



The invasion planning staff created in 1943 under the Chief of Staff Supreme Allied Command meets (clockwise from top left): Lt. Gen. Omar Bradley, commander, 1st U.S. Army; Adm. Sir Bertram Ramsay, naval commander-in-chief; Air Chief Marshal Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory, air commander-in-chief; Lt. Gen. Walter Bedell Smith, chief of staff; Gen. Sir Bernard Montgomery, commander, 21st Army Group (all Allied land forces); Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, supreme commander; and Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder, deputy supreme commander. (Photo courtesy of Imperial War Museum, London)

The Area under the Curve

Developing Strategic Leaders to Win in a Complex World

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I tell my audiences that it is like calculus—we are “the area under the curve.” I am the product of all my bosses, bad and good, all the training and education and all the assignments and experiences.

—Gen. Colin Powell

There is no greater strength for a military than having leaders capable of constructing strategies to avoid conflict or, once committed, to win decisively. Although the military-industrial complex spends billions each year to field capabilities to maintain U.S. military dominance relative to potential foes,

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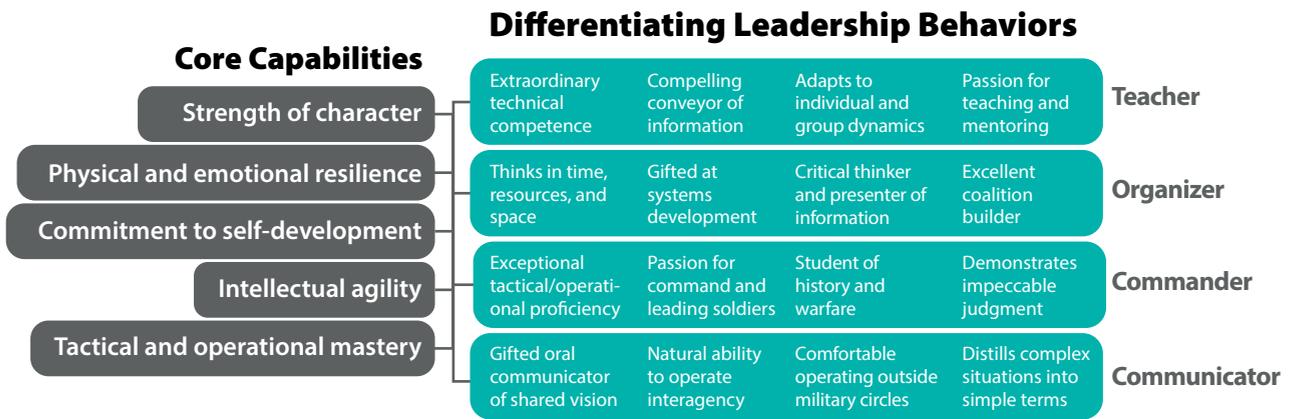
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the human element of conflict is where victory resides. Determining what measures the Army can take to grow our best tactical commanders into strong strategic leaders demands a historical look at our country’s most gifted examples. We argue that there are two underdeveloped components in the strategic development of officers the Army should consider revising if we are to cultivate exceptional strategic talent in the future. First, there is a range of career paths that will provide opportunities to optimize the transition to strategic leadership. Second, there are important adjustments to officer professional education from captain through colonel worthy of enacting. These refinements will enhance the Army’s efforts to build a wellspring of strategic acumen, especially when coupled with exceptional potential. This potential is best identified through differentiating leadership behaviors in outstanding young officers, which will enable leaders to narrow career path choices and broaden the number of strategic opportunities available to our most promising officers (see figure).

Good strategy explains what we are doing and why we are doing it in clear terms. It binds the nation’s political and military objectives with resources made available from Congress, and it gives purpose to our tactical formations. Bad strategy muddles these things to the point where they are of little use.¹ At the heart of good strategy are leaders who possess insight, experience, and a keen understanding of the issues before them.

Most Americans would associate good strategy with our campaign across Europe in World War II and the success we enjoyed in Operation Desert Storm. In each of these conflicts, great strategic leaders were at the helm. Gen. George Marshall and Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower in World War II, and Gen. Colin Powell and Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf Jr. in Desert Storm were leaders of uncommonly strong character, physical and emotional resilience, and tremendous breadth of operational and strategic experience. These leaders were well prepared for the complexity they faced. When we think of the type of strategic leaders who are prepared to lead our military through crises in the future, few would disagree that Marshall, Eisenhower, Schwarzkopf, and Powell are models worthy of emulation.

World War II and Operation Desert Storm had clear political and military objectives, and both included a magnificent articulation of strategic detail. The future operational environment is unlikely to afford that same



(Graphic from authors)

Figure. Strategic Traits Map

clarity, and the continued expansion of social media is likely to foreclose some options for national decision makers. This coming period of inevitable turbulence demands strategic leaders whose intellectual sabers are sharp, but sharpening those sabers requires a course refinement. Powell expressed the difficulty associated with developing our future strategic leaders:

The contemporary problem is complex. We have been at a tactical level for fourteen years with repeated non-broadening tours. Less schooling, less time to think and debate. Less time to read.²

As Powell suggests, the development of strategic leaders begins with an officer’s own personal and enduring commitment to self-development. Understanding complexity only comes with such a commitment to ongoing personal study.

The operational environment is becoming increasingly complicated, while our defense budget is becoming increasingly tight. As the global outlook portends a proliferation of military challenges, the future success of our Army and our nation rests in the hands of our (yet-to-be developed) next generation of strategic leaders.

Importance of Intellectual Agility

In order to respond to the threats we are facing today and remain prepared for those of tomorrow, we must identify and develop extraordinary talent. The best military advice now requires a deep understanding of all instruments of power and an ability to communicate persuasively with civilian leaders. It requires intellectual agility.

The foundational strategic trait of intellectual agility is worth defining for these purposes. An officer who is not confined to what he or she was previously taught but possesses sufficient breadth of experience and a natural ability to adjust quickly and comfortably to circumstances and conditions is intellectually agile. We suggest that such agility begins with tactical and operational mastery. Indeed, it is a prerequisite for higher-level military leadership. Our future strategic leaders must have the ability to transition quickly and seamlessly between tactical concerns and strategic issues.

Ready or not, senior officers are thrust into these roles at a stage in their careers where the cost of failure is unacceptably high. In-depth discussions and due consideration of methods to manage these situations are essential, before intellectual agility becomes a zero-sum game and the cost of getting it wrong includes either American blood and treasure or damage to our national reputation.

The accumulated experiences of colonels and general officers assigned complex missions are the connective tissue in the body of expeditionary contingency operations. Those collective experiences have taught senior leaders over a quarter century or more how to plan and carry out nearly any operation, with an understanding that mission-specific expertise can be surged but organizational acumen cannot. This is poignantly expressed by three West Point professors who directly address the importance of intellectual capital:

As technology and industry dominated the wars of the twentieth century, intellectual human capital will likely decide many of the world’s future security issues. Army officers

are America's "boots on the ground" senior leaders in the middle of rapidly changing environments. Army officers must have the intellectual agility not only to survive, but to thrive in such environments.³

How then should we think about the challenge of identifying and cultivating that sort of intellectual agility in our officers? A close examination of the careers of four legendary strategic leaders provides some insight into the type of developmental experiences and career paths that have the potential to enhance the development of strategic fluency.

Paradigms Worthy of Emulation

An analysis of the early careers of Marshall, Eisenhower, Schwarzkopf, and Powell reveals a set of paradigms for strategic preparation that are worthy of emulation. Each of these leaders garnered remarkable experience from the point of commissioning through their service as colonels. These experiences do not reveal a single

silver bullet to address strategic leader development. However, their distinguished careers clearly illustrate that the combination of diverse experiences and rich educational opportunities develops intellectual agility over time and optimizes otherwise uneven transitions to strategic leadership. We suggest there are no less than four career paths worth considering for refining this transition: teacher, organizer, commander, and communicator.

Gen. George C. Marshall—the teacher. This great strategic leader was afforded the time to read, reflect, and teach throughout the course of his eclectic early career. Marshall's experience as an apprentice to senior leaders gave him a richer perspective as a junior and midgrade

officer. As a lieutenant colonel, he served as an instructor at the Army War College, and then as assistant commandant at Fort Benning's Infantry School, where he demanded students engage in a disciplined and rigorous program of reading history and discussing tactics. These measures, along with structured reflection, we would argue, are foundational to strategic development. Marshall studied history, tactics, and strategy, but he was not burdened by an unbroken line of tactical assignments. Indeed, he was stationed in the Philippines twice before attaining the rank of brigadier general. He served as aide-



Chief of Staff of the United States Army George C. Marshall (left) confers with Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson 21 December 1941 in Washington, D.C. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Army)

de-camp to the former Army chief of staff at the Presidio in San Francisco, Gen. J. Franklin Bell, when Bell commanded the Department of the West. Then, he transitioned with Bell to Governor's Island in New York City to guide the mobilization effort for World War I (while Bell commanded the Department of the East). Marshall was a planner for and then aide to Gen. John Pershing while Pershing was the commander of American Expeditionary Forces, and then he transitioned to the Army staff when

Pershing became Army chief of staff. Leaving his overseas experience, Marshall served as commander of the 15th Infantry Regiment in China for three years prior to moving back to Fort Benning as assistant commandant. The combination of his time abroad, his apprenticeships to senior leaders in times of war, and his responsibilities as an instructor provided him the perspective and experience he needed to lead the Army up to and through World War II.⁴

Strategic career path #1 (teacher). An officer who has a rich educational experience (at graduate school, in a fellowship, or as an instructor) and possesses the ability to adapt quickly and

effectively to individual and group dynamics will excel on this career path. A leader who exhibits a passion for teaching and confidently applies different engagement techniques or information-sharing methods is a good fit here. The opportunity to teach students at the U.S. Military Academy, in one of the captain's career courses, at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, at the U.S. Army War College, or through a civilian fellowship would develop critical skills and broaden an officer's perspective. The time devoted to considering the lessons of history puts an officer in a position to evaluate strategic options based upon similar circumstances from the past. This type of officer must possess extraordinary technical competence and the appropriate temperament to impart lessons in a manner that is compelling. A great teacher very often has great command potential.

Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower—the organizer. As a senior officer, Eisenhower was known for his public patience, organizational acumen, and skill in managing big personalities. He possessed legendary talents for

building coalitions and applying calm and thoughtful judgment under the most exigent circumstances. His early career provides interesting insight into the origin of



Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, with Gen. George C. Marshall, waves to spectators 18 June 1945 at the airport in Washington, D.C. (Photo by Abbie Rowe, U.S. National Parks Service)

this reputation. A year after graduating from West Point and receiving his commission, Eisenhower was stationed at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, where he chose to serve as the head football coach at St. Louis College. This unique experience unquestionably cultivated his organizational skill. While Pershing was directing the battlefield monuments commission in Europe, he asked Eisenhower to develop a guide to the World War I battlefields, which honed Eisenhower's organizational skills further. As an aide to Gen. Fox Connor in the Philippines, and later to then Army Chief of Staff Gen. Douglas MacArthur, Eisenhower refined an ability to work with big personalities. His time with MacArthur included the Bonus March fiasco, which pressed the development of his political acumen, utilizing traits that he would call upon repeatedly while serving as the supreme allied commander.⁵



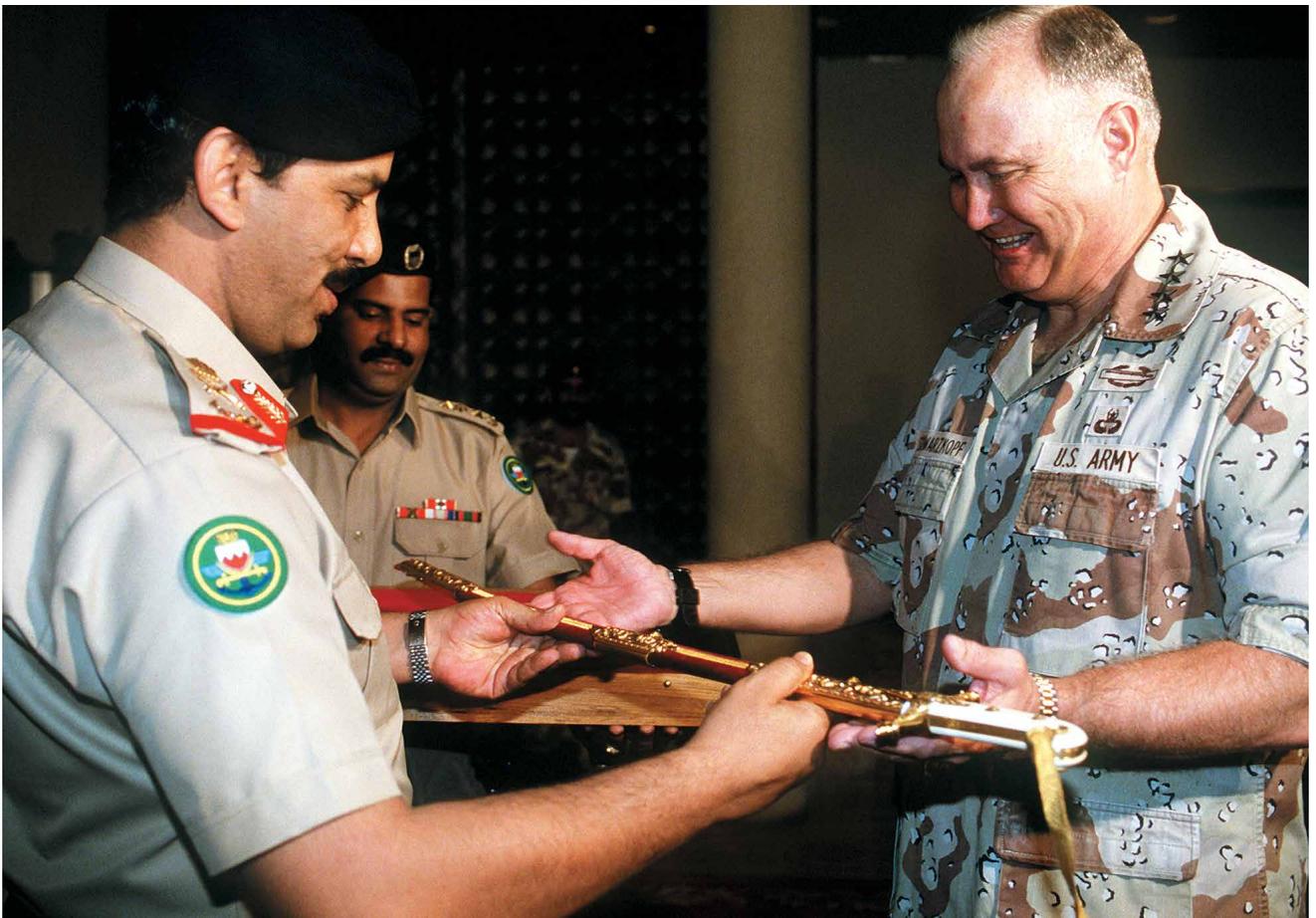
Then, as the executive officer to Assistant Secretary of War George Mosely, and through another challenging year with MacArthur as his assistant military adviser to the Philippine government, Eisenhower solidified his strategic voice.⁶

Strategic career path #2 (organizer). This path includes rich early-career experience as a tactical evaluator and then a follow-on teaching assignment to share those lessons (along the lines of Project Warrior).⁷ It then places those with demonstrated aptitude for service at the general-officer level (demonstrated through exclusively enumerated senior rater reports) to work as a field grade officer (before and after battalion-level command) at either the enterprise level in force management or on the Joint Staff in the same capacity. The Chief of Staff of the Army Strategic Studies Group and senior fellows are another set of appropriate assignments for an officer on this career path. There, he or she would address big problems for the Army chief of staff directly and, in so doing, see the larger Army as a member of a handpicked team. These officers not only are witnesses to the future development of the Army but, just as important, they

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Colin Powell communicates with the Pentagon during Operation Desert Shield. (Photo by Sgt. Jeff Wright, U.S. Army)

have to write about it. Developing this ability to articulate through the written and spoken word is a critical element to the career path of an organizer.

Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf—the commander. Schwarzkopf's global perspective was developed early in life while growing up abroad (Iran, Switzerland, and Germany) from the age of twelve and learning three languages. Schwarzkopf's lifelong interest in the Middle East and his experiences in combat, graduate school, and teaching provided him with a strategic maturity that he would draw upon in the first Gulf War. In 1962, he attended graduate school at the University of Southern California and earned a master of science degree in both mechanical and aerospace engineering. He then taught at West Point for the first year of his three-year obligation, before he cut short the assignment by volunteering to become a military advisor in Vietnam. Schwarzkopf's perspective developed significantly through intense combat



experience as an advisor to a group of one thousand Vietnamese paratroopers, and then again as a battalion commander, where he was wounded four times and awarded the Silver Star. Between combat assignments, he returned to complete his teaching tour at West Point. The time to reflect, write, teach, and hone his views gave him the perspective a commander needs to grow as a strategic leader. As the 24th Infantry Division commander, Schwarzkopf led his soldiers through the limited intervention in Grenada as part of Operation Urgent Fury. His experiences from formative years abroad through division command in a smaller-scale intervention enabled him to gradually develop the strategic agility required to lead a coalition through a major theater war.⁸

Strategic career path #3 (commander). This career path requires tremendous flexibility on the part of the institutional Army and particularly the academic institutions within it. Ideally, an officer on this career path demonstrates tremendous intellectual capacity and critical-thinking ability early on (e.g., selection as a Rhodes Scholar, Olmstead Scholar, White House fellow, or as part of similarly competitive programs), sufficient

Maj. Gen. Shaikh Khalifa bin Ahmed Al-Khalifa, minister of defense of Bahrain, presents Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf, then commander of U.S. Central Command, with a sword during a ceremony at defense forces headquarters 26 March 1991 in recognition of Schwarzkopf's role in the allied success during Operation Desert Storm. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Dean W. Wagner, U.S. Army)

to warrant offering the officer the flexibility to move between teaching and operational assignments at either the lowest or highest levels on joint or combatant command staffs. Such an officer must exhibit exceptional tactical and operational proficiency and demonstrate a clear passion for command and for leading soldiers. The intensity of a staff experience on either the Joint Staff or the National Security Council would provide the type of broad perspective required of a higher-level commander.

For those officers who demonstrate rare gifts in command and coalition-building potential (indicated by exclusive enumeration on evaluation reports from company- to battalion-level commands), latitude should be granted for them to pursue an even more diverse approach or, put differently, to construct a unique set of experiences in between commands—much as

Schwarzkopf was given the latitude to do in the midst of his teaching tour at West Point. Commanders demonstrate the ability to think in space (positioning of talent) and time (sequencing of resources), and they exhibit substantial system-engineering gifts. This career path is appropriate for officers who demonstrate impeccable judgment and show deep interest in becoming students of history and warfare.



Gen. Colin Powell—the communicator. Powell's searing experience in Vietnam shaped his worldview, and one might conclude that his time as a graduate student at George Washington University provided him with much-needed time to reflect and write. He served as a White House fellow at the Office of Management and Budget under future Secretary of Defense Frank Carlucci. This experience challenged him in very different and strategic ways as a young lieutenant colonel. The opportunity to expand and cultivate a strong professional network must have also given him even greater confidence to proceed as a strategic leader. His merging of military and civilian thinking is a skill that cannot be overstated in strategic terms. A persistent challenge for senior military leaders is translating military language into a form that can be understood and appreciated by civilian counterparts. The culmination of honing these skills was on full display with Powell throughout Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, as he provided nearly perfect clarity to both political leaders and to the Nation⁹

Strategic career path #4 (communicator). This path demands direct and regular involvement with the civilian sector. It may be accomplished through a fellowship experience (as a White House or congressional fellow) or

Gen. Colin Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (left), Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf, commander of U.S. Central Command, and Schwarzkopf's wife, Brenda, ride in the New York City welcome home parade 10 June 1991. The parade honored the men and women who served in Desert Storm. (Photo by Master Sgt. Wetterman, U.S. Army)

during a year with industry, in a position where there is high-level government or corporate interaction such as within the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, or on the Joint Staff in a position of policy formulation (e.g., as a Joint Staff intern, military aide, or policy analyst in a very challenging joint-staff billet). This career path is appropriate for officers who are comfortable operating outside military circles and who demonstrate an aptitude to thrive in the interagency environment. This may include experience on the National Security Council or in other venues within the national security community, such as the National Counterterrorism Center, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, the Department of State, or the Department of Defense. In these positions, officers cultivate the ability to translate detailed military concepts and distill complex ideas into simple terms for civilian counterparts. This type of high-level engagement

builds powerful communication skills and strong bridges to civilian leaders. This career path facilitates the development of leaders who are gifted at communicating a shared vision and possess a natural ability to operate effectively within the interagency environment.

Finally, these four career paths provide a more diverse set of options for our commanders and our human resource community to work with as they engage officers on their next and subsequent assignments. This approach adds a level of depth and creativity to the conversations and widens the aperture of how a young officer might consider diversifying career experience. Although there is no silver bullet, there is perhaps a “magazine” of silver bullets that offer the type of broadening paths that may lead more purposefully—and less haphazardly—toward real strategic development.

Finding a Strategic Voice

As an institution, we can develop a stronger stable of strategic leaders by expanding the diversity of select leaders’ experiences. This is not to suggest that every leader would become the recipient of this strategic broadening approach. In fact, we argue that only the top 10 percent of our talent should be carefully managed from the rank of captain and groomed for strategic leadership. Some of our best and brightest may be missed in the early stages. Those late bloomers will self-select into senior ranks through their own personal determination and exceptional performance, just as some who display early potential will not reach the highest levels for personal or professional reasons. However, it is difficult to develop a steady flow of strategic leaders without a more deliberate effort to manage a highly selective population from a much earlier point in their careers.

The measure of an officer’s success in the Army is his or her performance in tactical roles. Yet, beginning to develop a strategic voice as a colonel is too late. It is immeasurably difficult to quickly become confident and conversant in the foreign-policy arena where implications of certain actions are understood, strong arguments are made, and alternatives are deeply considered. Starting the maturation process toward foreign policy comprehension and the development of strategic fluency must begin much earlier in an officer’s career. The major issues surrounding tenets of U.S. foreign policy do not change dramatically from year to year, but understanding nuance and expressing precisely what is changing require time

and regular study. In effect, the effort to guide an officer to develop a worldview and a foreign-policy voice should begin as a senior company-grade officer and continue beyond brigade command, at which point there is an implicit expectation for a colonel to begin contributing to the formulation of military strategy and foreign policy. However, developing strategic fluency can take up to a decade of dedicated study.

Our Army does not have the organizational framework to prepare officers to think more deeply about foreign policy until enrollment at the U.S. Army War College. However, it is not merely an understanding of these disciplines that will best prepare Army leaders for the transition to the strategic level. Instead, it is the broad exposure to different concepts, the chance to apply strategic understanding to unfolding crises over time, the opportunity to debate strategic options, and the interaction with private-sector professionals that give our best officers the opportunity to grow intellectually and think more broadly about the world. Education is certainly a decisive component of this effort, but it is by no means a panacea. What is closest to a panacea is the time that our young military leaders are allotted and carve out to read, reflect, think, write, and clarify their professional thinking on larger and more complex geopolitical issues.

Institutionalizing a New Approach to Strategic Education

The current trajectory for an Army officer without any change to the well-worn career path includes the branch-specific basic course (four months in duration), the advanced course (up to six years later, six months in duration), U.S. Army Command and General Staff College for the top 50 percent of officers in uniform (one academic year in duration), and senior service college for those officers who have excelled in battalion-level command (one academic year in duration). A close examination of this path suggests there are opportunities where strategic thought might be instilled. This is not to suggest that attention should be diverted from the primary tasks in the basic and advanced courses—to develop mastery of tactical operations, hone proficiency, and cultivate a grasp of how to apply those concepts in combat. But, senior-level captains should begin to gain strategic understanding and, upon reaching the field-grade level, they should begin the transition to greater strategic comprehension. Following battalion command, the primary educational

focus is ideally on honing strategic understanding. Put differently, this is where to apply a “crawl, walk, and run” methodology to training and preparing strategic leaders. Captains should be “crawling” at the strategic level, working to understand the fundamentals of strategy and foreign policy. Majors should be “walking” through the type of strategic material that is now most commonly found in our war colleges. Finally, all lieutenant colonels who attend the war college should be “running” through the same curriculum now covered in the Advanced Strategic Art Program, which is currently designed for a smaller and more carefully selected subset of students. By definition, those selected for senior service college are in the top 10 percent of the Army at their rank and therefore should be required to demonstrate strategic fluency before transitioning back into the field. The Advanced Strategic Art Program possesses all the components necessary to cap off strategic fluency. It should no longer serve as an introduction to strategy but instead as a sort of finishing school for all war college students. Adopting these refinements to our professional education would obviate the too often lamented concern that we are selecting tactical masters for brigade command who lack a strong enough understanding of strategic concepts. Instead, what we see is a disproportionate amount of time spent on polishing the stone of tactical and operational excellence.

We suggest that officers who are more broadly educated and experienced are much more capable of

informing strategic discourse. How we manage the educational experience from captain to colonel is worth considering more deeply. The timing of these experiences is just right; now it is a matter of refining precisely what is taught and how that critical time is used. Powell reiterated the importance of these well-placed periods of research and reflection:

Command and General Staff College and the National War College are probably at the top of my list (of strategically developmental assignments). Both took me out of the Army I was in and accelerated me to get ready for the Army that was coming and I might help lead.¹⁰

When the four distinct career paths presented here are coupled with an institutional commitment to generate educational focus on strategy earlier in the career and maintain that focus through the professional life of an officer, then the conditions are set for a strong bench of strategic leaders to emerge. Our great Army can enact all of these reforms, bring officers to the water’s edge of strategic thinking, and perhaps whet substantially more appetites for the study of foreign policy and national security. Still, there must be a zest and passion to continue those pursuits, or the end game of having a strong bench of strategic leaders will remain elusive. As an Army, we must aim to make the area under each promising officer’s “career curve” full of breadth and depth. ■

Notes

Epigraph. Colin Powell, e-mail message to author (Fenzel), 28 December 2015.

1. Tyrell Mayfield, “In Search of Strategy,” Medium website, accessed 23 August 2016, <https://medium.com/the-bridge/in-search-of-strategy-42290b8c5e17#.1xen4zsa3>.

2. Powell, e-mail message to author (Fenzel).

3. Everett S.P. Spain, J.D. Mohundro, and Bernard B. Banks, “Toward a Smarter Military—Intellectual Capital: A Case for Cultural Change,” *Parameters* 45, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 78.

4. Ed Cray, *General of the Army: George C. Marshall, Soldier and Statesman* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1990).

5. The Bonus March involved seventeen thousand U.S. World War I veterans and their families who gathered in Washington, D.C., in the summer of 1932 to demand early redemption of their service certificates from the U.S. Department of the Treasury in the midst of the Great Depression. (The certificates were not scheduled to reach maturity until 1945). Then Army Chief of Staff Gen. Douglas

MacArthur put down the three-month-long protest aggressively, burning their camps and driving them out of the city.

6. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: Soldier and President* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990).

7. Project Warrior is a formal Army program designed to further develop up-and-coming post-company-command captains by funneling them directly into combat training centers to serve as observer-controller-trainers and from there into a captain’s career course to serve as small group instructors. This combination of observing and advising other units with the experience of teaching and sharing those lessons with future company commanders is commonly understood as an effective path toward battalion-level command and tactical mastery.

8. Norman Schwarzkopf, *It Doesn’t Take a Hero: The Autobiography of General H. Norman Schwarzkopf* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990).

9. Colin Powell and Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995).

10. Powell, e-mail message to author (Fenzel).