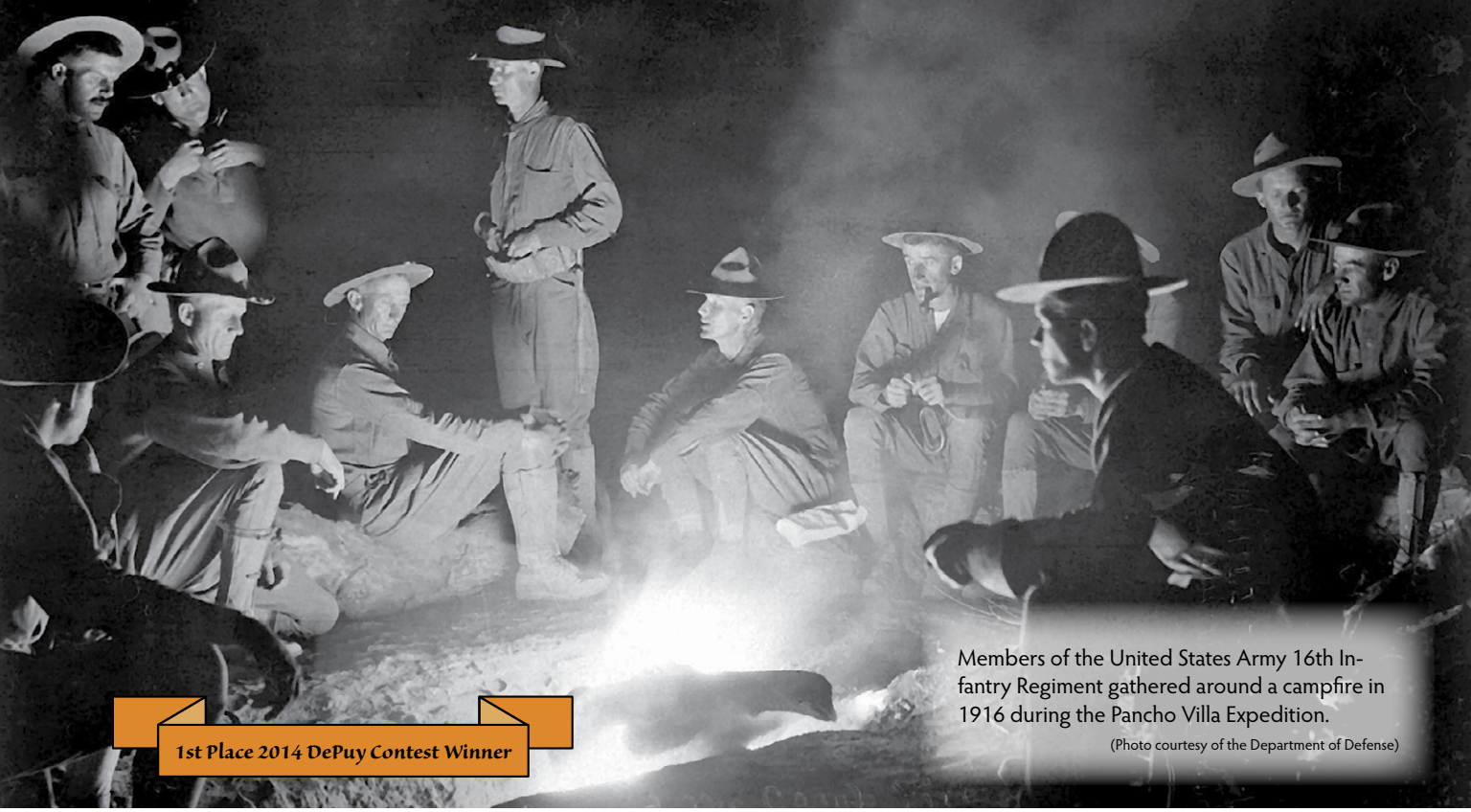

Members of the United States Army 16th Infantry Regiment gathered around a campfire in 1916 during the Pancho Villa Expedition.
(Photo courtesy of the Department of Defense)

1st Place 2014 DePuy Contest Winner

No Shortage of Campfires

Keeping the Army Adaptable, Agile, and Innovative in the Austere Times

Col. John Culclasure, U.S. Air Force, Retired

The fire is the main comfort of the camp, whether in summer or winter, and is about as ample at one season as at another. It is as well for cheerfulness as for warmth and dryness.

Henry David Thoreau

He never fired a shot in anger.[1] He never experienced combat on the actual frontline.[2] Yet Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower became one of the most effective, innovative, and prestigious officers to serve in the U.S. Army, and, eventually, as president. Eisenhower, the soldier, grew into the leader that took a somewhat untested Army, adapted it, and instilled

it with a degree of agility to undertake very arduous missions. That an officer enjoyed such success without close combat experience may seem odd, yet certain circumstances and events made this possible. With his memoirs, Eisenhower shed light on perhaps the most important transitioning episode of his career.

It seems Eisenhower's eventual and great contributions to the Army began while sitting "around a small campfire."[3] More important, he did so in the company of another officer who would have great influence on him.[4] That confluence of events yielded a kernel of wisdom and has ramifications for today's Army as it faces a future of fiscal constraints and an associated reduction of training and equipment.[5] Accordingly, today's Army searches for ways to be flexible and adaptable in light of that constrained future. It is neither complicated nor elaborate, but perhaps Ike's "small campfire" is the model for, or the key to, a successful future Army. The campfire setting suggests a way to emphasize and enhance what is truly a soldier's best weapon for adapting and innovating: the cognitive process.

First, an understanding of the relaxed campfire zeitgeist in Eisenhower's personal story is crucial so it can be replicated and applied to both mentoring and learning in today's Army. Next, introducing one all-important topic within that campfire setting allows focus on the one capability or skill the Army, as a whole, must grasp (and to a degree, the one it pursues now): the concept of the operational center of gravity (COG). Also, with its proper mood and topic, the campfire setting ultimately facilitates the Army's most valuable asset: the individual, or more specifically, the individual's mind, which is above all else the foundation of an effective thinker and leader. Finally, inviting other services to *enlarge the campfire* goes further to gain varied viewpoints on the operational COG concept as well as helping the Army continue its embrace of jointness. And it all starts with a very simple setting.

The Main Comfort of the Camp

Eisenhower as an individual, and later as an officer, was a product of his environment and experiences, some of which are generally known. He grew up in somewhat austere conditions in Abilene, Kansas.[6] Later, he attended West Point.[7] He, too, served in an Army that was constrained in terms of budget and manpower.[8] What is intriguing about his early career is how the allure of campaigns and operations, the history of which he loved as a youth, but then detested as a West Point cadet, drew him back to their study.[9] Eventually, history enthralled Eisenhower again. He became adept at delving into historical facts to explain why certain operations either succeeded or failed. This return to a fascination with history, which was so beneficial later in Eisenhower's career, was not an accident.

Eisenhower attributed his posting in Panama as the origin of his renewed curiosity in history.[10] As part of his duties in that territory, he explored the countryside and at times spent the night there, enjoying the "small campfire" experience.[11] He was not alone during these evening hours, however. Eisenhower's writings indicate the presence of other officers. When men, regardless of the walk of life, gather within the campfire's relaxing light, they talk, and they generally talk about everything. In Eisenhower's story, those conversations centered on history.[12] It is also safe to assume they took a tack on weapons, operations, and the future Army. One particular officer in these conversations became a great influence—the main actor in the Eisenhower story who was so crucial in the campfire model.

Eisenhower records how he found a fabulous mentor in Gen. Fox Conner, the influential officer alluded to earlier.[13] It was Conner, Gen. Pershing's operations officer in France during World War I, that cajoled, motivated, and enticed the young Eisenhower to become steeped in military knowledge and history.[14] Eisenhower warmly described Conner as quite the polymath, a "storehouse of axiomatic advice."[15] Conner apparently noticed something, too. He saw great promise in a young officer that could be brought to fruition through needed nurturing. Noting this significant relationship transpired in a very relaxed, almost mystical atmosphere of a campfire is illustrative and instructive.

Gen. Fox Conner

In the present day, a creative challenge for the Army would be to analyze that episode and establish that same relaxed "main comfort of the camp"—hereafter called *the campfire* for convenience and consistency—to assist the nurturing, mentoring process.[16] This paper gives no recommendation for any reinvention of the Army's mentoring program; the specific interest here is the campfire setting.

The importance of a setting for mentoring is reflected in other nonmilitary managerial and training institutions; one is the sports world. The Australian Sports Commission believes, "The mentor's first role is to create an environment that is conducive to, and challenging for learning."[17] The similarities between sports and the Army might be apparent and are certainly appropriate. Both require team effort, understanding of complex plans, agility, and rapid thinking in a violent environment (if only in the physical contact sense for sports). The sagacious Conner evidently succeeded in exploiting his chosen setting for mentoring, the campfire. Some campfire particulars, upon examination, are intriguing.

Quiet and untroubled, the campfire is mainly about discussion. This setting, regardless of topic, fortunately does not require elaborate facilities or complex exercises. As one example, the staff group exercises conducted in the Command and General Staff Officer Course (CGSOC) facilitate learning: small groups, dedicated to cooperation and respect, combined with competent facilitation, a good deal of questioning, and just a hint of a time constraint (after all, a campfire does dwindle over time). Given the small scale of the exercise, soldiers do not get lost in the milieu. Moreover, much like the campfire scene Eisenhower describes, the process is definitely a cognitive experience. The campfire model's simplicity reveals its other attractive points.

This construct is not restricted to CGSOC. It can be used at all levels and does not require the sophisticated training facilities available to those at combatant command level (e.g., U.S, Army Europe's Warrior Preparation Center).[18] True, the campfire setting can occur there, but it is equally well suited for the company level on up to battalion, brigade, and division levels. Reviewing Eisenhower's story, there are a few key points to emphasize when considering this paradigm:

- Aim for simplicity and the avoidance of any dogmatic or routine approach.
- There is no requirement to levy any programmatic requirements on the process.

Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower gives the order of the day. "Full victory—nothing else" to paratroopers in England, just before they board their airplanes to participate in the first assault in the invasion of Europe.

(Photo courtesy of the Center of Military History)

- There is no need for perfunctory checks on learning.
- Finally, from the tone of Eisenhower's memoirs, no lecturing is evident. Not once does he mention any critique or rejoinder on the part of Conner. The memoir conveys a good bit of the give and take, interspersed with encouragement, so instrumental in stimulating the cognitive process.

As a case in point, Eisenhower relates how he despised the "memory course" of history at West Point.[19] With gentle questioning, querying, and prodding that eventually engendered within Eisenhower renewed interest in the topic, Conner undertook the process of motivating interest. Again, Eisenhower never records a moment of disquiet. By Eisenhower's own admission, the change in his attitude came when Conner evidently enticed Eisenhower, over time, into the cognitive process.[20]

The term *cognitive* now appears in military writing, both Army and joint.[21] Contrasting the older staid joint publications, for example, recent versions show how doctrine now eschews the proposition that following an established planning checklist always produces a decent operation plan (and, by the way, operational success). The somewhat new interest in the cognitive invites another reflection on the nurturing-via-mentorship Eisenhower records.

As a side benefit, a good mentor wins from this arrangement too.[22] Quite possibly, this mentorship "made" Eisenhower, so Conner could be proud of his contribution to the future Army. Indeed, if there is any doubt to the efficacy of campfire-style mentoring, the Eisenhower-Conner duo stands forth as the epitome of a good leadership and mentorship dynamic developed through just such a process. However, leaders and mentors need to be wary.

Assuming no shortage of campfires, the time spent around them is, nevertheless, finite. That time must be used wisely. Ben Franklin is known for his rhetorical question, "Do you love life?" His snappy follow-on to an assumed reply of "yes" was very pointed: "Then do not squander time; for that's the stuff life is made of."[23] To apply Franklin's little jewel of wisdom to the Army, substitute "life" with the word "success". This is timely, as the Army now returns to garrison and endeavors to keep the high-tempo training pace that soldiers are accustomed to as a result of their intense operational experiences over the decade of conflict.[24] This raises another critical point.

Since the Army, like nature, abhors a vacuum, herein lies a trap to avoid: the Army must not mistake activity for action. If there is time to fill, the Army should fill it productively. Therefore, the campfire theme is critical.

Ben Franklin is known for his rhetorical question, "Do you love life?" His snappy follow-on to an assumed reply of "yes" was very pointed: "Then do not squander time; for that's the stuff life is made of."

The Essential Campfire Topic

Certainly Eisenhower and Conner contemplated the Army's status in their time.[25] History aside, most assuredly they discussed adaptation just as the Army does today. Recently, an apt description was applied to the plight of today's soldier by Brig. Gen. Daniel Hughes, deputy commanding general, U.S. Army Combined Arms Center–Leader Development and Education and deputy commandant, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. Specifically, it entails imagining the soldier as a stick figure, way out on a timeline, extending well into a future where a very complex environment awaits.[26] Out on that timeline, how does that soldier recognize and cope with a threat that could come from a multitude of directions?[27] In its simplest construct, to survive, the soldier must first perceive a threat and then adapt. Naturally, this demands that the Army must first imbue the soldier with skills to discern that threat. Once the threat is known, then the soldier must in many cases innovate in order to adapt. Training innovation that leads to adaptation, however, seems terribly complicated.

There are many ways available to the Army to do this. But, to borrow from and modify (if not butcher)

an axiom of German ace Adolph Galland, it is fair to state that an army trying to train for everything trains for nothing.[28] So instead, an army must be able to adapt. In light of future resource constraints, the Army certainly realizes it cannot train toward every contingency; it must, however, train to *adapt* in order to react to every contingency. To do so, it must focus on *one particular capability* or skill that enhances adaptability and allows flexibility.

The Army, like other services, must embrace a medium, a concept, a theme. For example, the U.S. Air Force long pursued the concept of centralized control and decentralized execution. This specific tenet of airpower ultimately identified the Air Force as a genuine stand-alone service.[29] It led to the exclusivity of the Air Force in a specific medium. For its part, the U.S. Navy boldly states it will "provide offshore options to deter, influence, and win in an era of uncertainty."[30] Certainly, terrain and the occupation thereof, still matter. But it is a very chaotic terrain. Nevertheless, that is the Army's domain as espoused by the Army chief of staff with his accurate assessment that the operational security environment is "characterized by great complexity."[31]

To manage operational complexity, the Army, as of late, applies a planning process for operational design (the Army design methodology).[32] However, operational planning, including design, is a fairly large and detailed process that hinges on something specific in order to be useful. So, what is the one thing the Army must grasp as the *sine qua non*—the thing that must be understood lest the stick figure described above perish? Certainly, a temptation to concentrate on an end state might perhaps arise, but that would be incorrect.

Eisenhower provides the answer. In his book *Crusade in Europe,* he was implementing design even though he did not use that descriptor. More specifically, Eisenhower concentrates on the all-important idea of *operational COG*, even though that specific term is not mentioned once, or identified as such. For example, once the Army was able to gain a foothold on the continent of Europe following Operation Overlord, Eisenhower aptly describes what had to be attacked—the "source of power."[33] He clearly states, "This purpose of destroying enemy forces was always our guiding principle."[34] Throughout his book, every aspect of planning hinged on that main point. In some respects *Crusade in Europe* reads like a case study in design, even if current design terminology—for example, COG—is absent.

The emphasis on the design process and operational COG comes at an opportune time. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the world evolved into an incredibly complex environment. Numerous theorists made many attempts to describe it. Thomas H. Henriksen's pamphlet *The New World Order* succinctly and accurately captured the era, beginning with this chilling prediction: "Unfortunately for the human race, war has a future."[35] That rather bleak omen seemed out of place at a time when champagne flowed in all the U.S. alert facilities after President George H.W. Bush stood down the nuclear deterrent force.[36] Somewhat presciently, Henriksen wrote his dire forewarning almost immediately after the stand down.[37]

More than two decades later, the Army likely agrees Henriksen's prediction proved true. As an article in the *Wall Street Journal* ruefully reported recently, "the dictators are back."[38] In that article, Bret Stephens poignantly posited how the mechanics of democracy are not taking root as wished:

> Maybe it's something in the water. Or the culture. Or the religion. Or the educational system. Or the level of economic development. Or the underhanded ways in which authoritarian leaders manipulate media and suppress dissent.[39]

The words "culture" and "religion" stand out as representing the kinds of challenging issues begging for application of Army analytical and operational expertise so hard-earned over the past decades. The phrase "underhanded ways" in particular conjures the complex scenarios demanding analysis of the one thing—the operational COG—that might sway, defeat, or otherwise nullify "authoritarian leaders."[40] Fortunately, operational design and the operational COG are now critical parts of CGSOC curriculum.[41]

As described earlier, the CGSOC environment serves as a modest start to replicating well a campfire setting. But does CGSOC really embrace the operational COG topic to the appropriate degree?

Students do receive a moderately detailed introduction in a joint operations class, but classes taught by the Department of Military History are almost devoid of the topic. For example, the COG concept is mentioned only once in all of the Department of Military History

lesson plans.[42] To remedy this incongruence, consideration should be given to injecting the operational COG into CGSOC as an overall theme. Practice of its application is needed, as well as undertaking as many historical case studies as possible to study instances when the operational COG was attacked to good effect, or even those cases where it was not.

It is the cognitive process that will tease out and yield the operational COG. No checklist can do this alone. Plus, the operational COG concept is not something learned once. It is a complex element of design, and like anything complex, it must be reviewed and exercised regularly. Thus, another challenge arises: within Army units, it is incumbent upon leadership to keep the operational COG lesson alive. If the Army earnestly emphasizes the importance of a topic, soldiers' interests are actively sparked.

Passively, reading lists serve as an inducement. After all, it is incumbent upon soldiers to show initiative and undertake a study of the concept on their own. The CSA's reading list, in particular, offers a superb selection.[43] For instance, a wonderful book is included: Michael Fischer's Pulitzer Prize winning *Washington's Crossing.* The list also gives an apt description of this book's contents. However, in the overall context of design, why not mention Washington's aim to defeat an operational COG, of the Hessians at Trenton, by exploiting their critical vulnerability—hubris (a superb point Fischer's text brings out)?[44] Going a step further, is it too much of a reach to dedicate a reading list solely to classic cases of operational COG identification and defeat?

brevet
Col. George Patton

Actively, outside of formal education and aside from personal professional reading, the challenge of leaders and mentors is to expose young officers to design mechanics as much as possible; thus, the emphasis on the readily accessible campfire concept. Of course, balance is needed. First, young officers must learn their weapons systems and the skill sets that will serve them at the tactical level. Even so, the leader's challenge is to explain, even at that early stage, how the soldiers' skills contribute to the overall mission and how they help attack an operational COG. It should be noted this dynamic was in play at the campfire in Eisenhower's story. He was a rather young subordinate when he and Fox Conner interacted. Of course, not every soldier will become an Eisenhower, but every Army leader can strive to be a Gen. Conner.

At this juncture it is helpful to bolster the persona of Conner with a person from fiction. In Michael Shaara's *The Killer Angels,* Sgt. Buster Kilrain, the tough old Irishman so loyal to Col. Joshua Chamberlain, makes a very profound assessment of the good colonel. In the hours before the fateful engagement on Little Round Top, the sergeant passes on this wonderful compliment: "You are damned good at everything I've seen you do. A lovely soldier, and honest man and you got a good heart on you too which is rare in clever men."[45]

Using Campfires to Fire the Mind

Conner, apparently embodying all that is "rare in clever men," noted something in Eisenhower.[46] In his biography, *Ike: An American Hero,* historian Michael Korda describes an evening at Fort Meade shortly after Connor and Eisenhower become acquainted. Again, in a very relaxed setting, the general asks a number of questions to both Eisenhower and George Patton regarding tanks. Most of the questions Conner directs to Eisenhower as "the brains" behind tank warfare (perhaps to the dismay of George Patton).[47] Also, it is these meetings that lead Conner to invite Eisenhower to serve with him in Panama.[48]

This ability to recognize the need for nurture is an important skill, especially as old adages and platitudes about armies begin to resurface. First, an army is a collection of men and women, and yes, the Army is only as good as its leaders. However, to borrow from the joint world, those who become the best do so through skill, knowledge, and experience.[49]

Concerning knowledge, it again helps to reinforce the real-world Conner with fictional Sgt. Kilrain. In Sharra's story, the old sergeant makes another erudite, pointed comment to the colonel: he taps his head while uttering, "there is only one aristocracy."[50] Cognition, the "aristocracy," is perhaps the Army's best weapon. As part of the cognitive domain, creativity is also getting emphasis.

Marine Corps Gen. James Mattis, while commander of the now-defunct Joint Forces Command, lamented that "current doctrinal approach to creativity is

insufficient."[51] Fortunately, changes in joint doctrine now address that insufficiency.[52] For the Army's specific purposes, however, can that creativity focus on one particular thing, or at least one specific category? Here, again, is where Army leadership can convey the central point to learn: to recognize and defeat the operational COG.

An emphasis on the operational COG's importance will, in turn, help the Army recognize those soldiers best at discerning it. Here, an amazing parallel exists between the Army and the U.S. Air Force. In his book *The Right Stuff*, author Tom Wolfe records how fighter pilots needed a rare skill set, a certain savvy, to survive flying in early jet aircraft.[53] Moreover, once the machine was mastered, the skill set also warranted a certain "something" that helped the pilot survive combat. Not every pilot had "this quality, this *it*."[54] Even more interesting, and maddening, it was something that could not be identified, nailed down, canned, and taught. It is somewhat the same with the operational COG concept; some soldiers are more adept at discerning it.[55]

"You are damned good at everything I've seen you do. A lovely soldier, and honest man and you got a good heart on you too which is rare in clever men."

To distinguish those skilled soldiers, there are a few points to consider. First the Army must expose soldiers to opportunities—the campfire—in which the importance of the operational COG is discussed. Also, attention must be given to the fact that while motivation is a key to learning, members of the greater Army organization are motivated for different reasons. Going further and deeper to draw on the extant theories of learning and motivation, in general soldiers' personal motivation can be linked to intrinsic needs and extrinsic needs.[56]

Intrinsic needs are the needs satisfied by the way that the soldiers see themselves—a personal view of the self.[57] In the context of these particular needs, consider those soldiers that may find the operational COG concept difficult and obtuse. Knowing its importance to the Army, however, perhaps they will set a goal and work that much harder to gain the knowledge needed to grasp the topic.[58] The Army would then be well served. This seems to have been the case, partially at least, regarding Eisenhower's history pursuits; he may have been trying to satisfy an intrinsic need. However, he may have been trying to impress Connor, too, which led to satisfaction of extrinsic needs.

Extrinsic needs are those satisfied "by the actions of others," through recognition, acceptance, and awards, for instance.[59] The "others" in this case can be considered as Army leadership. Again, in the event soldiers are aware of the importance of the operational COG topic in the eyes of Army leadership, by extension, they will realize it had best be important to them. Their careers, the success of their missions, if not their survival, may depend on it. This may seem antithetical to the campfire concept, but it is not. Soldiers know that advancement in a military institution depends on an exhibition of knowledge and skill important to that institution. This fundamental in no way conflicts with the campfire concept. Again, the Army is well served. Moreover, whether a grasp of the operational COG concept is reached intrinsically or extrinsically, the Army leadership discovers those soldiers with "the right stuff" that can master it.

To recap thus far, it will be incumbent on leaders to be innovative, use the time at hand, create the campfire setting, and start discussions. If the Army can establish that setting and emphasize the importance of the topic, the foundation of mentorship is laid. Now add to this the challenge of the team.

Illuminating the One Single Concentrated Effort

In the opening pages of *Crusade in Europe*, written 28 years after the campfires in Panama, Eisenhower seems to remonstrate against coalitions (which subsume joint operations), writing about their "ineptitude."[60] However, following Mediterranean operations, he observes that lessons of the same indicate "there is no separate air, land, or naval war."[61] In his closing commentary, Eisenhower even goes further to praise the virtues of coalitions.[62] Later, as president, he persists as a champion of the "efficient team," decrying any attempts by the services to elude joint operations.[63]

To be sure, joint operations have been around a long time. An early and irresistible classic case

executed during the Civil War serves well to underscore this point. In one operation, Adm. David Dixon Porter's ships assisted Gen. Ulysses Grant's capture of Vicksburg on the Mississippi River.[64] While the operations were not the result of a large, coordinated planning effort, they were eventually successful. Porter records that when Grant was asked how he was to get his troop transports past the Vicksburg batteries, Grant's response was, "That is the admiral's affair."[65] Of course the episode is not a complete lesson in joint planning as it is perhaps more of an anecdote about Grant's droll character. Nevertheless, Porter's reflection serves as interesting commentary on the faith one commander had in another (service component) commander.

The faith demonstrated by Grant is no less important today. It is crucial to look outward at the team the Army will join as the "indispensable partner" described by the Army chief of staff.[66] It is a safe assumption that the Army will likely lead most joint task forces. So, it is natural for Army leadership to consider what the other services can do for the Army.

Solutions to the problems associated with the complex environment described earlier, at first look, do not lend themselves to other services. While there is no attempt to belittle the other services, the solutions seem to call for boots on the ground. The Navy's off-shore presence and the decentralized execution of the Air Force are not independent solutions, but rather parts of a solution. Central to any solution is the role of the Army since it is most likely to get tapped to wade into the complex land environment of an operation once senior political interests are formed and clear end states (hopefully) are presented.

Receipt of the mission and end state is one thing, but getting to theater or operational area is another. Conducting the fight is still another thing. With the entire joint force shrinking, the Army will need to rely on jointness more than ever, just as the other components will rely on the Army as an indispensable partner for getting the job done in some joint operations area somewhere in some combatant commander's area of responsibility.

It is logical, therefore, that the Army must remain knowledgeable of the joint tenets as Eisenhower wanted, since as a land force, it is dependent on the other services. The Army will get to the fight by air and by sea, but it is not just about getting there; the Army may also be required to counter threats from those other domains. In order to turn rapidly to exploit a remote critical vulnerability of an adversary, a large percentage of the time the Army may have to rely on some other weapon system in some other domain. Perhaps the Army will obtain a good deal of its agility through cooperation with the other services.

This is not a veiled call for more joint training, joint basing, or joint billets. In the spirit of simplicity, when circumstances allow, we can simply expand the "campfire circle." The intent is to keep the process low-key and uncomplicated. The Army should at every opportunity invite members of the other services into the discussions. Coming together also offers another way to get disparate perspectives on discerning an operational COG, since a different capability or specialty of a service might allow it to go directly to the critical vulnerabilities (e.g., use of an Air Force remotely piloted vehicle), or affect them in other ways. Technically adroit members of any service can give a technically oriented, creative take on the analytical process for identifying an operational COG. This is also one way to continue to skirt parochialism and simply think of the other services as the extension of Army power, even at the risk of some spirited inter-service rivalry. It is a worthy undertaking; after all, it was Eisenhower who extolled us to "free ourselves of emotional attachments to service systems of an era that is no more."[67]

This calls for a continuing effort to break the paradigm of blue on red, and think instead of purple on red. This is no new undertaking for the Army, but rather a reaffirmation. The Army understands that it will not go it alone; it is going to be a team effort.

Conclusion

The Army, fortunately, does not need elaborate measures to adapt and innovate. There should be no shortage of campfires, metaphorically speaking, in the coming times of fiscal austerity. The campfire model so beneficial to Eisenhower can be employed today; it is a simple effort of setting, topic, and the cognitive. The Army need only look for any opportunity to re-create that campfire setting that allows the discourse between leaders and soldiers so instrumental in good mentorship. If the Army creates the circumstances, it is a reasonable assumption soldiers can be drawn into the same type of discussions that so benefitted Eisenhower and, by extension, the Army later in his career. In that relaxed setting, soldiers can participate in discussions on

pertinent subjects, on discussions specifically focused on the best mechanism that makes the Army flexible and adaptable: the ability to discern an operational COG. Finally, during any campfire forum, the Army should be willing to invite other services to garner the benefits of "joint talk" and exchange. There may be shortages of resources, but being "as ample at one season as at another" there is no certainly no shortage of campfires.[68]

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47. Michael Korda, *Ike: An American Hero*, (New York: Harper/HarperCollins, 2007), 152.
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