The Strategic Planning "Problem"

Maj. Gen. Gordon B. "Skip" Davis Jr., U.S. Army;
Brig. Gen. Thomas C. Graves, U.S. Army; and
Col. Christopher N. Prigge, U.S. Army

Maj. Gen. Gordon B. "Skip" Davis Jr. is the deputy chief of staff, Operations and Intelligence, Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers, Europe. He holds an M.S. in strategic studies as well as a masters in business and international relations obtained in France, where he studied as an Olmsted Scholar.

Brig. Gen. Tom Graves is the executive officer to the Supreme Allied Commander Europe. His most recent assignment prior to arriving at NATO was the director of the School of Advanced Military Studies, Leavenworth, Kan. He is a graduate of the United States Military Academy (USMA) and holds an M.S. in educational technology from McNeese State University.

Col. Chris Prigge is the director of the Advanced Strategic Planning and Policy Program at the School of Advanced Military Studies. Col. Prigge is a graduate of USMA, earned an M.S. from the School of Advanced Warfighting and the School of Advanced Military Studies, and holds a Ph.D. from Harvard University.

PHOTO: A U.S. Marine watches a statue of Saddam Hussein being toppled in Firdaus Square, in downtown Bagdhad, 9 April 2003. (AP Photo/Jerome Delay, File)

OVER THE PAST decade, the U.S. Army has struggled with a host of complex problems in pursuing its strategic military objectives in Afghanistan and Iraq. Problems like ethnic and tribal politics, lack of suitable governance at many levels, collapse of the rule of law, diverse cultural and religious norms, radicalization and extremist groups, economic challenges, illegal drug trade, external state interference, and cross-border sanctuaries have confronted planners in both theaters. We can expect these problems and others to be part of the contextual dynamics of future campaigns. Consequently, a significant question has emerged for the Army: How do we prepare officers with the knowledge, skills, and experience to develop strategic plans to address complex problems for which solutions are not easily identifiable?

The Army's answer to this question initially focused on the procedures and processes that planners use to understand and develop solutions to problems. The Army relies heavily on the Military Decision Making Process (MDMP), which is tremendously useful at solving complicated, but *familiar* operational and tactical problems. The process is ideally suited to rapidly develop effective courses of action for problems that can be framed using existing doctrine. However, despite MDMP's tremendous value, the process does not force commanders and their staffs to ask the appropriate questions necessary to grapple with complex but *unfamiliar* problems. As became clear in Iraq and Afghanistan, campaign strategies and many of the operational challenges required a broader understanding of the environment, an understanding of the interplay of nonmilitary elements, an ability to cooperate with a wide range of intergovernmental and multinational partners, and in many cases a new lexicon to describe the environment. As Gen. Martin Dempsey explained in 2010, "In Iraq and in

Afghanistan we found that the traditional planning processes were inadequate for the complexity of the operational environment."[1]

To address this inadequacy, the Army turned to Design as a companion piece to MDMP to help planners address the issues associated with complex and unfamiliar problems. Design, originally adopted from the Israeli theory of Systemic Operational Design, required practitioners spend considerable time defining the environment and framing the problem before beginning to identify a solution.[2] Design emphasized the need for critical and creative thinking and iterative solution processes to understand clearly the depth of the problem that operational planners encountered on the ground. The vehicle for introducing Design and similar critical thinking skills to the Army was the school most identified with planning processes and operational planners: The School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) at Fort Leavenworth, Kan. The school embraced this change wholeheartedly and revamped its curriculum to include the use of Design and MDMP as companion parts of a coherent planning process. It acknowledged that both can play an important role in developing operational and tactical plans, depending on the situation.[3] Design is now a standard part of the curriculum for majors in the Command and General Staff Officers Course and for battalion and brigade command-selects in the School for Command Preparation Tactical Commander's Development Program.

The Yingling Argument

However, the introduction of the Army Design Methodology and the inclusion of Design into professional military education and other leader development forums did not address a more fundamental problem: the need for leaders who could think and operate in the realm of strategy. Thus, concurrent with the debate on the need for a better planning process, another debate emerged on the need for further education of our officer corps to develop better collaboration, communication, and influence skills at the strategic level and critical and creative thinking skills in general. The public face of this debate was provided by Lt. Col. Paul Yingling who

(U.S. Army)

War Plans Division, March 1942. Left to right: Col. St. Clair Streett; Gen. Eisenhower, chief; Col. A. S. Nevins; Brig. Gen. R.W. Crawford; Col. C.A. Russell; and Col. H. A. Barber, Jr.

posited in an article in the *Armed Forces Journal* that the Army did not value intellectual creativity in its senior leaders. In his article, he broadly attacked the officer professional development path as a "system that . . . does little to reward creativity and moral courage" in its senior leaders.[4]

While possibly overstating the problem, Yingling's assertion is worth further investigation. A review of the resumes of all serving active duty general officers, conducted in 2007 (the same year that Yingling published his article), showed that roughly 70 percent of the general officers held advanced degrees from civilian institutions, and almost half of those officers held master's degrees from both civilian and military institutions (such as the National War College, Army War College, SAMS, etc.).[5] On its face, this would seem to refute Yingling's assertion.

However, upon closer inspection there may be something to what Yingling says. It is important to note that many of the general officers who earned advanced degrees did so on their own time and not as the result of a focused effort by the Army to develop their intellectual capacity. Many of them earned their degrees at night or during weekends while performing some other duty—such as attending the Command and General Staff College. Also notable, despite the proliferation of master's degrees, only six of the 300 active-serving general officers possessed degrees at the doctoral level. Four of the six officers earned their doctorate in conjunction with a tour of duty as an instructor at the United States Military Academy (USMA).

This lack of focused education has more to do with career timelines and requirements than with a lack of institutional interest in intellectual development. Given the requirements of Goldwater-Nichols and joint assignments, key developmental jobs, positions in the institutional Army, and promotion timelines tied to a 30-year career, there is little room for advanced civil schooling. Many of the opportunities, such as advanced degrees for foreign area officers or other functional area specialties, require an officer to forgo the opportunities for advancement in his or her operational branch. For officers in operational tracks, opportunities exist for advanced degrees, but they have traditionally been associated with a utilization tour as an instructor at USMA or in another institutional assignment. These utilization tours can continue up to three years, potentially sacrificing important operational experience that officers require for successful battalion command—a key step to future service as a senior leader. In many cases, those who pursue more traditional assignments focused on developing operational expertise have an advantage over their peers who did not. Pursuing a doctoral-level degree with the requisite time to develop and write a doctoral dissertation is usually detrimental to an officer's career in the operational Army. In the case of the six general officers who earned Ph.D.s noted above, all of them wrote their dissertations on their own time—a remarkable achievement given the time required to complete a doctoral dissertation satisfactorily.[6]

In Search of a Solution

In December 2011, in Gen. Odierno's first trip to Fort Leavenworth as the Army's 37th chief of staff, he asked Lt. Gen. David Perkins, commanding general of the Combined Arms Center, to develop a concept that would satisfy a critical capability gap—one that Odierno had witnessed during several years of leading multinational forces in Iraq. Odierno explained that while he had many talented officers and advisors throughout his tours, they generally lacked the academic depth and strategic planning experience to develop viable strategic plans in conjunction with civilian and military officials from the United States and other partner nations. He wanted a concept for a systematic way to prepare planners capable of developing grand strategic and theater plan0s and capable of shaping the strategic debate with influential thinkers outside the military.

The Advanced Strategic Planning and Policy Program

In an effort to address these issues, SAMS developed the Advanced Strategic Planning and Policy Program (ASP3). This program sends selected field grade officers at the ranks of senior major through senior lieutenant colonel to highly respected doctoral programs throughout the nation in order to use the new skills and knowledge during operational assignments. While enrolled, the officers complete their studies toward a doctorate, augmented with professional education that provides the skills

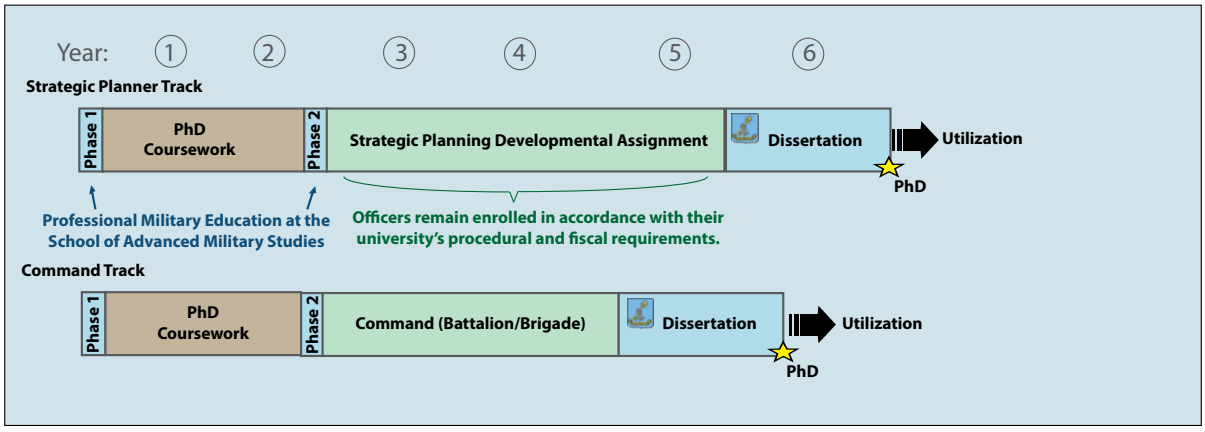

Figure
The Timeline of ASP3

strategic planners and leaders require to operate at the highest levels. The success of ASP3 involves three key components:

- Selecting the right officer.
- Providing the right education.
- Providing the right experience through a managed process of strategic level assignments.

In each of these elements, experience and education provide a balanced approach to creating the end product: an officer "who can think creatively, plan strategically, and communicate with senior leaders in all branches of government and academia."[7] Inherently included in this definition is the ability for those senior leaders to operate within the joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational environment as well as collaborate with other important players including foreign civilian and military leaders, intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations, and myriad elements that make up the modern battlefield.

The first component, selecting the right officer, requires a holistic approach that includes evaluating the officer's ability to complete a doctorate, ensuring the officer has the experience and preparation to serve at the strategic level, and coordinating with career managers as well as senior leaders. Pursuing a doctorate involves a substantial amount of individual study and effort, and the officer must have a strong desire to complete the requirements. One indicator of an officer's ability to undergo a doctoral program is successful completion of a rigorous post-graduate degree that includes a significant writing requirement in the form of a thesis or monograph. The officer's demonstrated commitment to a lengthy research project gives a strong indication that the officer will be able to complete a doctoral dissertation in the future. Likewise, publishing in academic journals also serves to identify those who have the wherewithal to complete a doctorate. Officers with a strong performance in operational and planning assignments have potential to serve successfully as strategic planners, and a broad range of assignments help contribute to their future success. Additionally, support from senior leaders in the form of letters of recommendation helps identify the right officers to complete this demanding program. Ideally, the individual would have served 12-20 years in the Army with experience in tactical and operational units, have experience as an operational planner, and have a strong academic background. The experience as an operational planner is critical to providing context for the coursework and educational experience.

Having selected the best officers, providing the appropriate civilian and professional education is key. For civilian education, this involves finding the university and degree program that can satisfy an officer's professional and academic interests and contribute to his or her ability to plan, collaborate, and communicate at the strategic level. Study in a

liberal arts field is most relevant for establishing the broad base of knowledge and building the critical and creative thinking skills that effective strategic planners require. Degrees in economics, international relations, political science, history, strategic studies, security studies, and others that provide a window into a complex and diverse world are ideally suited for strategic planning.

Augmenting the university education with professional coursework that addresses military problems at the strategic level is important to ensure that the development does not become a purely academic exercise. Most full-time doctoral programs involve two years of coursework conducted during the fall and spring semesters, which leaves the summers free for other academic and developmental opportunities. To ensure the advanced civil schooling serves a practical military purpose, ASP3 will use the summer to deliver coursework and practical exercises focused on strategic history, theory, systems, issues, and planning.

Finally, the third component, the holistic management of an ASP3 officer's career, will allow the Army and nation to maximize the benefit of the program. Within the context of a 20- to 30-year career, there are conditions that must be satisfied to keep officers competitive for promotion among their peers. Removing an officer from operational assignments for more than two years at a time places the officer at risk when compared to those who remain in operational assignments. Juxtaposing this with the fact that most liberal arts Ph.D. candidates are enrolled in graduate school from 4 to 10 years, there is a fundamental tension between the constraints of the officer personnel management system and the academic requirements of a typical doctoral program. This requires some creative management to allow officers to complete the academic requirements and at the same time remain competitive for career advancement.

Unlike other Army-sponsored doctoral programs, this civilian education is designed to be applied practically in an operational environment.[8] The critical step is completing the Ph.D. coursework within two years. Officers will then apply their coursework as strategic planners or commanders in a subsequent "developmental tour" to gain experience. For candidates in the program, this tour involves assignments at a combatant command or other strategic headquarters, but does not preclude battalion and brigade command for those selected. With this paradigm, it is possible for officers in ASP3 to complete the Ph.D. coursework, but remain competitive among their peers. Once the development tour is complete, students will take an additional year to focus on completing their dissertations and earning their Ph.D. Managed correctly, the assignment as a strategic planner should provide opportunities to advance the thinking, research, and logic to develop the dissertation argument. Once awarded the Ph.D., the officer will be well-suited to address grand strategic problems in further utilization tours as a senior leader for our Army and nation. The ASP3, although designed for Army officers, will in effect serve the greater joint force. Most strategic planning positions for ASP3 officers will be in joint headquarters (e.g., combatant commands, joint staff, and Department of Defense) rather than in Headquarters, Department of the Army.

The Role of a Coordinating Agency

To ensure the education does not fail in achieving its goals to produce strategic planners for the military, charging a coordinating agency in managing the educational process and assisting in the career management of the officer is essential. This agency has a critical role in selecting the right officer, providing the necessary education, and helping to manage the career assignments. It will guide the selection of doctoral programs and assist officers during the application process. It will also be responsible for developing and delivering the professional instruction that will augment the civilian education. This instruction will not only focus on the practical aspects of strategic planning, but also allow officers to network with others in the program and to share useful ideas gained from the different academic fields and schools.

After the initial assignment, the same coordinating agency will assist officers with the research and drafting of the doctoral dissertation. Where the writing physically occurs is not as important as providing the resources, time, and mentorship needed to complete the requirement. Throughout the writing process, the coordinating agency can bring officers together on an occasional basis to provide feedback from peers and

instructors who have a Ph.D. The combination of a writing-syndicate atmosphere and critical feedback will have a catalytic effect, something that most civilian doctoral programs do not provide.

Finally, with a low number of students per year, the agency will assist in managing the officer's career through interfacing with Human Resources Command, senior leaders, and assignment officers. This effort will continue to develop the skills needed for strategic planners while still allowing the officer to remain competitive in the operational Army. For example, the student who desires to write about homeland security for his dissertation is ideally suited for a developmental assignment at U.S. Northern Command. Because the coordinating agency has visibility on these nuanced requirements, it can inform the assignment officer, ensuring that the Army and the joint community gain the most from the officer's education.

The coordinating agency must embed with the Army's traditional professional military educational institutions. Currently, this coordinating agency exists within SAMS. With the current small number of students, SAMS is well suited to manage the tasks above. As the program grows and matures it may prove prudent to relook this relationship. Other options could include creating a new school of its own or relocating the coordinating responsibility to another institution. However, as the coordination of the program evolves in the future, the requirement for managing and mentoring the students will continue to be important for their success—from the time they begin their education to the time they finish their career.

Why a Ph.D.?

Developing adept strategic planners is not simply the result of advanced degrees or professional education but includes a holistic career path that combines experience with education. For operational planners, the education requirement is usually satisfied through the Command and General Staff College, SAMS, and a developmental tour as a division or corps planner. However, a much broader education, including interaction with those outside the military, is required for successful strategic planning. A strategic planner must understand the different aspects and perspectives on defense and foreign affairs and their historical development beyond what a master's program can generally deliver. For example, for strategic planners at a NATO headquarters to be successful, not only must they understand military capabilities and capacities but also they must possess a broad knowledge of economics, governmental structures, historical context of traditional European political and territorial issues, and other pertinent strategic factors. Simply stated, a NATO planner who does not account for the current economic and political pressures within Greece, Italy, Ireland, Spain, and the eurozone will be unable to develop feasible strategic options for his or her commander. Sufficient education in these areas is not possible within the current content and structure of master's programs in professional military education. It requires engaging civilian academic institutions with the requisite knowledge and expertise and building time in an officer's career to attend schools to gain these broader skills. However, does that education require a Ph.D.?

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The fundamental reason for pursuing a doctorate of philosophy is to gain the skills, experience, and education required to "create new knowledge."[9] In academia, delivering this knowledge in the form of a published article, book, or doctoral dissertation is the norm. Although the coursework in a doctoral program seeks to establish a broad base of knowledge in an academic discipline like international relations, the dissertation focuses very narrowly on a specific topic on which the Ph.D. candidate becomes a recognized expert. Upon earning the degree, Ph.D.s enter academia and continue research on their specific area of expertise, passing on their knowledge to the next generation of scholars and encouraging further research. At its most basic level, a traditional Ph.D.

(U.S. Army, Sgt. Tim Ortez)

Retired U.S. Army Gen. Jack Keane, right, walks along the streets with Dr. Frederick Kagan, left, and Dr. Kimberly Kagan, wearing brown hat, in the Al Jubaylah district of Basra, Iraq, July 10, 2008. All three were members of the American Enterprise Institute's Iraq Planning Group, which released "Choosing Victory: A Plan for Success in Iraq" in January 2007.

program is focused on producing a future professor or researcher—not someone who is going to apply the education practically.

However, despite a university's focus on academia, there is a practical role for officers with a Ph.D. When the military found itself struggling for answers in Iraq and Afghanistan, it reached out to a number of recognized experts for assistance, most of whom had a Ph.D. Likewise, many of those who have held civilian leadership positions within the Office of the Secretary of Defense have earned doctorates. In both cases, having a doctorate has been helpful because strategic planning and policy work demands creating new knowledge. The attributes and skills required to conduct high-level research and identify new and unfamiliar phenomena are prerequisites for solving complex and unfamiliar problems at the strategic level. Doctoral coursework provides exposure to a broad array of viewpoints and methods. The extensive experience in research and writing creates a natural skepticism for faulty logic and weak arguments. A person with a Ph.D. understands how to do thorough research, develop a coherent narrative, and create a new lexicon and language that resonates with others to begin the process of solving a problem. At the strategic level, all problems are unique, despite aspects that may be familiar (e.g., the insurgencies in Iraq and Vietnam). Planners must describe new phenomena and identify new approaches accurately and clearly so that other agencies, multinational and intergovernmental partners, and subordinate staffs can address those problems. To be effective, a military strategic planner must be able to inform strategic debate through coherent analysis and dialogue with influential thinkers within and outside government.

Conclusion

In 2005, the Department of the Army conducted an in-depth study of leader development in response to a requirement levied by the Secretary of the Army Transition Team. The review, appropriately titled "The Review of Education, Training, and Assignments for Leaders Task Force," examined various aspects of officer professional development. One of the key findings identified the need to "send officers most likely to be successful in the

operations career field to advanced civil schooling with a utilization tour that does not take the officer off the command track." The narrative went on to further to say, "the goal of this initiative is not to reap a utilization of the officer's knowledge; but to exercise the officer's mind. Therefore, any rigorous program that develops mental agility is acceptable. [Human Resources Command] could assist the officer to get into the best school possible while acknowledging that there is nothing wrong with the officer enjoying the pace and location of graduate schooling."[10] The Advanced Strategic Planning and Policy Program makes great strides at operationalizing this critical finding.

The Army has seized the opportunity to address the need for a combination of strategic planning and policy assignments enabled by extensive civilian education and professional instruction—the combination of experience and education currently lacking in the development of strategic planners and leaders. Working within existing constraints of the Army personnel management system, ASP3 provides selected officers with a skill set that is critically important to the nation and the military. In the end, the success of ASP3 will require senior leaders, mentors, and others in the career management and leader development community to recognize the intrinsic value of a comprehensive program that combines civilian and professional education with strategic experience. This combination will provide a solid foundation for future strategic planning and strategic leadership. ***MR***

NOTES

1. Martin Dempsey, "A Campaign of Learning: Avoiding the Failure of Imagination," *RUSI Journal* 155 (June-July 2010): 7.

2. For a report on the first Army experiment with Systemic Operational Design, see: William T. Sorrells et al., "Systemic Operational Design: An Introduction," (M.S. thesis, School of Advanced Military Studies, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 2005).

3. Thomas C. Graves and Dr. Bruce Stanley "Design and Operational Art: A Practical Approach to Teaching the Army Design Methodology," *Military Review* (July-August 2013). This article gives a much more detailed discussion of the history of the SAMS curriculum with regard to the integration of Design and design-type thinking.

4. Paul Yingling, "A Failure in Generalship," *Armed Forces Journal* (May 2007), as referenced at <http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2007/05/2635198>, 8 February 2013. At the time of publishing, Yingling was serving as alieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army and assigned as the deputy commander of 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment. His article attracted much attention and debate throughout the Army and military.

5. Thomas C. Graves, "Strategic Leadership and Education: A Study on Officer Education and Development." A research paper to fulfill the requirements of the M.S. in National Security Strategy, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle, PA, 15 October 2007.

6. Ibid.

7. Combined Arms Center briefing to chief of staff of the Army, 27 January 2012. This wording drawn directly from the problem statement of the presentation, as approved by Gen. Raymond Odierno.

8. Examples of doctoral programs sponsored by the Army are the Professor, U.S. Army War College Program, and the Professor, U.S. Military Academy (USMA) Program. The focus of both is to create academic instructors.

9. A variety of different Ph.D.s have used the phrase "create new knowledge" in different conversations with the author as an argument against the pursuit of a Ph.D. for strategic planners. The phrase was used by Ph.D. professors at the School of Advanced Military Studies, USMA, Harvard, and at other institutions in interviews with academics. Because it was so widely used by different audiences, it is referenced in this article.

10. Department of the Army Deputy Chief of Staff G3/5/7, *Army's Review of Education, Training and Assignments for Leaders (RETAL)*, "Advanced Civil Schooling" (Washington, DC, 22 November 2006), PowerPoint slide #4.