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ARTICLE

Learning to Fight

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The intelligence seemed solid: The core of an entire al Qaeda command cell was operating out of a local mosque, under the direction of the imam. They met during Friday prayers, stored their weapons in the mosque itself, and even constructed bombs in the imam's office. The members of the cell melted into the general population as they entered and exited and thus couldn't easily be identified or tracked. From a purely military standpoint, the solution seemed clear: Raid the mosque, on Friday, during prayers, and destroy the local al Qaeda command structure.

But was that the right call? Would it inflame the local population, spur an insurgency, create an international incident, and call down the wolves of the traveling press? Or would it send a message that there are no safe havens, impress the locals with American strength of will, and give them confidence that we are serious in our purposes and capabilities? Or would the result be a hopeless mishmash of both outcomes—an inflamed press, some locals impressed, others outraged, and an unclear impact on the insurgency as a whole?

Such was the command experience during our recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq: facing a shadowy and elusive enemy and confronting a largely alien

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culture, all under the watchful eye of a largely hostile press and an increasingly cynical and war-weary public.

Did we get these decisions right? Did we educate our leaders to make the right decisions?

The recent publication of *The Generals: American Military Command from World War II to Today*, by Thomas Ricks, has helped spur a debate within and outside the military over the effectiveness—and training—of our military leadership.[1] Ricks unfavorably contrasts the far more ruthless command environment of World War II—where failing leaders were relieved of command at a breathtaking rate—with the War on Terror, where failing leaders are more likely to be promoted than relieved. In our current war, leaders have sometimes "failed up," leaving broken wartime commanders to return stateside to even greater levels of responsibility.

Commenting on *The Generals*, conservative writer William S. Lind places the blame for perceived leadership failures partly on the military educational process itself:

> Almost never do our military schools, academies, and colleges put students in situations where they have to think through how to fight a battle or a campaign, then get critiqued not on their answer but the way they think. Nor does American military training offer much free play, where the enemy can do whatever he wants and critique draws out why one side won and the other lost. Instead, training exercises are scripted as if we are training an opera company. The schools teach a combination of staff process and sophomore-level college courses in government and international relations. No one is taught how to be a commander in combat. One Army lieutenant colonel recently wrote me that he got angry when he figured out that nothing he needs to know to command would be taught to him in any Army school.[2]

Are we failing to train leaders effectively "to fight a battle or campaign," and instead emphasizing "staff processes and sophomore-level college courses in government and international relations"?

Sadly, Mr. Lind's critique is at least partially correct.

To understand military education, one has to understand a bit about the career-long process, beginning in college (typically in Reserve Officers'

[1]Thomas E. Ricks, *The Generals: American Military Command from World War II to Today* (New York: Penguin, 2012).

[2]William S. Lind, "Rank Incompetence," *American Conservative*, February 1, 2013, http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/rank-incompetence-434/.

Training Corps [ROTC] or the military academies). At the risk of oversimplifying, an Army officer is educated in four major steps: (1) college, (2) career course, (3) intermediate level education (ILE), (4) and war college. Generally speaking, aspiring officers learn the basics of military life in college ROTC, captains hone their craft during career course, majors seek promotion to lieutenant colonel during ILE, and lieutenant colonels seek promotion to colonel in war college.

Both ILE and war college last almost a full year; war college heavily emphasizes strategic studies.

These schools—time at these institutions is generally referred to as time "in the schoolhouse"—are supplemented, especially in the combat arms, by extensive training exercises, most notably at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) at Fort Polk, Louisiana, and the National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin, California, where deploying units endure essentially a compressed, simulated deployment.

While the academic environment in the schoolhouse is quite forgiving, the operational training at the JRTC and NTC can be harsh. I've known more than one officer—cracking under the strain of constant simulated attacks, sleepless nights, and an accelerated operational tempo—whose reputation was seriously damaged at the JRTC and NTC.

By contrast, in the absence of actual misconduct, few officers fail in the schoolhouse. While characterizing ILE or war college as "sophomore-level college courses" is an exaggeration, these classes are hardly rigorous. They're no more and no less difficult than civilian graduate studies in the humanities.

By one measure, military training programs are an unqualified success: They do an outstanding job preparing graduates to "succeed" within the modern military. In other words, they help prepare officers for the next stage of their military careers, an objective that unfortunately only partially overlaps with preparing officers to fight and win wars.

To grasp this distinction, one has to understand the clear-cut differences between what one colonel I consulted with calls the "operational" versus "nonoperational" military.

The operational military fights and trains to fight wars. The nonoperational military runs the government jobs program that is the stateside/peacetime armed forces.

The operational military medevacs wounded soldiers, places artillery rounds on-target, and snipes the Taliban from impossibly long distances. The operational military invades nations and deposes dictators. The nonoperational military deals with impossibly complex matters of military discipline and

military pay and benefits, complies with a labyrinth of regulations in the conduct of even the most mundane matters, and values "diversity" and "fairness" over effectiveness and efficiency.

The operational military is the Army as commonly understood. The nonoperational military is a combination of the Department of Health and Human Services and your local DMV.

In counter-insurgency campaigns—success in the operational military can be somewhat murky, failure can be masked for extended periods, and even the best leaders struggle to achieve remotely measurable results. Zero-defect in a shooting war (where the enemy always has a say) is simply impossible. But one thing is clear, defaulting to caution—to by-the-book operations—is not always best. Boldness is often required, and the best leaders can be downright revolutionary.

For the typical Army commander, life in the nonoperational military carries as many or more risks to career advancement than does performance on the actual field of battle, yet the qualities required for success are very different. In the nonoperational military, a zero-defect mentality holds, and commanders thus default to the safe harbor of the labyrinth of military regulations and field manuals, sometimes viewing any action not explicitly authorized by regulation to be inherently suspect. The cautious commander thrives in the nonoperational context. Ruffle very few feathers and you'll be just fine.

An examination of an ILE course catalog reveals the operational/nonoperational divide.[3] In its wide scope, ILE offerings represent the military's effort to create an educational plan that addresses the spectrum of leadership challenges in a heavily bureaucratic military structure, with courses containing everything from case studies of military campaigns to explorations of military war-fighting doctrines to more nebulous classes on leadership, the media, and effective communication—classes that wouldn't be out of place in a civilian business school and are crafted to help officers succeed within the military bureaucracy.

The problem, however, is that the schoolhouse—while always imperfect and inadequate at cultivating warriors—is certainly adequate for building bureaucrats. A warrior, ultimately, is shaped by experience in battle, with

[3] *Command and General Staff College Catalog*, United States Army Combined Arms Center, http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/cgsc/repository/350-1.pdf.

wars often raging for some time until the inadequacies of peacetime training and habits are swept away.

It took Lincoln years before he found the right man to command the Army of the Potomac; similarly—as Ricks points out in *The Generals*—division commanders were readily replaced throughout World War II as Eisenhower and his generals found officer after officer wanting in the one place that truly mattered: the battlefield. In Korea, thousands of American lives were lost before the right general brought the right strategy to the fight.

Today, however, the nonoperational military thrives right alongside the operational military, even in the midst of war. Glittering battlefield accomplishment can be sullied by bureaucratic failures, and—conversely—wartime mediocrity can be balanced when commanders return home and efficiently perform the mundane administrative tasks that allow a commander to report his unit as "green" (ready) in updates to the command. If a commander has enough soldiers pass physical fitness tests, qualify on their weapons, and attend timely health examinations, he can cover a multitude of more subjective failures of leadership.

When General George Casey infamously declared in the aftermath of Fort Hood, "[A]s horrific as this tragedy was, if our diversity becomes a casualty, I think that's worse,"[4] he was echoing not the language of the battlefield, but the *learned* behavior of the modern military schoolhouse—which reflexively responds to the media with the politically correct banalities of your average government office.

As for reform, it is impossible to reform the schoolhouse without reforming the military itself. Army schools that don't prepare officers for actual Army life do those soldiers a disservice, and if actual Army life is rife with bureaucracy, inflexibility, and political correctness, its schools will be no different.

If history has one clear lesson about military education, it's this: Experience is the best teacher. In *Catastrophe 1914: Europe Goes to War*, noted British historian Max Hastings traces how thoroughly unprepared European military leadership was for continental conflict—despite a longstanding study of war.[5] Self-defeating tactics, failures of nerve, and outright mental breakdowns marked many of the officers of 1914 and the years that followed. Only brutal experience brought forward the best and

[4]Quoted in Tabassum Zakaria, "General Casey: Diversity Shouldn't Be Casualty of Fort Hood," *Tales from the Trail* (blog), Reuters, U.S. Edition, November 8, 2009, http://blogs.reuters.com/talesfromthetrail/2009/11/08/general-casey-diversity-shouldnt-be-casualty-of-fort-hood/.

[5]Max Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914: Europe Goes to War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013).

brightest commanders, with some nations clinging to ineffective leaders long after they failed at the front.

While our schools could be better, and certainly more rigorous, military education can shoulder only a small part of the blame for American military setbacks in Iraq and Afghanistan. After all, these same schools succeeded in producing a class of officers whose tactical excellence and courage meant that again and again we bested the enemy in the field, even when outnumbered and occasionally taken by surprise.

What to do? To borrow from the military's heavy use of acronyms, the short answer is "More NTC, less ILE." In other words, do more to simulate real-world combat (and evaluate officers accordingly) and less to educate officers into the bureaucratic mindset of the nonoperational Army. As stressful as NTC is, it can't compare to the horrors of modern combat—although it's certainly more effective than an avalanche of PowerPoints and multiple choice exams in testing a soldier's mettle.

One final note: For all its imperfections, the military education system did create a class of officers who ultimately won in Iraq and who initially cleansed Afghanistan of al-Qaeda with astonishing speed. While the outcome of the Afghan conflict is yet to be determined, it could well be that our wartime limitations had more to do with the strategic reality of the Taliban's safe haven in Pakistan combined with a nearly indecipherable (to us) Afghan tribal culture than with our own failures of leadership.

Or perhaps our failure of leadership went to the conception of the operation itself. We asked our soldiers to do the impossible: defeat the Taliban (while often hampered with absurd rules of engagement) *and* modernize a feudal society. Was it ever reasonable to think that Afghans would adapt to an imposed Western-style democracy? We can fault education for wrongly teaching that certain goals are attainable. We cannot, however, fault education for failing to teach us how to achieve the impossible.

Going back to the original example of the hypothetical mosque raid, it is difficult to conceive of the proper schoolhouse answer. Experience and wisdom dictate the commander's decision, and the schoolhouse is better at providing absolutes (often filtered through politically correct truisms) than it is at cultivating the qualities necessary to make the difficult calls.

Is our military education broken? No more broken than the military itself. Experience has been—and will always be—the best teacher, and no amount of well-crafted PowerPoints will improve upon its stern lessons.