

# THE SCHOOL OF ADVANCED MILITARY STUDIES:

## An Accident of HISTORY

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ARISTOTLE AND HIS PUPIL, ALEXANDER

**T**HE BEGINNINGS OF the School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) are more than 25 years old now. Some might find it incredible that it is so young, but it's also incredible, in retrospect, that we have a SAMS at all. It certainly was not an inevitable development. Revisiting why there was a beginning at all for SAMS is an appropriate way to mark the school's 25th anniversary. What was intended,

how the key ideas that give SAMS its distinct character took shape, what the key hurdles were, and what conditions are necessary for its survival for another quarter century are topics deserving professional notice.

### The Need for Advanced Military Study

The SAMS curriculum owes its beginnings to two epiphanies among the Army's senior leadership:

- Realization that the military art of our time was more intellectually demanding than we had been prepared to accept.
- Recognition of the need to muster humility and admit that officers needed to be better educated than they were at the time.

This dawning occurred when the Army was actively questioning its core doctrine. In 1978 General Bernard W. Rogers, the then-Chief of Staff of the Army, had questioned the entire officer education system and launched a top-down look called the "Review of Education and Training for Officers" (RETO). The Army was also reflecting on how it had done in Vietnam, and was looking forward to the present and foreseeable future. I was involved in both of these efforts and was one of the most junior officers in the RETO study group—just after my graduation from the Command and General Staff College (CGSC). By 1980, I found myself at the center of the effort to revise how the Army should think about waging war with the Soviet Union.

This effort was the second try at a post-Vietnam updating of Field Manual (FM) 100-5, *Operations* (what now is FM 3-0). I had studied hard at CGSC and had afterward served successfully as a battalion XO, brigade S-3, division deputy G-3, and battalion commander, and I still felt inadequate to the task. I noticed that others around me, even senior-officer War College

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graduates, were not any better equipped to think critically and creatively about military art. We had learned the military doctrine of the day, but not how to usefully judge, question, and revise it. Army officers (CGSC and War College graduates alike) had a short historical memory of the evolution of military methods, were thus stuck in the present, and were therefore unable to envisage change. Some of us could quote Sun Tzu and Clausewitz, but we did not really understand them.

Lieutenant General William Richardson, the CGSC commandant of that time, shared this frustration. In the fall of 1980, he ordered the directors of CGSC to find ways to “improve the tactical judgment” of CGSC graduates. They came forward with a number of remedies. Their suggested improvements, while helpful, were simply inadequate to bridge the chasm between what was and what needed to be. General Richardson had addressed the right problem, but the Army needed a genuine paradigm shift to solve it.

General Richardson’s committee of CGSC directors had not been receptive to my ideas about needed curriculum changes. In my view, they were making adjustments within the conventional framework, but needed to step outside it. I developed detailed ideas for developing curriculum and designing a school dedicated to filling the need, but I held off advancing my ideas and waited for an opportunity to brief General Richardson alone. Having worked with him closely on the Army doctrine that eventually came to be called “AirLand Battle,” I knew he would give me a fair hearing. In late spring of 1981 General Richardson invited me to accompany him on a 21-day trip to China to visit Chinese military officer educational institutions

ranging from pre-commissioning to general officer schools. This trip was an historic occasion, the first peaceful military-to-military exchange between Red China’s People’s Liberation Army and the American military. On a Yangtze River cruise, a short break between school visits, I finally had an opportunity to discuss my ideas. I suggested that the Army needed to select a small portion of each CGSC class and put them through a ten-month graduate degree level education program in how to think about military art.



Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831)

## Original Intentions

General Richardson’s earlier request for a CGSC evaluation and the subsequent determination of a need for advanced military education suggested a course of instruction covering:

- The logic underlying military doctrine.
- How to judge doctrine critically.
- How to think creatively about doctrine and military art.

SAMS *was not* intended to be a course of indoctrination for planning specialists. Rather, it was intended as a course for gener-

alists who would lead the Army in every way, especially intellectually. It *was not* intended to be a course for operational level staffs, but to educate selected officers in the enduring principles applicable at all levels of conflict. An underlying assumption was that, prior to the course, students would already be thoroughly indoctrinated by CGSC in current methods of operations at all levels. SAMS was thus intended to teach the logic underlying current doctrine and how it evolved and would further evolve, as missions, technology, and other conditions changed.

When General Richardson asked the CGSC faculty to improve tactical judgment, I believed he meant tactics *and* operational art. In fact, the evolution of tactical method was at the heart of post-Vietnam transformation. We saw rapid technological change ahead, and we believed the Army needed a core of officers who could evolve tactical methods as rapidly as the technology permitted. A few years after SAMS was formed, the course was changed to emphasize the “operational level” of the military art.

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This decision was unfortunate in my view. The Army could have adapted to the “digital age” much more rapidly had the broader theoretical focus of the early course been retained. Institutionally, it might also have realized sooner what platoons, companies, and battalions on the ground should do to bring peace to a traumatized people—the simple but inescapable logic of “clear, hold, and build” that finally evolved in Iraq.

I think the reason for the change away from tactics occurred because some senior leaders did not understand the difference between indoctrination and an immersive education. But there was also a recognized need to address operations at division level and above. The Army had not thought in terms of large-scale maneuver since World War II, and the major change in doctrine introduced in 1982 centered on division- and corps-level maneuver. Although CGSC walked students through planning exercises for operations at that level, the senior officers of the Army in 1982 had been company grade officers during the brief maneuvering periods of the Korean War. Therefore there were no officers anywhere in the Army with any experience (real, simulated, or virtual) in planning or executing operations of extended large-scale maneuver. Most division- and above field exercises of the 1970s and early 1980s consisted of a few days of battalion- and brigade-level maneuver ending with “nuclear release.”

Another impetus to getting educated in division- and corps-level maneuver was a product of the doctrinal re-think of the time. We realized that, given the strategic nuclear stand-off of “mutual assured destruction,” and the political costs of being first to push the button, political authorities might wait until they saw the inevitability of defeat, and, if the inevitable was delayed long enough, diplomacy might re-freeze the action. This placed an imperative on winning the first and subsequent battles, thereby causing conventional attacks to fail and Soviet offensive will to crumble. Somewhere, somehow, officers needed to be able to conceive of extended operations at these levels.

In 1981 there was no Army or Joint school curriculum that addressed the military art of campaigning in adequate depth. By the fall of 1985, I departed Fort Leavenworth for brigade command having produced two classes who could. Nearly one half of these students commanded brigades, and about one third became general officers.

## Shaping SAMS's Distinct Character

My discussion with General Richardson while in China lasted no more than an hour. Within that space key ideas took shape that gave SAMS its distinct character, one that has persisted. Instruction at the school was to be a “journey of learning,” from company through joint task-force level. This concept stemmed from a shared belief that sound “operational art” rests on a foundational understanding of tactical dynamics—a theoretical understanding of how combined arms achieve objectives. The learning journey was to address conflict not only with states, but also with insurgents. The subject matter covered was to be *integrated* by a “role-model” faculty with a high faculty-to-student ratio. The School would rely on three basic modes of learning: Socratic-method seminar discussions of historical case studies and applicable military theory; modern case studies framed, planned, and executed using appropriate simulations and expert coaching; and in-the-field participation on division- and corps-level



The Death of Socrates (Jacques-Louis David, 1787)

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planning staffs in real-world exercises in Europe and Korea.

By the end of our discussion, the general had decided that the next year would be spent laying the groundwork for the school. He was being reassigned to serve as the Army's Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations under his West Point classmate General Edward C. "Shy" Meyer, something he revealed during the discussion. General Richardson would work toward establishing the school from his end in the Pentagon, and I was to spend my next year, not at Carlisle studying the War College Curriculum, as was the Army's plan, but in a curriculum of my own devoted to researching and designing a school for advanced military studies. I was to develop its curriculum and take the necessary steps to establish it at Fort Leavenworth. Under a program called the "Army Research Associate Program" I would concurrently earn my Army War College diploma and visit General Richardson monthly to report my progress.

### **Key Hurdles**

There were four key hurdles at the beginning. The first was arguing the benefits of devoting the Army's mid-career talent pool to time spent in the "school house" rather than the "field." The argument we settled on was that a class of students could be graduated for the price of one M-1 Abrams tank and that the knowledge gained and put to work in combat would recoup that cost many times over. Moreover, the time in school would not come at the expense of time in field assignments. It would come at the expense of other-than-field duty time. Students could have both field experience and another year of education. We further argued that their greater success would actually lead to longer average careers. I think this argument still holds true given the success of the school's graduates.

Another hurdle to overcome was the Army's sensitivity to creating a "general staff" or "elite" track to a general's stars. It was believed, for

instance, that what counted toward advancement was not military education, but the imprint of the selection. We sidestepped this issue by not using a board selection process, and having students "self select" for candidacy while at CGSC and by having the faculty screen candidates for suitability.

A third hurdle was building a case-study-based curriculum and finding suitable faculty in less than a year. The first part was overcome through hard work, long hours, and the talents of Lieutenant Colonels Hal Winton and Doug Johnson, both Ph.D.s in history from Ivy League schools. They were already serving on the Fort Leavenworth faculty and became part of the development team. Finding suitable SAMS faculty was too difficult to accomplish using the normal officer assignment process. The "Advanced Operational Art Studies Fellowship" program was developed (as, at first, an echo of what I had done to earn my War College degree) to prepare instructors to lead a SAMS seminar of majors. This fellowship program was eventually extended from one to two years in length and ultimately provided eight "fellows" by the program's third year. It has worked fairly well since.

A fourth hurdle was ensuring that the Army placed the product of its school where learning would not only be used but would continue. The solution was to assign all graduates to field commands that would commit to giving them "branch qualifying" positions for the rank of major, while they continued their education in operations by serving on the planning staffs of a division or corps. The first position insured that the extra year at Fort Leavenworth did not jeopardize chances of promotion due to lack of battalion-level experience. The second crystallized theoretical knowledge and exposed the former student to general officers who were the Army's premier tacticians. General Meyer and subsequent chiefs of staff expressed this desire in personal letters to gaining division and corps commanders. This disciplined use of a valuable new asset has been the real key to the success of SAMS.

Of the senior officers who followed General Richardson as successive commandants and deputy commandants at Fort Leavenworth, Generals Merritt, Saint, Vuono, and Palmer became the biggest supporters and shapers of SAMS while I was director. Most of all, SAMS was, and is, shaped by its

excellent faculty and fellows. Of the faculty I hired, only Robert Epstein, a noted historian of military campaigning and the operational art, remains.

## Conditions for Survival

The School for Advanced Military Studies will be around for another 25 years if it remains true to its roots. The challenges it was set up to deal with have become more difficult in our rapidly changing world, one where mission novelty and uncertainty are the norm. Military art remains as immensely challenging as it always has been—both intellectually and physically. Knowledge of its principles today, as always, saves lives and treasure. The better military art is understood, the faster victory is gained. Understanding the art entails the competence to judge and revise doctrine, and that ability will not be in demand if senior Army professionals decide it is more important to indoctrinate than to educate. At least a few of their successors must be steeped enough in operational theory to be aware of the stultifying effects of doctrinaire groupthink. The Army is full of doctrinaire officers because it grows them that way—it values “in the box” thinking among junior leaders. The Army rewards officers for their acuity in adherence to doctrine. However, our military must have a core of leaders whose imaginations have transcended this mind-set.

There will always be a need for imagination, creativity, and a broad set of skills tailored for decision making in a wide range of imaginable conditions—doctrine cannot address these needs. If SAMS indoctrinates in the groupthink of the latest Quarterly Defense Review, an exercise driven as much by interest groups and programmatic compromises as by reasoned analysis, it will fail in its intended mission. If the latest Army and Joint doctrinal concepts—inertial products of the lowest common denominator of intellectual experience—become the SAMS pedagogical standard, the program will fail to inculcate needed ability to judge and to question. It will ultimately fail to achieve its original aim of creative leadership and institutional critique.

The SAMS faculty has to use the valuable ten months afforded to it for a very productive “journey of learning,” judged from the long term rather than the short. The difference between a civilian graduate

school and a professional one is that in the civilian model, the customer is the student, and in the professional model, the customer is the profession. In both cases, the customer chooses the path of the journey. The enlightened profession indoctrinates for the short-term but educates for the long.

During the last years of the Cold War, the journey at SAMS included counterinsurgency case studies and theory, even though the next use for that knowledge was not on the horizon. Thinking similarly, SAMS should now devote a significant portion of the learning journey to large-scale, so-called “conventional” operations against states, as such conflicts may well appear in contemporary form. (They will not be “traditional” in any sense.) For instance, the basic theory for using military force to deter, attack, defend, and pacify on any scale will not change, but technology, global conditions, and local situations will shape contemporary methods. Re-fighting historical battles and campaigns in a new and modern form is educational. Applying enduring theory under modern conditions to invent new methods and test soundness is educational. SAMS thus needs to recalibrate itself upon the logical, theoretical foundation of operational art by—

- Understanding the dynamics of soldiers, evolving weapons, and ever-adapting forms of enemies.
- Preparing to operate within a mosaic of peoples.
- Using the most modern ways of communicating and interacting.

This complexity entangles rote processes found in unavoidably stale doctrine and makes the need for critical and creative thinking ever immediate. One cannot think either critically or creatively without deeply understanding the subject matter in need of such thought. Academic disciplines that do not advance the understanding of military art, while valuable, are better taught elsewhere. SAMS has to focus on what brings victory.

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The beginnings of SAMS may have been accidental, but its endings are predictable. SAMS will continue as long as senior Army professionals value critical and creative thinking, and SAMS delivers that product. Any accountant can tabulate the cost of an enterprise, and that cost will always remain an issue, but the real value of something is not found in its numbers. Operations Just Cause and Desert Storm demonstrated the value of SAMS to the Army; results were directly traceable to graduates who had achieved tangible results. We have not yet seen that connection with Iraq and Afghanistan—the names of those credited with finding the way to success in Iraq cannot be found in the rosters of former SAMS students. Perhaps the SAMS curriculum was too weak in pertinent areas. When SAMS fails to deliver critical



**Genghis Khan (c. 1162–1227)**  
A mind untrammelled by doctrine.

and creative thinkers, the talent-pool's attention will be drawn by other professional employments. The Army will not yield up its top talent for a second year of schooling at Fort Leavenworth if it has more pressing work for them elsewhere. The SAMS graduates, faculty members, and the Army that nurtured it are all broadly deserving of congratulations. But this is no time for complacency. SAMS graduates must be the school's most vigilant and ardent critics. **MR**

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