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Strategic Education for All Junior Officers: Building Morale and Enabling Adaptability

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Should strategy be required in junior officer education? Even at an institute such as West Point, it is not, where recently an officer-faculty member remarked, “We don’t want second lieutenant strategic thinkers [in the United States Army].” Matthew Cavanaugh argues that basic strategic knowledge is fundamental to two critical junior officer requirements: building morale and military adaptability.


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In a recent *Infinity Journal* essay, Colin S. Gray wrote, “Military officers perform the strategic function at every level of command, from a platoon on upwards,” and that “strategic competence” ought to be “widespread.”[i] Moreover, he has separately written, “strategic genius is rare, strategic talent is more common” which “can be improved by formal education…[to generate] instinct for a better performance.”[ii] For that, one might consider Gray an optimist. However, he concludes the *Infinity Journal* article with a warning: “although there is no new knowledge to be discovered about strategy, old knowledge can be lost.”[iii]

Even at storied West Point, this counsel goes unheeded. The trimmings of strategy are everywhere at West Point; the campus was a crucial strategic location during the American War of Independence and maintains strategic value as the cradle of U.S. Army officer professionalism. It has produced some superb strategists, as the saying on recruiting posters reminds prospective cadets: “At West Point, much of the history we teach was made by people we taught.”

Unfortunately, none of the strategy made by people West Point taught was a direct result of what West Point chooses to teach. This past semester I had visitors from the Israeli Defense Force. There were three, one Lieutenant Colonel and two Captains. They taught in the Israeli military education system and were canvassing similar American educational institutions. They were, in a word, “shocked” at such a strategy course. “We do not even attempt this sort of knowledge until an officer is a Lieutenant Colonel in our system,” the senior officer exclaimed.

This is clearly not just an American, or West Point problem. Even the most junior military officer, on day one, must be able to identify, describe and potentially diagnose the conflict they find themselves to be a part of. The current Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army General Raymond Odierno recently wrote in *Foreign Policy* that his aim was to develop junior officers “cognizant of the potential strategic ramifications of their decisions.”[vi] This essay proposes that a standalone strategy course ought to be part of every military officer’s commissioning process, and will offer for support two historical pieces of evidence. When complete, this essay will add two strong reasons to support General Odierno’s statement: strategic understanding builds morale and enables adaptability.

Developing a junior military officer’s strategic understanding helps to build the morale necessary for battlefield success. Much ink has been spilled on the importance of morale in combat. Napoleon’s maxim that “the morale is to the physical as three is to one,” or Field Marshall Lord Wavell’s comments that the “final deciding factor of all engagements, battles and wars is the morale of the opposing forces.”[vii]
It was at this moment that Union Major General Winfield

meaner place could man be put in?”[x]

described that particular scene by simply asking, “What

and Private Silas Adams. After the war Private Adams

Directly adjacent to the 1st Minnesota was the 19th Maine

regimental historian, of Company K, 1st Minnesota Volunteer

Lieutenant William Lochren, a civilian attorney and later

unit morale. The American Civil War experience of Second

Lochren’s Assessment

Second Lieutenant Lochren was at the Battle of Gettysburg,

near the center of the Union line on 2 July 1863. The Union

Army’s Major General Daniel Sickles’ 3rd Corps had pushed

forward in such a way that created a gap between his forces

and the rest of the line. Near the end of the day’s fighting, the

Union line thinned such that a Confederate brigade led by

Brigadier General Cadmus Wilcox surged forward in an effort

to pierce the Union front. As Lochren recalled,

We stood in full view of Sickles’ battle in the peach

orchard half a mile to the front, and witnessed with

eager anxiety the varying fortunes of that sanguinary

conflict, until at length, with gravest apprehension, we

saw Sickles’ men give way before the heavier forces of

Longstreet and Hill, and come back, slowly, at first, and

rallying down the slope by the Trostle house, across the

low ground, up the slope on our side, and past our

position to the rear.[ix]

Directly adjacent to the 1st Minnesota was the 19th Maine

and Private Silas Adams. After the war Private Adams

described that particular scene by simply asking, “What

meaner place could man be put in?”[x]

It was at this moment that Union Major General Winfield

Scott Hancock, in charge of the Union center and the 2nd

Corps, saw the break as well as the advancing Confederates. When Major General Hancock realized that there were only the roughly 289 men of the 1st Minnesota available, he exclaimed: “My God, are these all the men we have here?”[xi] He then ordered the 1st Minnesota to advance to take the rebel battle flags, against approximately 1,100 Confederates. [xii] Later, Hancock would write:

Reinforcements were coming on the run, but I knew

that before they could reach the threatened point the

Confederates, unless checked, would seize the position.

I would have ordered that regiment in if I had known

that every man would be killed. It had to be done.[xiii]

Simultaneously, Second Lieutenant William Lochren recorded

this assessment: “Every man realized in an instant what that

order meant – death or wounds to us all; the sacrifice of the

regiment to gain a few minutes’ time and save the position,

and probably the battlefield.”[xiv]

This is a truly noteworthy statement from a junior military officer. This is the height of strategic instinct

This is a truly noteworthy statement from a junior military officer. This is the height of strategic instinct – Lochren clearly

identified the unit’s military objective and linked it directly to

the organization’s broader military objective. Simply put, time

was necessary and the men of the 1st Minnesota provided

this time to enable the Union to hold this part of the field

on July 2nd, in turn ensuring the Union would turn back the

broader Confederate threat to Pennsylvania and Northern

will. Second Lieutenant Lochren’s strategic understanding

empowered him to build the morale necessary for success in

a difficult and critical battlefield endeavor.

As a member of the unit later put it, “we were there to meet

the requirements of the occasion, and were ready to do it,

whatever it might cost.”[xv] And certainly the costs were high.

Though the exact figure is disputed, around 225 of the men

that went into that charge were either killed or wounded,

which is reputed to be the worst loss for any regiment in a

single engagement of the war.[xvi]

Adaptability & Captain Russell Voelckmann

Developing a junior military officer’s strategic understanding

enables adaptability, which is critical when conflicts veer

in unexpected directions. Military adaptability as a useful

characteristic has been supported broadly, but never as well

as by Sir Michael Howard in 1974:

I am tempted indeed to declare dogmatically that

whatever doctrine the Armed Forces are working on

now, they have got it wrong. I am also tempted to declare

that it does not matter that they have got it wrong. What

does matter is their capacity to get it right quickly when

the moment arrives...[xvii]

More recently, in one of his last speeches as Secretary of

Defense, Robert Gates spoke to the Corps of Cadets at
West Point on 25 February 2011. He asked what he considered the “important question,” which was “how can the Army prepare, train, and retain officers with the necessary multifaceted experience to take on a broad range of missions and roles? Where there is not one, but many doctrines in play?” Gates then advised the audience to take “some instruction and inspiration from the career of Russell Volckmann, Class of 1934.”

Perhaps it would be instructive to heed Secretary Gates’ advice and look more deeply into Captain (later Brigadier General) Volckmann’s experience with adaptability after the surrender of Bataan on the island of Northern Luzon.

His wife and child having been sent back to the United States due to the Japanese threat, Captain Volckmann was embedded with the Philippine Army until being reassigned as a division intelligence officer just before the surrender. In early April 1942, Volckmann learned about several guerilla units operating in North Luzon. As Volckmann put it,

> When an opportunity presented itself, I cornered General Brougher.

> ‘Sir, I’m still in pretty good physical shape – I have a lot of fight left in me. Would you give me permission to try and work my way north to [an Army Colonel running guerilla operations] if and when we are ordered to surrender?’

> The General, very tired, paused for a few moments and then replied, ‘Sure thing. I’ll report you missing in action on a patrol. If you try, the best of luck to you.’

> I questioned several of my friends to see if I could persuade anyone to join me. No one seemed interested, the usual reply being, ‘You won’t have a chance. There are too many Filipino informers and fifth columnists. Why try? The Japs will treat us ok.’

> …Above all, I still felt there was much yet to be done… and I could not resign myself to surrendering.

This statement belies a terrific sense of initiative and willingness to win. Where his peers chose to stay on track with the unit, despite the obvious defeat that was on the way – Volckmann went a different route. And, after many months of slow movement, illness and recovery, Volckmann survived and by October 1942 reported that he was “back in the war, only this time as [a guerilla].”

The massive challenge Volckmann faced was that “in all my training I had never been exposed to the techniques and policies of resistance and guerilla warfare.” There was no guide, no prior knowledge, on which to fall back.

On 9 June 1943, the Japanese captured the two colonels in charge of resistance activities. Volckmann, age 32, assumed command “as the next senior officer in North Luzon.” This is where Volckmann’s story gets interesting; he commanded a force that eventually grew to 22,000 by the end of the war. The numbers though, are far outweighed by his reflections on his initial strategic assessment.
Captain Volckmann’s intellectual understanding of strategy – the ability to see the wider picture and where his efforts and use of force fit into it – is instructive and provides guidance for what ought to be expected of commissioned military officers. His “ends” remained the same, but his strategic understanding supported an adaptability of his “ways” due to sufficiently reduced “means.”

Admittedly, repetition of this exact scenario is unlikely. Cynics will charge that Volckmann likely did not have any formal training in strategy as this paper advocates. This much is true, but consider a powerful counterfactual: what if more of Volckmann’s peers had his broader understanding of strategy? Would that not have made Japanese efforts on North Luzon more difficult?

Conclusion

Though both historical examples provided may seem implausible, there are contemporary occurrences similar enough which suggest the desirability of building strategic understanding into pre-commissioning military education. For example, consider this recent story from Vanity Fair about the conflict in Libya:

…on the night of March 21, 2011, [U.S. Air Force] Captain Tyler Stark took off in an F-15 [as a navigator] from a base in Italy with a pilot he’d only just met, on his first combat mission. He now had reasons to think it might also be his last.

Even so, [after having to bail out of the plane] as he floated down, he felt almost calm. The night air was calm, and there was no sound, only awesome silence. He didn’t really know why he’d been sent there, to Libya, in the first place. He knew his assignment, his specific mission. But he didn’t know the reason for it.[xxxvi] [Author’s emphasis, MLC].

What happens when direct military orders are insufficient or hierarchy breaks down – what fills that role? The military prefers officers with initiative, as when General David Petraeus famously insisted to his subordinates that, “In the absence of guidance or orders, figure out what they should have been and execute them aggressively.”[xxxvii] However, General Petraeus’ sentiment is pregnant with a massive assumption: that they will know what to do; that they are imbued with strategic understanding. Such a notion, as in Captain Stark’s case, may prove false.

Perhaps a thought experiment is in order: imagine instead drifting down in that parachute a Second Lieutenant Lochren or Captain Volckmann. Would their characteristics – Lochren’s ability to inspire morale or Volckmann’s adaptability – would these not be a significant improvement?

What happens when direct military orders are insufficient or hierarchy breaks down – what fills that role?

In 1913, on the eve of the Great War, Reverend Percy Kettlewell, a headmaster at a private school in South Africa, remarked, “Schools are like munitions factories and ought to be turning out a constant supply of living material.”[xxxvii] All military schools charged with creating officers could be construed in such a way. Their graduates control society’s weapons; this special class is expected to defend defenseless societies and prosecute purposeful, orchestrated violence on behalf of their citizenry. As war is not going away, the warriors built will, with certainly, be used. The vagaries of modern warfare require more than simple automatons programmed for tactical implementation; an understanding of strategy supplies abundant morale and necessary adaptability for all conflict paradigms.

West Point and many other military commissioning sources are designed to build skilled tacticians with great emphasis placed on the current character of conflict. In Major General Koster’s words, they are often more concerned with battlefield “doers” than battlefield “thinkers.” As such, places like West Point inevitably produce officers of all varieties, Lochrens, Starks and everything in between.

But when West Point produces a Volckmann, as it did in 1934, it is often in spite of, not due to, the education provided. This must change, and a useful step would be to ensure that a multi- and interdisciplinary academic strategy course is a part of every soon-to-be officer’s education.

If this is not the case, Gray’s admonition will require adjustment – at West Point, strategic knowledge is being lost in perhaps the worst, saddest way – for lack of effort.

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References


[iii] Ibid., p. 9.

[iv] Note: This refers to a specifically tailored multi- and interdisciplinary strategy course, which synchronizes the received wisdom from many relevant fields. Though history has immense value in seeking wisdom by learning about what happened, anthropology and psychology describe crucial human factors, and political science informs with important broad theories, there is an essential leap from these academic domains to finding applicable solutions to put to use on the modern battlefield for the achievement of policy aims. These often stove-piped academic fields are necessary to understanding conflict, but not sufficient as separate entities. War and strategy are fundamentally too big to fit into one discipline. Also, see Arthur F. Lykke, “Toward an Understanding of Military Strategy,” The U.S. Army War College Guide to Strategy, 2001, p. 179-185.


[x] Ibid., p. 49-60.

[xi] Ibid., p. 55.

[xii] Ibid., p. 56. p. 58.

[xiii] Ibid., p. 57.

[xiv] Ibid., p. 56.

[xv] Ibid., p. 140.

[xvi] Ibid., p. 170. 179.


[xix] Ibid.

[xx] Ibid.


[xxii] Ibid.

[xxiii] Ibid., p. 87.

[xxiv] Ibid., p. 105.

[xxv] Ibid., p. 119.

[xxvi] Ibid., p. 120.

[xxvii] See Gates.


[xxix] Ibid., 106.

[xxx] Ibid.

[xxxi] Ibid.

[xxxii] Ibid.

[xxxiii] Ibid., p. 107.

[xxxiv] Ibid.

[xxxv] Ibid., p. 107-108.

