
- Open dialogue, not rank-determined discussions.
- Flexible perspective-taking, not turf protection.

The Army's leadership training for preparing officers for tactical or operational roles is generally sound, but its training for preparing leaders for their strategic role is incomplete at best. Some leaders consider it unsoldierly to have a strategic focus.<sup>4</sup>

Many officers who attend senior service colleges never emerge from the realm of tactics. Some never develop leadership skills other than direct ones. Division commanders and assistant division commanders supervise the tactical operations of the commands in which they serve on a daily basis. Developing strategic awareness does not become a top priority until late in an officer's career. Few, if any, quality exercises exist in the Army's curricula that involve strategic issues for company and field grade officers.

The Army's rapid operational pace provides few opportunities for improvement in subjects that are not of immediate utility, but the COE requires unit leaders to shift rapidly from a tactical context into a strategic context and employ their units with equal skill. Can we afford to continue this pattern when we know future doctrine will require this ability earlier?



Iraqi children poke their heads out of a front door as 4th Infantry Division troops patrol the streets of Samarra, 18 December 2003.

***The ambiguity of contemporary crises and military events demands that the Army begin developing officers early in their careers who can predict second- and third-order effects; negotiate; understand globalization; build consensus; analyze complex and ambiguous situations; think innovatively and critically; and communicate effectively.***

Strategic leadership requires understanding all three levels of war and how the military functions as part of a larger whole. Consider the current Global War on Terrorism. CSA General Peter J. Schoomaker reinforced the idea of transcending military boundaries when he said, “We have harvested the opposition [to the Taliban] to do our will in Afghanistan.”<sup>5</sup> His concept is a keen insight into the environment—one that far exceeds what is taught at any war college.

The ambiguity that characterizes recent conflicts demonstrates the need for skills that far exceed simple tactical-level leadership. Given the far-reaching military, economic, political, and diplomatic implications of the operations, no military center of gravity exists that requires leaders to operate at all levels while simultaneously maintaining a strategic perspective.

The Army generally promotes and selects for senior command those who succeed at the direct level

of leadership. The implicit and somewhat tenuous assumption of this selection process is that those who are successful at the direct level of leadership will acquire, as they rise to higher echelons of command, the requisite skills and experiences for strategic leadership.

A review of general officers’ resumés reveals that they often have little time for assignments that provide opportunities for quality reflection and study. Operational assignments are the norm. Many who become generals have only one nonoperational assignment, which allows little time for reflection and assimilation of skills. Brigadier General David Huntoon said, “We are rushing officers through promotion gates too fast to ensure they are amassing the experience and expertise necessary to be able to summon up the instincts, insights, foresight, and wisdom essential to success in a complex battlespace.”<sup>6</sup> Most colonels serving as executive officers, as well as general officers serving on the Army staff, do not gain the perspective that colonels on the joint staff or in the Department of Defense gain. Officers whose duties take them into daily contact with people from the Department of State, National Security Council, CIA, and NATO develop broader perspectives and a nuanced understanding of strategic issues.

Coupled with education, experience in the interagency process is increasingly useful for senior leaders. Operations with increased strategic and political implications, as well as joint, interagency, and multinational execution early in an officer’s career, will become the norm. This suggests the need to change how to manage midlevel assignments. The Army must provide experiences to those officers most likely to rise to positions of strategic responsibility. The Army might also reconsider what assignments are nominative and how much latitude branches have in assignments to develop future strategic leaders.<sup>7</sup>

Clearly the Army must carefully manage the assignment process to ensure the development of requisite strategic leadership skills. The Army can improve the assignment process by identifying and carefully managing worthwhile assignments during appropriate windows of opportunity. Developing higher level skills places increased importance on educating Army leaders at all levels in both the institutional and operational Army in subjects that augment strategic leadership skills.

Improving Army officers’ strategic leadership skills should begin with accession and precommissioning and continue through the general officer

level. Becoming a competent general officer takes a lifetime of education, training, and experience. The Army's goal should be to develop an officer corps that has the requisite skills and has learned to correctly perform actions crucial to strategic leadership.

Much anecdotal and systematic evidence suggests that some strategic leaders engage too readily in micromanagement, indicating over-reliance on the direct leadership mode. Micromanagement stifles creativity and can create an environment that rewards permission-seeking, relegating such maxims as "be bold" and "take risks" to mere rhetoric. Educating officers early on about strategic leadership will make the requisite transition to it more likely.

### Improving Strategic Leadership

The Army's current officer education system begins the development of strategic leaders at the U.S. Army War College (AWC) at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania. The U.S. Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, has also added a track of study for strategists. Given the changing context within which the Army fulfills its responsibility to the Nation and the inherent requirements in this new operating environment, developing strategic leaders at the War College level comes too late.

The leader development process requires progressive training and education that produces leaders who possess appropriate skills at the appropriate time, and clearly, the sooner strategic leadership development begins, the better for the officer, the Army, and the Nation.

The Army currently does not have a concerted methodology to develop strategic leaders, although it does have some excellent institutional courses. Unfortunately, the courses are based on past paradigms that wait for leaders to achieve certain developmental gates before training them for the skills associated with the next level of performance and that rely on success at lower levels of performance to predict future success.

Filling the gap in education and training that exists today will require paradigm-breaking, multilevel leadership skill development. The Army can better use education to leverage skill development. The Army can require that officer assignments exercise and develop strategic leadership skills. The Army and the leader can use self-development to reinforce skill development.

**Institutional opportunities.** The Army should strengthen strategic leadership instruction in Army



Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Richard B. Myers responds to a reporter's questions during a press briefing with Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld.

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schools and courses and not limit this effort to general officers or AWC courses. The Army should introduce elements of strategic-thinking skills during Intermediate Level Education and expand them at the Army War College. Curricula should be periodically reviewed based on feedback and on a changing operating environment. A review of the training available through the General Officer Management Office (GOMO) shows that there is useful, focused tactical- and operational-level training but little strategic-level work. The current GOMO training message offers 11 courses, but only three touch on strategic leadership issues:

□ The Brigadier General Training Course (BGTC) introduces new general officers to the general officer experience, but discussions about strategic leadership skills are anecdotal. Three days is not enough time to train a strategic leader. BGTC could easily add a session focused on strategic leadership.

A U.S. captain and an Albanian interpreter talk with demonstrators after the shooting deaths of three Serbians, 28 May 2000.



US Army

***In Bosnia and other peace operations, even junior officers face challenges in which their tactical decisions are likely to have immediate strategic consequences. Therefore, they need to develop strategic awareness that lower levels of institutional education and training do not offer.***

□ The Capstone Course is 6 weeks long, but much of that time is spent visiting commands worldwide. The course offers no true strategic-level leadership training other than a 3-day exercise at the Joint Warfighting Center at Suffolk, Virginia. Any strategic wisdom general officers gain from their 15 days of overseas travel is serendipitous at best and depends on the senior mentor and the balance struck between tourism and concentrated study time.

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**Other opportunities.** General officers can also acquire knowledge by participating in strategic-level programs at the Kennedy School of Government or the Fletcher Conference. Joint, multinational, and interagency war games also provide useful education and training. The Army should expand opportunities to participate in these programs where possible. The Center for Creative Leadership seminars, a mandatory program for all brigadier generals, concen-

trates on strategic-level issues. Most attendees are direct- and organizational-level leaders in civilian industry.

Opportunities to partner with academic institutions that offer strategic educational programs have increased since 11 September 2001. The links to Georgetown, American, George Washington, and other Universities and to the think tanks in Washington, D.C., also provide useful opportunities. GOMO's partnership with Syracuse and Johns Hopkins Universities through the National Security Leadership Course is a good example of collaborative efforts. Quality distance-education technology allows users similar opportunities, to a greater or lesser extent, worldwide. Still, opportunities for senior officers to attend such courses in the face of the extraordinary operational pace in every command are difficult to arrange.

In the past, fellowships offered opportunities for select officers to gain a strategic perspective. The contemporary operating environment requires that strategic leaders understand the many instruments of national power and the asymmetrical nature of current and future threats. The Army must overcome a bias against education in both teaching and learning in order to make quality time for reflection. The Army should consider increasing the quantity and quality of officers in educational positions and in its schools and allow a select few to serve for extended periods as master educators. According to Huntoon, "There is also a need to provide greater opportunity for our field grade officers to complete a focused master's- to doctorate-level education. The latter can be provided by either the Army's senior institutional centers or through quality civilian graduate centers, through resident, distance-learning, or a hybrid means."<sup>8</sup> If the Army is going to develop more and better strategic leaders, it must invest and commit to changing Army culture. The institutional Army plays a critical role in preparing strategic leaders.

**Operational opportunities.** Operational opportunities should include strategic staff rides and strategic training and evaluation, such as a Battle Command Training Program (BCTP) evaluation for nondivisional unit or corps commanding generals. BCTPs and the combat training centers could include a strategic planning phase for division and assistant division commanders. The forum, which would be a general officer-level forum run by senior retired officers, Senior Executive Service members, or other subject matter experts, would compel participants to learn strategic thought well in advance

of warfighting and mission-rehearsal exercises for operational deployments.

General officer-level workshops on strategic and operational challenges around the world could become a norm. We can do this in the new general officer pre-command course (PCC) at Fort Leavenworth. Staff rides that include a consideration of the strategic dimension of such operations as Normandy or the Ardennes would also be beneficial. Officers could also do some strategic-level work during battalion and brigade command PCCs as well.

To expose leaders to the strategic environment, we can leverage internships, fellowships, and assignments to joint staffs or the National Security Council staff. Such assignments would allow officers some time to study and reflect in a strategic environment. For this to work, the Army must make a cultural shift to balance such assignments with traditional operational assignments. The Army must also reward or recognize those who serve in positions that cultivate the broad perspectives that are necessary to acquire strategic leadership skills.

**Self-developmental opportunities.** Self-developmental opportunities should include directed readings or functional modules delivered by distance or distributed learning. Self-development is a critical foundation for lifelong learning. Self-development is a primary means to complement institutional or operational opportunities and to develop critical, creative thinkers who can serve as leaders managing strategic change.

Current military professional reading lists include few books about strategic leadership. Strategic leaders should refine their reading lists to include the best available material on the strategic environment and leadership as well as books that discuss the moral dimension at the strategic level.<sup>9</sup> Army leaders should encourage dialogue by publishing articles or writing books on strategic leadership.

Given the complexity of strategic leadership, a holistic approach for improving how we develop strategic leaders is important. We must also include joint, interagency, and multinational perspectives. Generals Tommie Franks and Schoomaker believe we should give more value to joint assignments. Huntoon said, "We must break the Army-centric view. Army strategic leaders need to think asymmetrically. Future missions are dynamic; sometimes the threat of force is more useful, other times it is not."<sup>10</sup>

The Army needs leaders who understand this vision and can convey it to their subordinates, to the American people, and to the U.S. Congress, the Secretary of Defense, and the President. Schoomaker

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General Peter J. Schoomaker, U.S. Army Chief of Staff (right), at the Joint Operations Center, Bagram Air Field, Afghanistan, 26 December 2003.

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recommends changes in operational assignments and education that will change the Army culture and "allow for subordinates to be creative."<sup>11</sup>

Developing an officer corps capable of strategic leadership involves accepting a shift to *skill development* complemented by *experience* and *reflection* and to acquiring strategic leadership skills through the education and experiences gained from specific career patterns. Developing enduring competencies rather than teaching perishable skills is the key. To develop officers capable of strategic leadership, the "first of the critical areas to be examined is the identification of strategic leader skill sets."<sup>12</sup> Developing these skills will produce officers who are confident, doctrinally competent, cognitively resilient, and comfortable with ambiguity. After fully identifying leadership competencies, many of which already exist in leadership doctrine, the next step is to institute ways to develop them, such as embedding skill-development programs throughout the officer education system and in the operational Army.

Officers need to know that the Army expects them to develop strategic-leadership skills early in their

careers. The value of the broad-based competency approach to skill-development is that competency will transcend leadership levels. When the Army trains junior officers to be conceptually competent, they will

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understand that the Army expects them to display conceptual competency throughout their careers.

Long-term solutions might focus on providing appropriate educational opportunities throughout an officer's time in service. Educational opportunities that allow officers to reflect on past experiences are valuable and might include teaching as well as student assignments.<sup>13</sup>

## Serving the Nation

The COE/FOE and the future Army will need doctrinally competent leaders who possess conceptual as well as interpersonal competence. Effective strategic leaders realized this long ago. George C. Marshall, reflecting on his appointment as the Chief of Staff of the Army, wrote, "It became clear to me that at the age of 58, I would have to learn new tricks that were not taught in the military manuals or on the battlefield. In this position I am a political soldier and will have to put my training in rapping out orders and making snap decisions on the back

burner, and have to learn the arts of persuasion and guile. I must become an expert in a whole new set of skills."<sup>14</sup>

One aspect of skill acquisition that many agree on is that waiting until one becomes a general officer to acquire strategic leadership skills might be too late. Indeed, developing conceptual and interpersonal competence must begin much earlier. However, assignments that include broadening educational opportunities and providing time for reflective thinking are key to strategic leader development; developing strategic leaders for tomorrow will require change.

To transform and succeed in the COE/FOE, the Army must be adaptive. To improve strategic leadership, Army leaders must venture forward boldly. Leading change is always difficult, but the Army's success depends on moving forward. The Army must challenge and change part of its culture.

The Army must view strategic leadership as a subject worth studying, learning, understanding, and applying. It must embark on a path that includes developing strategic leadership skills throughout an officer's career. Army Transformation provides this opportunity. Now is the time, as the Army transforms the officer education system, to introduce strategic concepts and leadership competencies earlier in an officer's career and more frequently in the courses.

An officer corps whose education is based on developing confidence and enduring competencies will lead an Army able to win in any environment. These officers will provide a full complement of self-aware, adaptive strategic leaders who are constantly improving themselves and always ready to serve the Nation. **MR**

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## NOTES

1. *U.S. Code*, Title 10, "Armed Forces," on-line at <[http://uscode.house.gov/title\\_10.htm](http://uscode.house.gov/title_10.htm)>, accessed 11 March 2004.  
2. Howard Olsen and John Davis, "Training U.S. Army Officers for Peace Operations—Lessons from Bosnia," U.S. Institute of Peace Special Report, 29 October 1999, 1.  
3. John A. Spears, Emil K. Kleuver, William L. Lynch, Michael T. Matthies, and Thomas L. Owens, "Striking a Balance in Leader Development: A Case for Conceptual Competence," National Security Program Discussion Paper Series, no. 92-02, John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1992; Stephen J. Zaccaro, "Models and Theories of Executive Leadership: A Conceptual/Empirical Review and Integration," U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral Sciences, Alexandria, Virginia, October 1996; Richard A. Gabriel and Paul L. Savage, *Crisis in Command: Mismanagement in the Army* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978); Garry Wills, *Certain Trumpets: The Nature of Leadership* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994); U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, *The Army Training and Leader Development Panel (Officer Study)* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2001).  
4. Michael D. Pearlman, in *Wormaking and American Democracy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 20, says, "At best, said the commandant of the National War College in 1990, the Armed Forces 'presume there is something unsoldierly about an officer who grows to intellectual stature in the business of military strategy.'"  
5. Interview with GEN Peter J. Schoomaker, Frontier Conference Center, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 29 November 2001.  
6. GEN David Huntoon, "General Officer Strategic Development," Information paper, 4 October 2001. Few officers have spent significant time in joint and multinational assignments that could broaden their perspective and give them the opportunity to learn how the Department of Defense, the Executive branch, and foreign militaries operate. The Army does not always consider officers who have spent considerable time in joint assignments as being as "competitive" as officers who remain in Army billets. The Army

must value their experiences in tangible ways.  
7. COL James Greer to LTG James C. Riley, E-mail, "Tng (Training) strategic leaders," 12 July 2002.  
8. Huntoon.  
9. *Ibid.*; Joseph Gerard Brennan and Admiral James Bond Stockdale gave a series of lectures known as the Stockdale Course for senior military leaders at the Naval War College, Annapolis, Maryland. The result was "The Foundations of Moral Obligation," a useful work on ethics and morality for strategic leaders. Two other notable, relevant titles include Michael Walzer's *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (NY: Basic Books, 2000) and Paul Christopher's *The Ethics of War and Peace: An Introduction to Legal and Moral Issues* (Paramus, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998), which deal directly with moral issues related to the Army's public charter—the ethics of killing.  
10. Huntoon.  
11. Schoomaker, 29 November 2001. The idea that we need to provide more educational as well as training experiences has broad support.  
12. Memorandum Thru Vice Chief of Staff, Army, for Major General Robert R. Ivany, Commandant, U.S. Army War College (USAWC), Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, "Charter Guidance—USAWC Student Studies on Strategic Leader Skill Sets and Future War, Future Battlefield," 1.  
13. GEN Dwight D. Eisenhower often noted that his experiences as a teacher helped him prepare for high levels of leadership. Generals Tommie Franks, Eric K. Shinseki, Creighton Abrams, John M. Keane, and Montgomery C. Meigs had similar educational teaching assignments. Many others have had broadening educational experiences—with opportunities for quality reflection—that have helped them develop the requisite skills for successful strategic leadership.  
14. U.S. Army Field Manual 6-22 (formerly 22-100), *Army Leadership* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 31 August 1999), 7-1.