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Rethinking Professional Military Education

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The Pentagon is currently undertaking a congressionally mandated Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) of strategy, force structure, missions, and resources. One issue that should be on the table is defining professional military education requirements. The current system is inadequate. The Department of Defense (DOD) should restructure it to emphasize a broad range of graduate education opportunities early in an officer's career.

The Sad State of Military Education. Military schools have changed only modestly since the end of the Cold War. Preparing to fight a known enemy required certain skills and knowledge, and professional education focused on those narrow areas. As a result, officer schools and development programs have continued to train and promote leaders with skills and attributes to meet the needs of the 20th century, not future challenges. For example, despite the fact that the U.S. military has conducted an average of one peacekeeping, peacemaking, or post-conflict operation every two years since the end of the Cold War, military education and training programs offered scant preparation for the postwar challenges in Iraq.

The Threat Matrix. Post-conflict tasks are not the only missions that the military needs to master in the 21st century. The QDR guidance defines four broad areas of capabilities that the military needs in the future:

1. Responding to conventional military threats;
2. Meeting "irregular" challenges, such as terrorism and insurgent campaigns;
3. Combating catastrophic dangers, such as weapons of mass destruction; and
4. Countering "disruptive threats" from military competitors who develop unexpected capabilities.

- Military officer education is inadequate. The Defense Department must restructure it to emphasize a broad range of graduate education opportunities—early in an officer's career.
- The military's war colleges should have to compete with civilian schools for military students.

Reform proposals call for everything from Arabic-language training to negotiating skills to increased engineering and scientific training. These calls ignore reality. Operational requirements are leaving less, not more, time for professional education. Likewise,

the Pentagon cannot be expected to foresee exactly which kinds of leaders, language skills, and geographic or operational orientations will be needed for future missions. The future is too unpredictable.

What Should Be Taught? In the future, the attribute most needed by military officers is the critical thinking skills that come from a graduate education program. Thinking skills are the best preparation for ambiguity and uncertainty. Virtually

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any graduate program would suffice. In fact, the military should seek as broad a range of graduate experiences as possible as a hedge against unexpected operational and strategic requirements.

The armed forces have done this in the past. Between World War I and World War II, the military let officers seek out a diverse swath of educational and professional opportunities. When the United States later entered the war, the officer corps was prepared to respond to the wide range of situations that it faced. The U.S. is now in a similar period of uncertainty. Professional military education needs to acknowledge this and broaden the opportunities available to the officer corps.

Who Should Be Taught? Today, the DOD mistakenly ties senior education to promotion. In the 21st century, every officer will require critical thinking skills to operate in an increasingly complex environment with dispersed decision-making. Officers at all levels need to be able to analyze situations and make the best decisions possible in often difficult situations. A graduate education should be a prerequisite because it provides the analytical skills necessary for functioning in dynamic environments. In addition, professional education requirements should be the same for active duty and reserve component leaders because they perform the same tasks on the battlefield.

When Should They Be Taught? The military is the only profession that waits until its leaders are well over 40 years old to provide most of its future senior leaders with a graduate experience. Officers need this experience when they are young—before they are 30 years old—when education will have its greatest impact. Early education will prepare officers to be better mentors and prepare them for professional self-study later in their careers. Earlier graduate education and the more frequent use of the military means something must give. The services will need to consolidate schools and rely more on short-term courses and distance education to train specialty skills.

Where Should They Be Taught? To build a well-educated, diverse officer corps, the military

should use the free market. A requirement for educating a large pool of military officers will create a vast new demand. Officers should have a wide variety of options and opportunities. The primary goal of military education is to teach officers how to think. What or where officers are learning is less important than the types of skills that they are developing—skills that will serve them well in a wide spectrum of situations and conflicts. An officer can gain the same critical analysis skills from a political science course as from an advanced engineering course.

In addition, the military's war colleges should have to compete with civilian schools to attract military students. Competition will lead to better services and programs as well as guarantee a diverse and well-trained officer corps.

Moral and Political Instruction? Moral and political issues are part of war, not a separate sphere that military leaders can ignore. Officers will have to engage in the struggle of ideas against terrorism and other ideologies that may emerge in the 21st century. They will have to understand the political dimensions of war and the complexities of civil-military relations. Thus, every program must include at least some element of a classical liberal education to prepare leaders skilled in both the art of war and the art of liberty.

Educating a diverse, well-educated officer corps armed with graduate-level critical-thinking skills may be the most important contribution that DOD can make to transforming the military.

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