

A U.S. marine throws a training grenade during a live fire and movement grenade training exercise at Arta Range, Djibouti, 18 February 2014.

(U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Staci Miller)



# On Strategic Understanding Teaching Strategy from the Ground up

Maj. Matthew Cavanaugh, U.S. Army

*Maj. Matthew Cavanaugh is an Army strategist assigned as an assistant professor in the Defense & Strategic Studies Program at West Point. Maj. Cavanaugh is at work on a Ph.D. dissertation on generalship under Professor Colin S. Gray at the University of Reading (UK). He blogs regularly at [WarCouncil.org](http://WarCouncil.org).*

Not everyone supports junior officer strategic education. Typical arguments in opposition appear to be based on expediency:

- Keep junior officer education focused on tactics since that is what they will do after graduation anyway.
- There is not enough time for them to study strategy and tactics.
- They only exist to service targets.
- They are not smart enough to comprehend strategic issues.
- If they start developing an opinion about strategic issues, they will become disobedient.

Even Plato considered encouraging higher-level thought in young soldiers a bad idea when he wrote about society's "guardian[s]" in *Republic*.<sup>1</sup> He counseled, "A young person cannot judge what is allegorical and what is literal." He preferred young warriors who acted like obedient guard dogs.<sup>2</sup>

Such logic persists in the modern era. Author Ward Just writes that West Point Superintendent Maj. Gen. Samuel Koster said in 1970, "We're more interested in the 'doer' than the thinker."<sup>3</sup> More recently, this author heard an active duty West Point faculty member stating bluntly that the U.S. Army

did not want second lieutenant strategic thinkers. In light of such statements, certain questions emerge: why would junior officers need to think beyond the tactical fight, and if so, to what extent? How would they develop their thinking beyond the tactical level if that were indeed necessary?

As *strategic landpower* takes shape conceptually, all Army officers—particularly junior officers—will need to develop *some* level of strategic understanding. The strategic landpower concept is evolving but generally refers to the comprehensive and synchronized employment of landpower to effectively and efficiently achieve national strategic objectives. Junior officers will not need to study strategic planning for the Army to implement this concept. However, junior officers will need to develop sufficient *strategic understanding*—the comprehension of and ability to communicate broad purpose for the use of force and the relationship between tactical action and national policy—to become effective military leaders in the coming era.

Some consider strategic understanding the exclusive province of those who exercise *mission command*, defined by Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0 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."<sup>4</sup> Strategic understanding can underpin the exercise of mission command yet need not be limited by it. Mission command is constrained by the term *mission*. Missions, for the most part, are designed to support war efforts. Thinking about how one's mission fits into a war is not just helpful; it is necessary. War is about much more than the tactical fight.

This essay will demonstrate that all Army leaders—including junior officers—must develop their strategic understanding. It will describe how to implement a strategic studies education program for junior officers that is consistent with the Army's strategic landpower concept.

## The Need for Strategic Understanding

The security environment is characterized by exponential growth in digital capabilities and capacity. Mobile phones are prevalent on battlefields across the globe. The powerful communications reach and embedded cameras in cellular phones have enabled a proliferation of civilian journalists and novice war correspondents. The numbers are staggering: in a *New York Times* editorial, Pico Iyer notes, "10 percent of all the pictures ever taken as of the end of 2011 were taken in 2011."<sup>5</sup> Steven Metz of the U.S. Army War College writes that wars are now "live cast," and "made available to a global audience in real or near real time."<sup>6</sup> Thus it appears that landpower is headed toward the same level of scrutiny that instant replay provides to professional sports. Every war fought on land will be on display, subjecting junior officers to greater examination than their predecessors. British General Sir Rupert Smith described this new paradigm as "war amongst the people."<sup>7</sup>

In this context, the U.S. Army contributes to shaping the security environment by regionally aligning forces. *Regionally aligned forces* are units assigned or allocated to combatant commands or those prepared for regional missions.<sup>8</sup> Tactical units are to develop sustained relationships with geographical combatant commands, enabling greater cultural specialization. For example, an article in *Parameters* by Kimberly

Field, James Learmont, and Jason Charland described one brigade's regional alignment experience.<sup>9</sup> Over about six months while assigned to U.S. Africa Command, the brigade conducted nearly a hundred squad- to platoon-size, short-duration missions in more than 30 countries. In short, the regional alignment of forces means that the Army is sending smaller units to more places—more rapidly than ever before. Junior officers will lead these constantly shifting missions.

If this complexity was not enough to contend with, the junior officer also must have a greater sense of joint, interagency, and multinational partner operations. J.C. Wylie writes about a soldier's need for joint partners in *Military Strategy: a General Theory of Power Control*:

The soldier cannot function alone. His flanks are bare, his rear is vulnerable, and he looks aloft with a cautious eye. He needs the airman and the sailor for his own security in doing his own job.<sup>10</sup>

Even beyond recognizing the utility of airpower and seapower, Army junior officers must comprehend the capabilities of the other forces providing landpower—the Marine Corps and special operations forces. Greater strategic understanding by these officers will help improve interservice coordination.

U.S. Army Chief of Staff Gen. Raymond Odierno has at least twice indicated his support for strategic understanding in the profession. In February 2013, he wrote that his aim was to develop junior officers "cognizant of the potential strategic ramifications of their decisions."<sup>11</sup> Then, in February 2014, he called on the Army to focus on objectives that included "cultivating strategic perspective" and using education "to grow the intellectual capacity to understand the complex contemporary security environment."<sup>12</sup> These statements provide strong support for expanding junior officer strategic education.

Unfortunately, there is evidence that the Army does not value developing strategic understanding in its junior officers. There is no requirement for any dedicated strategic education at West Point or in the Reserve Officer Training Corps (while the U.S. Air Force Academy, for example, mandates two courses). This gap persists despite the fact that after September 11, 2001, then U.S. Army Chief of Staff Gen. Eric

Shinseki directed a report on leadership from the U.S. Army War College that concluded the Army should “begin growing strategic leader capability at the pre-commissioning level.”<sup>13</sup> Such preparation might have helped a U.S. Army lieutenant stationed at Camp Arifjan, Kuwait. Interviewed recently by journalist Rosa Brooks from *Foreign Policy* magazine, he was asked, “What’s your mission here?”<sup>14</sup> His joking reply included the infamous phrase, “Ours is not to wonder why.”<sup>15</sup> Such a question should never go unanswered by a commissioned member of the profession of arms. A sense of strategic purpose is a necessary element of competent officership. The solution is education for strategic understanding.

### Strategic Understanding: Three Critical Components

Two pathways to strategic understanding for junior officers are formal and informal education. A prime example of informal education is through self-study. A case in point comes from the [WarCouncil.org](http://WarCouncil.org) website—a nonpartisan, multidisciplinary academic forum dedicated to the study of the use of force (primarily) for the profession of arms.<sup>16</sup> While writers can submit contributions to the [WarCouncil.org](http://WarCouncil.org) blog, its users also can take advantage of a self-study section with over 20 topics and approximately 300 curated links to videos, podcasts, maps, and graphics. Such informal learning can support formal education.

A formal strategic studies course would be as Gen. Shinseki’s report counseled: each soon-to-be junior officer would begin growing strategic leader capability by taking a course during pre-commissioning education. Simply put, strategic studies is the multidisciplinary study of the use of force. As depicted in the figure, three critical components to a strategic studies course are including multiple academic disciplines, using strategic frameworks, and providing venues

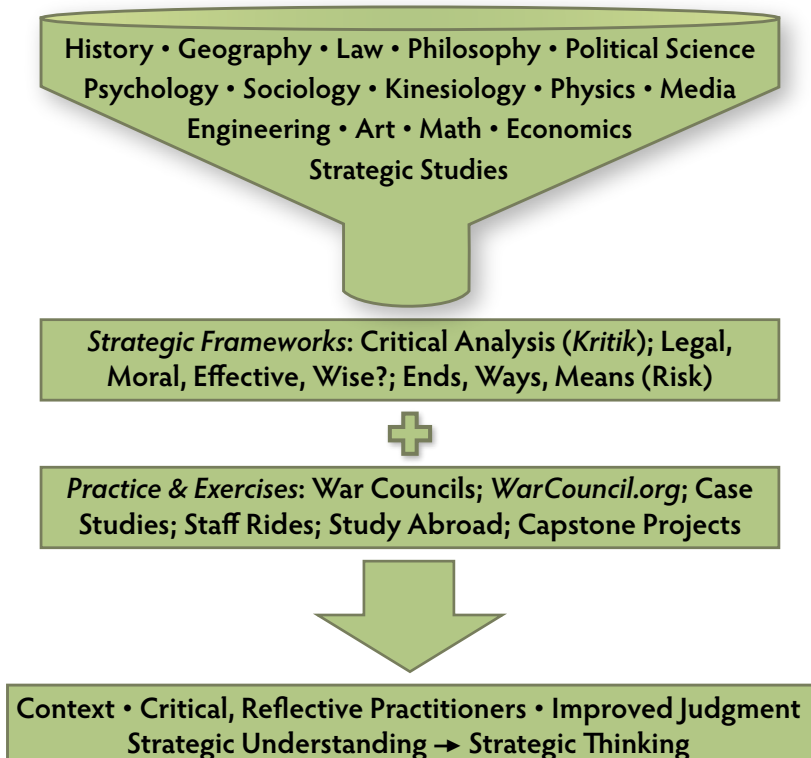
for practice and exercises. These three components are essential for an effective strategic studies course.

### Multidisciplinary Approaches

Consider any real-world conflict, historical or contemporary. Now think of the many perspectives one might consult in analysis to better understand that conflict. There are always many. For example, with respect to the evolving situation in Ukraine, former U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union Jack Matlock writes on his blog, “I believe that nobody can understand the likely outcomes of what is happening unless they bear in mind the historical, geographic, political, and psychological factors at play in these dramatic events.”<sup>17</sup> Journalist Sebastian Junger describes war in the broadest of terms: “I mean, the thing about war—it’s sort of everything ... in one complicated package.”<sup>18</sup>

War is a large, complex activity that is entirely too big to fit into a single academic category. Therefore, the study of war is inherently multidisciplinary. Professor Stephen Biddle of George Washington University explains why the study of war cannot be limited to a single discipline:

### Components of Strategic Studies



War does not have a discipline to study it—it lies on the seams of the way academia is organized ... [So to study war] I think the best skill set is diverse and multi-disciplinary. War is a complicated social phenomenon, and to understand it, it helps to be able to approach it from different directions.<sup>19</sup>

Oxford historian Hew Strachan concurs, calling strategic studies, “a hybrid—a disciplinary mix of history, politics, law, some economics, and even a little

disciplines or fields that contribute to the course syllabus. This approach is beneficial in that it avoids myopic, single-discipline approaches to studying conflict. It imparts the sense of intellectual humility that retired Marine Gen. James Mattis counsels: “We need an educated, adaptable officer corps—not one married to any single preclusive view of war.”<sup>22</sup> Strategic studies education for junior officers should embrace this philosophy.

## Strategic Frameworks

Using many disciplines necessitates strategic frameworks to funnel diverse ideas for analysis. Some frameworks are general and can span the levels of war. Former British Army officer Emile Simpson describes a helpful tactical and operational framework he calls *Can I? Should I? Must I?*: “‘Can I?’ is a legal question about rules of engagement; ‘should I?’ is about the effect—does the potential action support the purpose of the wider operation; ‘must I?’ is a practical moral question which seeks especially to keep potential civilian casualties to a minimum.”<sup>23</sup>

Another framework is the well-known balancing of military objectives (ends), military concepts (ways), military resources (means), and risk, as described by Arthur Lykke.<sup>24</sup> Lykke’s comprehensive approach engages with

many academic disciplines.

More recently, Irving Lachow provides yet another framework: “Is it legal? Is it moral? Can it be effective? Is it wise?”<sup>25</sup> This broader take on Simpson’s framework is useful for its flexibility. It can help leaders assess nearly any strategic or military action, from intervention to cruise missile strike to humanitarian relief. The wisdom question is open to interpretation, but one useful guideline might be *achievement of sustainable ends consistent with national interest—at an acceptable cost.*<sup>26</sup>



U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Mikki L. Sprengle

(From Left to Right) Retired Gen. Gordon R. Sullivan, president of The Association of The United States Army, introduces the panel for the Strategic Landpower Forum at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center, Washington, D.C., 23 October 2013. Gen. Robert W. Cone, Gen. Raymond T. Odierno, Gen. John M. Paxton, Jr, and Adm. William Harry McRaven (not shown) sit on the panel to provide remarks and answer questions.

mathematics.”<sup>20</sup> Individuals serving in strategic roles tend to come from varied backgrounds; this variation strengthens the collective effort. In a recent survey of 234 “current and former senior government officials” that regularly confront strategic challenges, Paul C. Avey and Michael C. Desch found significant diversity in academic background: 13 separate undergraduate majors, as diverse as biology and foreign language, with another 12 percent in the “other” category.<sup>21</sup>

Accordingly, in the elective military strategy course at West Point, there are 14 separate academic

A final example of a strategic framework is Carl von Clausewitz's critical analysis (*kritik*).<sup>27</sup> As he wrote in *On War*, "Critical analysis [is the] application of theoretical truths to actual events."<sup>28</sup> The objective is to unravel "the hidden processes of intuitive judgment," an important skill for all military officers.<sup>29</sup> This process, described in detail in a full chapter Clausewitz devoted to the subject in *On War*, helps the student connect theories from many disciplines to military experience.<sup>30</sup>

## Practice and Exercise

Historian David McCullough once remarked—  
The great thing about the arts is that you can only learn by doing it—that's how you learn things. You can't learn to play the piano by reading a book about playing the piano. You can't learn to paint without painting. You have to do it.<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, developing strategic understanding is akin to learning an art. The optimal format for studying strategy provides case studies and real-world practice. To this end, at West Point, military strategy classroom instruction is supplemented by a series of *War Council* events (conducted separately, but in parallel with the website). The basic concept is to invite panelists from different academic backgrounds to provide varied perspectives on a conflict. Three recent events included a total of eighteen panelists from ten separate academic departments.

A March-April 2014 survey revealed overwhelming approval of the *War Council* events.<sup>32</sup> A large majority believed the events helped them better understand the use of force in the international environment and inspired them to conduct further self-study. One of the cadets stated, "Events like the *War Councils* are what I came to West Point for. They are the most relevant developmental experiences that I have had here."

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

**Acknowledgement.** *The author wishes to express gratitude to those who generously reviewed and provided helpful suggestions for this essay—in particular, Frank Hoffman of the National Defense University and Liam Collins of West Point's Defense & Strategic Studies Program.*

Finding ways to provide venues for practice and exercise—particularly in assessing current strategic issues—resonates with the target audience for this strategic education.

## Outcomes and Value

Strategic understanding provides junior officers with the ability to ask the right questions about their environment. As they will never be asked to refight the Civil War, Vietnam War, or Iraq War, focusing on a process for solving new problems as they arise seems appropriate.

There are distinct advantages to a junior officer developing a sense of strategic understanding. The first is a sense of context. War is big and chaotic, and the U.S. Department of Defense is massive. For a new member of this organization, understanding the fundamentals of the use of force can provide a compass for navigation. Second, strategic understanding enables practitioners to be more reflective as they are better equipped to link disparate pieces of military knowledge coherently. Third, military judgment is the essence of the profession of arms. Strategic understanding widens an individual leader's lens to focus on the relationship between tactical action and national policy. Strategic understanding can be a larger way of looking at platoon leadership.

Although there will always be a few holdouts, the contemporary security environment and the Army profession provide strong indicators that strategic understanding should be required for all commissioned officers, including the most junior. These signals ought not be ignored; there is no better time than now to begin to develop strategic understanding in the junior officer corps—success in future landpower contests demands it. ■

## Notes

1. Plato, *Republic*, ed. By Elizabeth Watson Scharffengerger, trans. by Benjamin Jowett (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2004), 60 (2.375a).
2. *Ibid.*, 65 (2.378d).
3. Samuel Koster, quoted in Ward Just, *Military Men* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 24.
4. Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0, *Mission Command* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO] May 2012), 1.
5. Pico Iyer, "The Folly of Thinking We Know: The Painful Hunt for Malaysia Airlines Flight 370," *New York Times* (20 March 2014).
6. Steven Metz, "Strategic Landpower Task Force Research Report" (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 18 September 2013), 4, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/index.cfm/articles/STRATEGIC-LANDPOWER-TASK-FORCE/2013/10/3>.
7. Rupert Smith, quoted in Toni Pfanner, "Methods of Warfare: Interview with General Sir Rupert Smith," *International Review of the Red Cross*, 88(864), (December 2006): 719.
8. Field Manual (FM) 3-22, *Army Support to Security Cooperation* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, January 2013).
9. Kimberly Field, James Learmont, and Jason Charland, "Regionally Aligned Forces: Business Not As Usual," *Parameters* (Autumn 2013), 60.
10. J.C. Wylie, *Military Strategy: A General Theory of Power Control*, Classics of Sea Power series (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1989), 46.
11. Raymond Odierno, "The Force of Tomorrow," *Foreign Policy* (4 February 2013), [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/02/04/the\\_force\\_of\\_tomorrow](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/02/04/the_force_of_tomorrow).
12. Raymond Odierno, "CSA Strategic Priorities: Waypoint 2," (19 February 2014), [http://www.army.mil/article/118873/Waypoint\\_2\\_Follow\\_up\\_to\\_CSA\\_s\\_Marching\\_Orders/](http://www.army.mil/article/118873/Waypoint_2_Follow_up_to_CSA_s_Marching_Orders/).
13. Leonard Wong et al., "Strategic Leadership Competencies" (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 1 September 2003), 11, [italics original], <http://www.strategic-studiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=382>.
14. Rosa Brooks, "Portrait of the Army as a Work in Progress," [ForeignPolicy.com](http://ForeignPolicy.com) (May/June 2014), 44.
15. *Ibid.*
16. See the [WarCouncil.org](http://www.warcouncil.org/) blog at <http://www.warcouncil.org/>.
17. Jack Matlock, "Ukraine: The Price of Internal Division," [JackMatlock.com](http://JackMatlock.com) blog, entry posted 1 March 2014, <http://jackmatlock.com/2014/03/ukraine-the-price-of-internal-division/>.
18. Sebastian Junger, "Ethics Matter: A Conversation with Sebastian Junger," *Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs*, MP3 audiorecording, 18 March 2014.
19. Stephen D. Biddle, "Military Victory in the Information Age, with Stephen D. Biddle," audiovisual recording, UCTV [University of California Television] Conversations with History series, 17 April 2006, <http://www.uctv.tv/shows/Military-Victory-in-the-Information-Age-with-Stephen-D-Biddle-Conversations-with-History-11495>.
20. Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 253.
21. Paul C. Avey and Michael C. Desch, "What Washington Wants," *Foreign Policy* (March/April 2014), 69.
22. James Mattis, Keynote Address at the Launch of 'Keeping the Edge: Revitalizing America's Military Officer Corps', MP3 audiorecording, *Center for a New American Security*, 24 February 2010.
23. Emile Simpson, *War from the Ground Up: Twenty-First-Century Combat as Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 154.
24. Arthur F. Lykke, "Toward an Understanding of Military Strategy," in *The U.S. Army War College Guide to Strategy*, ed. J. Boone Bartholomees (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2001), 179-185.
25. Irving Lachow, "Bugs, Bytes, and Bots," *Center for a New American Security: Annual Conference 2013*, MP3 audiorecording, 16 June 2013, <http://www.cnas.org/media-and-events/transcripts/transcript-cnas-2013-annual-conference-bugs-bytes-bots#.UxwxR1z6luY>.
26. The author adapted this phrase from H.R. McMaster, in a lecture for the "Ground Forces Dialogue" program, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 20 March 2013, [csis.org/node/42400/multimedia](http://csis.org/node/42400/multimedia).
27. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 156.
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*, 389.
30. For more on critical analysis see Jon Tetsuro Sumida, *Decoding Clausewitz: A New Approach to On War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2008).
31. David McCullough, "Painting With Words," biographical documentary film directed by Mark Herzog, viewed on HBO (Home Box Office), 2008.
32. To quantitatively assess the value of the *War Council* events, the author conducted an email survey from March 30-April 1, 2014. All 41 respondents "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that the events helped cadets "better understand the use of force in the international environment." Also, 95% were "inspired to further self-study" on the subject. For this and other positive feedback, the *War Council* teaching approach was awarded the 2014 Apgar Award for Teaching Excellence, selected from among eleven U.S. Military Academy faculty nominations.