

Strategic Understanding

Recently at West Point, an actively serving officer/faculty member could be heard stating bluntly, “we don’t want second lieutenant strategic thinkers [in the United States Army].” Our dissertation defines and describes “strategic understanding” as the first attribute for junior strategic landpower leaders, as well as how “mission command” nests within this concept. Lastly, Major Cavanaugh considers three important reasons for cultivating strategic understanding in junior strategic landpower leaders: base practicality, the contemporary warfare context, and professional competence.

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Col. Russell W. Volckmann, an energetic, personable West Pointer and former instructor of the Philippine Army's 11th Infantry Regiment, displayed political skills essential for success. In retrospect, his achievements seem all the more impressive since, like other American officers, he had never been exposed to the techniques and policies of guerrilla warfare.



<http://www.history.army.mil/books/wwii/70-42/70-424.html>

“Strategic Understanding:

The First Attribute for Junior Strategic Landpower Leaders”¹

Why would anyone want junior officers to think beyond the tactical fight? Plato considered this a bad idea when he wrote about society’s “guardian[s]” in *Republic*.² He counseled, “a young person cannot judge what is allegorical and what is literal,” and so he preferred these warriors assume qualities like those of obedient guard dogs.³ Similar thinking has survived into modernity. In 1970, West Point Superintendent Major General Samuel Koster said, “we’re more interested in the ‘doer’ than the ‘thinker’.”⁴ More recently at West Point, an actively serving officer/faculty member could be heard stating bluntly, “we don’t want second lieutenant strategic thinkers [in the United States Army].”

So there are those that would not support the development of strategic thought in junior officers. The argument appears to rest on one tree, with several branches: “keep them focused on tactics, that’s what they do after graduation anyways”; “there isn’t enough time to study both strategy and tactics”; “junior officers only exist to service targets”; “they’re not smart enough to handle the big strategic stuff”; “if they start developing an opinion, they’ll be disobedient.”

This essay concurs that junior strategic landpower leaders ought not prepare to be *strategic planners*; however, society should expect all military officers to hold *some* level of strategic understanding. Eminent strategist Colin Gray concurs, and has written, “Military officers perform the strategic function at every level of command, from a platoon on upwards.”⁵ As such, “strategic competence” ought to be “widespread.”⁶ It could be that the problem is “wicked” in the sense that strategic thinking can be oriented many ways, some clearly inappropriate.⁷

As Major General Richard Chilcoat once wrote, there are multiple roles within the “strategic art.”⁸ Therefore, the question becomes: what role ought junior strategic landpower leaders fill in this paradigm?

This essay defines and describes “strategic understanding” as the first attribute for junior strategic landpower leaders.⁹ Some consider this the exclusive province of “mission command.”¹⁰ However, though the two work together, as a concept strategic understanding is broader and underpins mission command. For example, mission command is inherently constrained by the word, “mission.” Missions are designed to support war efforts, therefore, thinking about how one’s mission fits into the war’s context is not just helpful, but necessary.

War is about much more than the tactical fight. Thus, the first strategic landpower leadership attribute for officers is strategic understanding. Strategic understanding is defined here as *awareness, comprehension, and ability to communicate broad purpose for the use of force and the relationship between tactical action and national policy*. There are three important reasons for cultivating strategic understanding: base practicality, the contemporary warfare context, and professional competence.

A Strategic “North Star” Builds Morale and Enables Adaptability

There are practical reasons to develop strategic understanding in junior strategic landpower leaders. To be direct, strategic understanding builds morale and enables adaptability.¹¹ Much ink has been spilled on the importance of morale in combat. Colin Gray, in his book *The Strategy Bridge*, has described how leaders construct this intangible feeling, which propels landpower troops onward through organized violence:

...for soldiers willingly to risk their lives in ways that exceed minimal or perhaps only token compliance, there is always need for a dose of the ingredients that make for high enough morale. The ingredients can be chemical (vodka, rum, indeed anything alcohol), spiritual (trust, inspiration, self-confidence) or a lack of alternatives (desperation).¹²

To the modern officer, death threats and chemical aids (beyond caffeine) seem unlikely, and desperation is overly pessimistic. Thus, Gray's list leaves one option: inspiration. The cognitive ability to directly link one's tactical actions to a particular military objective and policy goal can be an immense source of morale. To paraphrase Nietzsche: he who has a "why" to fight can bear almost any "how" in war.

Strategic understanding also enables adaptability, which is critical when conflicts inevitably take unexpected turns. 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...¹³

What happens when all is not as expected – when the assigned mission is foiled by a willed enemy? There will be times in the future, as there have been instances in the past, where the provided mission information is wholly inadequate for the military situation in front of the officer.

Consider the experience of Captain Russell Volckmann, who evaded capture on the famed Bataan Peninsula, escaping to the hills and jungles of Luzon. He acknowledged, “In all my training I had never been exposed to the techniques and policies of resistance and guerilla warfare.”¹⁴ Volckmann survived and eventually led a guerilla force of 22,000 to resist the Japanese, titled “US Armed Forces Philippines – Northern Luzon.”¹⁵ Particularly noteworthy was Volckmann’s understanding of the strategic context in which he fought: he knew his Philippine soldiers’ strengths and history, local geographic factors, and considered space and time as the Japanese faced inevitable counterattack.¹⁶ Volckmann’s story ought to be the ideal that junior strategic landpower leaders strive for.

Context: Rise of the YouTube Wars¹⁷ and Battlefield Robots

Steven Metz of the U.S. Army War College recently assessed that today’ conflicts are “transparent” and “live cast,” meaning they are “made available to a global audience in real or near real time.”¹⁸ Popular *New York Times* writer Thomas Friedman concurs, and worth quoting at length,

You don’t want to be in these wars. This is not your grandfather’s battlefield. When the enemy is nested in homes and apartments and no one wears a uniform but everyone has a cellphone camera, you have a real strategic and moral challenge...¹⁹

In these very public wars, the stakes are higher at the tactical level than in the past. Professor George R. Lucas, of the *Stockdale Center for Ethical Leadership* at the U.S. Naval Academy, finds that “never before in history has so much power been placed in the hands of the individual soldier.”²⁰

Specifically, he believes that one soldier can "single-handedly bring down the entire allied war effort" because "violations of *jus in bello* now clearly impact *jus ad bellum*."²¹ The character of today's conflict is such that individual tactical actions receive unprecedented scrutiny. This trend demands strategic thinking at all levels.

Then there is the robot trend. The rise of battlefield robots is busy consuming the U.S. Air Force and will likely move on the landpower domain.²² Consider the recent rollout of the "Pentagon-financed humanoid robot named Atlas."²³ Atlas has been "designed to perform rescue functions in situations where humans cannot survive."²⁴ Junior strategic landpower leaders ought to watch the U.S. Air Force as it faces this incoming wave of drone robotics – because the same changes may be afoot on the ground.

Some are doubtful and likely share Thomas P.M. Barnett's view, that if "there's something truly valuable to contest, a country's manned forces still need to occupy and control it; otherwise, nothing is achieved. Wake me up when drones can set up local government elections in Afghanistan or reconfigure Mali's judicial system."²⁵

Whichever way one comes down on that issue, there is one corresponding certainty: increased capability. Expanding technological development pushes power down to the tactical level in greater amounts than previous junior strategic landpower leaders ever had. With such power comes responsibility; specifically, the ability to wield these weapons in a way that supports and does not set back policy accomplishment. Strategic understanding provides a compass to establish the initial navigation for and conduct of this modern "storm of steel."²⁶

Professional Competence

Army Doctrinal Publication 1: *The Army*, states that like other professions, the Army “certify[ies] individual and organizational competence” with respect to “military expertise.”²⁷ Gratefully, some key leaders in the Profession of Arms already support strategic understanding as a necessary competence for junior strategic landpower leaders. Army Chief of Staff General Raymond Odierno has written that his aim is to develop junior strategic landpower leaders “cognizant of the potential strategic ramifications of their decisions.”²⁸ Moreover, while commanding U.S. Army North, Lieutenant General William Caldwell wrote, “Mission command can only succeed if the next generation of leaders is trained to think strategically.”²⁹ These senior leaders can see that strategic understanding cuts to the heart of the Profession of Arms. They know what “right” ought to look like; what might “wrong” look like?

Consider the following occurrence, reported by Michael Lewis in *Vanity Fair*.³⁰ On March 21, 2011, an Air Force Captain took off as a navigator in an F-15 from a base in Italy “on his first combat mission.”³¹ He was heading for Libya and was eventually shot down over that country. Having had to bail out, Lewis reports that as the Air Force Captain “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 here, to Libya, in the first place. He knew his assignment, his specific mission. But he didn’t know the reason for it.*”³²

This example could have been plucked from any armed service. Here one can find a commissioned officer on a mission in which he will likely take human lives and destroy property on behalf of the American public.

Yet beyond his immediate operational mission he could not answer “why” it was that the American people asked this of him. He was unable to connect his tactical actions to American national policy. Is this a “competent” member of the Profession of Arms?

Recommendations

How does one develop strategic understanding? Recent Australian scholarship found two distinct pathways to military learning, one formal “directly managed by the organization,” and “an informal system that was fostered through strong social networks and driven by the organizational culture.”³³ Thus, this essay will provide both one formal and one informal learning recommendation.

Each soon-to-be junior strategic landpower leader should take a strategic studies course during precommission education (i.e. ROTC program, OCS, or Service Academy). After September 11, 2001, Army Chief of Staff General Eric Shinseki commissioned a report on leadership from the U.S. Army War College that concluded the Army should “*Begin growing strategic leader capability at the precommissioning level.*”³⁴ Ideally, this would be a multidisciplinary strategy course, which synchronizes knowledge on war from many relevant fields and provides a framework for “critical analysis” of war.³⁵ Though history has immense value through learning about what happened, geography often teaches about constraint, anthropology and psychology can describe crucial human factors, and political science informs with important theories – there is an essential leap from these academic departments to finding applicable solutions to employ on the modern battlefield. All domains are necessary; none are individually sufficient. Essentially, war and strategy are too big to fit into one discipline.

Informally, senior strategic landpower leaders should support organic self-study initiatives. One such example comes from this author’s experience in creating the *WarCouncil.org* website.³⁶ The objective for those writing on the *War Council* blog or participating in offshoot discussions is not to arrive at the “right” answers about the use of force – it is to learn to ask the right questions and thereby become “reflective practitioners.”³⁷ Though the unknown future conflict they will face may resemble some elements of previous wars, it will certainly have unique characteristics that will necessitate fresh thinking. This high bar should be less challenging to clear when aided by a sense of strategic understanding: *awareness, comprehension, and ability to communicate broad purpose for the use of force and the relationship between tactical action and national policy.*

Strategic understanding for junior strategic landpower leaders has practical value, is driven by the contemporary warfare context, and required by professional competence. Thus it seems there is no better time to begin this formal and informal learning process than today – success in future strategic landpower contests demands it.³⁸

Disclaimer: This essay is an unofficial expression of opinion; the views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of the US Military Academy, Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or any agency of the US government.

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Endnotes

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² Plato, *Republic*, ed. by Elizabeth Watson Scharffenberger, trans. by Benjamin Jowett (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2004), 60 (2.375a).

³ *Ibid.*, 65 (2.378d).

⁴ Ward Just, *Military Men* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 24.

⁵ Colin S. Gray, "Strategy: Some Notes for a User's Guide," *Infinity Journal* Volume 2, Issue No. 2 (Spring 2012), 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ See "wicked problem," *Wikipedia* (February 10, 2014), http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wicked_problem

⁸ See Richard A. Chilcoat, *Strategic Art: The New Discipline for 21st Century Leaders* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 1995), <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=285>

⁹ Note: This paper adopts the following definitions – *Strategic landpower is the comprehensive employment of landpower to effectively and efficiently achieve desired security conditions in the human environment. The human environment is the sum of physical, psychological, cultural, and social interactions between strategically-relevant populations and operational military forces in a particular war or conflict.*

¹⁰ Headquarters, United States Department of the Army, *ADP 6-0: Mission Command* (May 2012), 1. Note: "mission command" is defined here as "the exercise of authority and direction by the commander using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander's intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders in the conduct of unified land operations."

¹¹ See Matthew Cavanaugh, "Strategic Education for All Junior Officers: Building Morale and Enabling Adaptability," *Infinity Journal* Volume 3, Issue No. 2 (Spring 2013), 23-27, https://www.infinityjournal.com/article/97/Strategic_Education_for_All_Junior_Officers_Building_Morale_and_Enabling_Adaptability/

¹² Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice*, 215.

¹³ Michael Howard and A.J. Wilson, 'Military Science in an Age of Peace', *The RUSI Journal*, 119: 1, 1974, 7.

¹⁴ Russell W. Volckmann, *We Remained: Three Years Behind the Enemy Lines in the Philippines* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1954), 105.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 107-108.

¹⁷ Aryn Baker, "The YouTube War," *Time* (May 27, 2013), <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2143557,00.html>

¹⁸ Steven Metz, "Strategic Landpower Task Force Research Report," (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, September 18, 2013), 4.

¹⁹ See Thomas L. Friedman, "A Wonderful Country," *New York Times* (February 2, 2014).

²⁰ See George R. Lucas, "Inconvenient Truths: Moral Challenges to Combat Leadership in the new Millennium," 20th Annual Joseph Reich, Sr. Memorial Lecture, U.S. Air Force Academy (November 7, 2007).

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² See Matthew Cavanaugh, "The Death of the U.S. Air Force and the Rise of the U.S. Air Machine Force," *War Council* (January 13, 2014), <http://www.warcouncil.org/blog/2014/1/12/the-death-of-the-us-air-force-the-rise-of-the-us-air-machine-force-by-major-matt-cavanaugh>

²³ John Markoff, "Modest Debut of Atlas May Foreshadow Age of 'Robo Sapiens'," *New York Times* (July 11, 2013), http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/12/science/modest-debut-of-atlas-may-foreshadow-age-of-robo-sapiens.html?_r=0

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Thomas P.M. Barnett, "Think Again: The Pentagon," *Foreign Policy* (March 4, 2013), http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/03/04/the_pentagon?page=0,3#sthash.wByL4PI6.dpbs

²⁶ See Ernst Junger, *Storm of Steel* (New York, Penguin Classics, 2004).

²⁷ Headquarters, United States Department of the Army, *ADP 1-0: The Army* (September 17, 2012), 2-4.

²⁸ Ray Odierno, "The Force of Tomorrow," *Foreign Policy* (February 4, 2013), http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/02/04/the_force_of_tomorrow

²⁹ William Caldwell, "Lt. Gen. Caldwell: What the Army needs now, most of all, is to develop leaders," *Foreign Policy: The Best Defense* (April 18, 2013), http://ricks.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/04/18/lt_gen_caldwell_what_the_army_needs_now_most_of_all_is_to_develop_leaders

³⁰ Michael Lewis, "Obama's Way," *Vanity Fair* (October 2012), <http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/2012/10/michael-lewis-profile-barack-obama>

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid. [Note: Author added italics. MLC]

³³ See Paddy O'Toole and Steven Talbot, "Fighting for Knowledge: Developing Learning Systems in the Australian Army," *Armed Forces & Society* 37(1) (2011).

³⁴ Leonard Wong et al., "Strategic Leadership Competencies" (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, September, 2003), 11, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=382> [Italics original].

³⁵ This essay recommends Carl von Clausewitz's "critical analysis." See Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 156-169. See also Jon Tetsuro Sumida, *Decoding Clausewitz: A New Approach to On War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 195-196.

³⁶ See WarCouncil.org.

³⁷ See Donald A. Schon, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* New York: Basic Books, 1983.

³⁸ The final reason for developing strategic understanding in junior strategic landpower leaders: to build a "bench" from which to select future strategists. As General John Galvin once wrote, "We can never predict who will be in the key positions of strategy formulation and execution in a time of crisis, and we cannot expect to be able to create 'instant military strategists' in time of war. In order to have the ability to expand, we need a structure...in which at any one time there are officers at all levels experiencing a maturation of their talents as strategists. We need young strategists because we need senior strategists, and we need a lot because when the time comes we need enough." John R. Galvin, "What's the Matter with Being a Strategist?" *Parameters*, 19 (March 1989), 84.