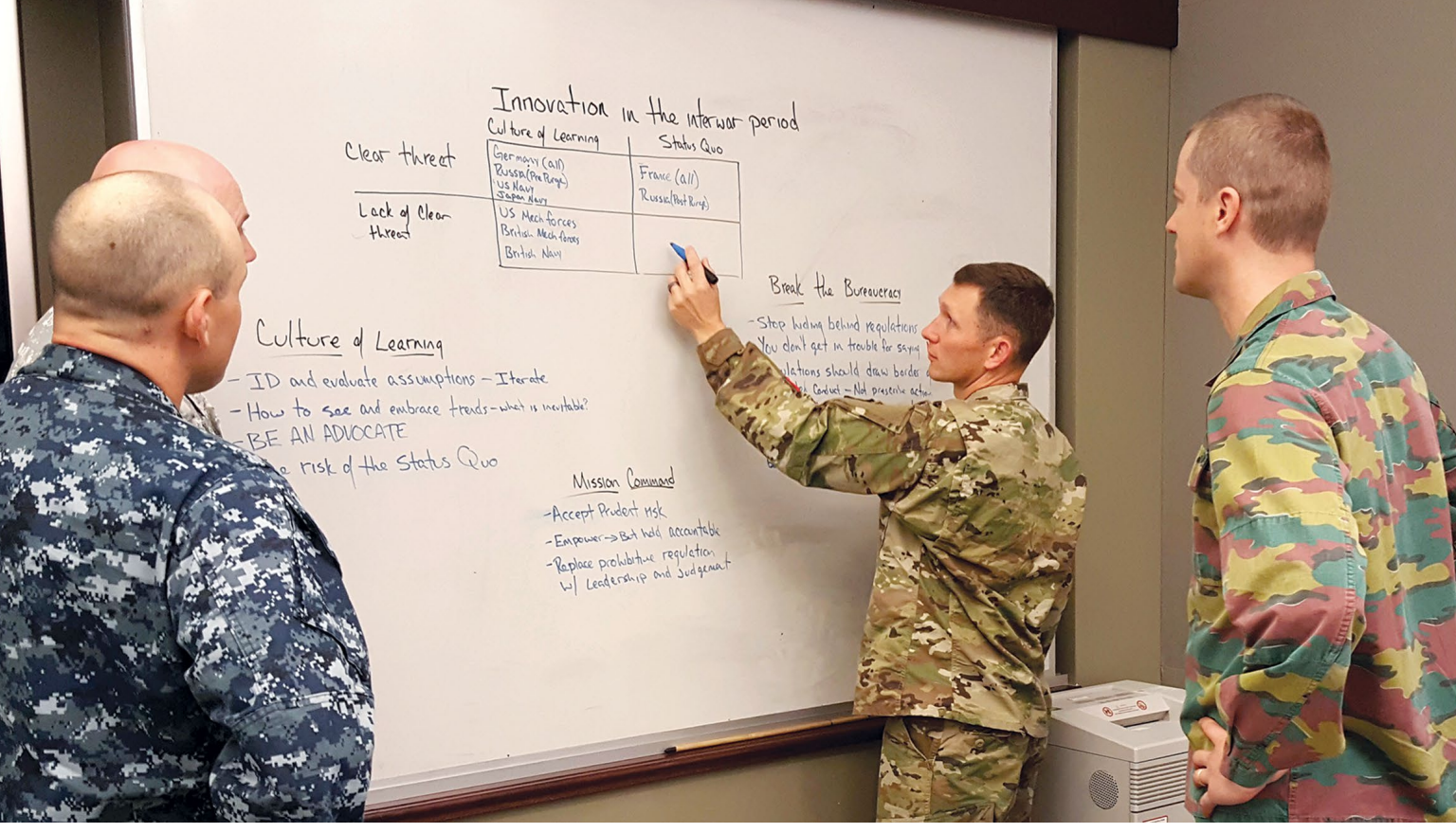

Maj. Andrew Miller (*center*) works with fellow U.S. Army Command and General Staff College students Maj. Brent Adams, U.S. Army; Lt. Cmdr. J. J. Murawski, U.S. Navy; and Senior Capt. Rik Van Hoecke, Belgian army, 26 September 2015 to identify conditions necessary for innovation. (Photo by Maj. Karen Daigle, U.S. Army)

Treading the Way of Ignorance

Officer Education and Critical Thought

1st Lt. James Tollefson, Alaska Army National Guard

In order to arrive at what you do not know
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
—"East Coker," T. S. Eliot

On 25 November 1950, a Chinese army numbering in the hundreds of thousands unexpectedly emerged from the forbidding mountains of North Korea and crashed into the U.S. Eighth Army. Chinese soldiery, fired by revolutionary zeal and hardened by twenty years of constant conflict, flowed around U.S. units in the broken terrain like a human tide.[1] U.S. forces, strung out "from hell to breakfast," as one corps commander put it, found themselves isolated in individual companies and battered until they broke and fled south.[2] In ensuing days, the U.S. 2nd Infantry Division was beaten, broken, and forced to retreat down a six-mile corridor of fire and death that earned the sobering appellation "the Gauntlet."

As U.S. forces retrograded toward Seoul, strident voices in the United States demanded to know what had happened. How had the mighty U.S. Army, that muscular organization that had crushed two aspiring world empires within the last decade, taken such a blow from a rabble of lightly armed peasant soldiers? How could an army three hundred thousand strong mass against U.S. forces *and achieve complete surprise*?

The answer, as it turned out, was that the political and military logics of the war were in conflict. The Truman administration wished to keep the war limited and, accordingly, desired to avoid Chinese involvement. Meanwhile, Gen. Douglas MacArthur insisted that the Chinese would not dare intervene, and that, if they did, massive U.S. airpower would crush them.[3] He was less forthcoming about the intelligence coming from his front-line units, which increasingly indicated a massive Chinese presence in North Korea.[4] MacArthur seems to have even welcomed the prospect of all-out war against Communist China.[5] Whether the Chinese intervened or not was almost beside the point—if they did, their regime could be toppled; if they did not, Korea would be unified. Either outcome was a U.S.—and for MacArthur, a personal—victory.[6]

Despite this difference of perspective, Truman initially chose to allow MacArthur to act as he wished. Consequently, MacArthur moved north, his lead elements advancing all the way to the Chinese border. The Chinese responded with overwhelming force. Ultimately, the government allowed MacArthur "to bring purely military thinking into matters that remained in essence political" and thereby invited disaster.[7]

In Vietnam, American commanders again brought military decision-making logic to bear against a foe that focused on, and won, the decisive political conflict.[8] Today, as we survey the results of fifteen years of fruitless conflict—a resurgent Taliban, a divided Iraq, a triumphalist Islamic State, brutal sectarian violence, and terrorism—we must ask ourselves if perhaps we have once again inappropriately applied military thinking to political problems.

The challenges we face today clearly do not bend to military logic alone. Today's challenges are inherently multilogical, demanding a nuanced understanding of many competing viewpoints. They can only be addressed by leaders willing to discard worn-out solutions and freely engage with the world as they find it, as it really is. Yet from the earliest days of military service, we train our young leaders to think monologically—in a simple, linear fashion. We train them to win decisively as lieutenants and captains while preparing them to flounder as generals. We focus on tactical victory while fatalistically hoping for strategic success.

Weak-Sense Critical Thought, Military Training, and Tactical Victory

We can define monological or "weak-sense" critical thinking as what we learn to do to solve specific problems. It is technical reason that solves problems systematically by understanding the workings of a discrete and bounded system, such as a car engine. Such are vocational thinking skills, necessary to accomplish specific tasks with excellence. Where problems are well structured or well understood, they can be fruitfully addressed by monological thinking.

At present, the training young officers receive teaches and rewards monological thought. This is entirely appropriate. It is time to act when the shooting starts, after all, and to do so decisively. Therefore, young leaders are conditioned to kill, react to contact, maneuver their units, cross-level supplies and ammunition, evacuate their casualties, report to higher headquarters, plan for the offense and defense, and control direct and indirect fires. Critical thought is required in the planning of raids, ambushes, defenses, logistical resupplies, air movements, and patrols, but the standards of success and failure are clearly defined. One considers the opponent's point of view from within the context of one's own: "If I was the enemy, with the materiel that the enemy is templated to possess, what would I do and how would I do it?" Then the young leader drafts a plan to meet his or her opponent's imagined courses of action. Always the bias is to act, and the tools to enable this action are simple, decisive, monological tactics.

Leaving platoon leadership, young officers receive their first thorough exposure to doctrine at the career course.

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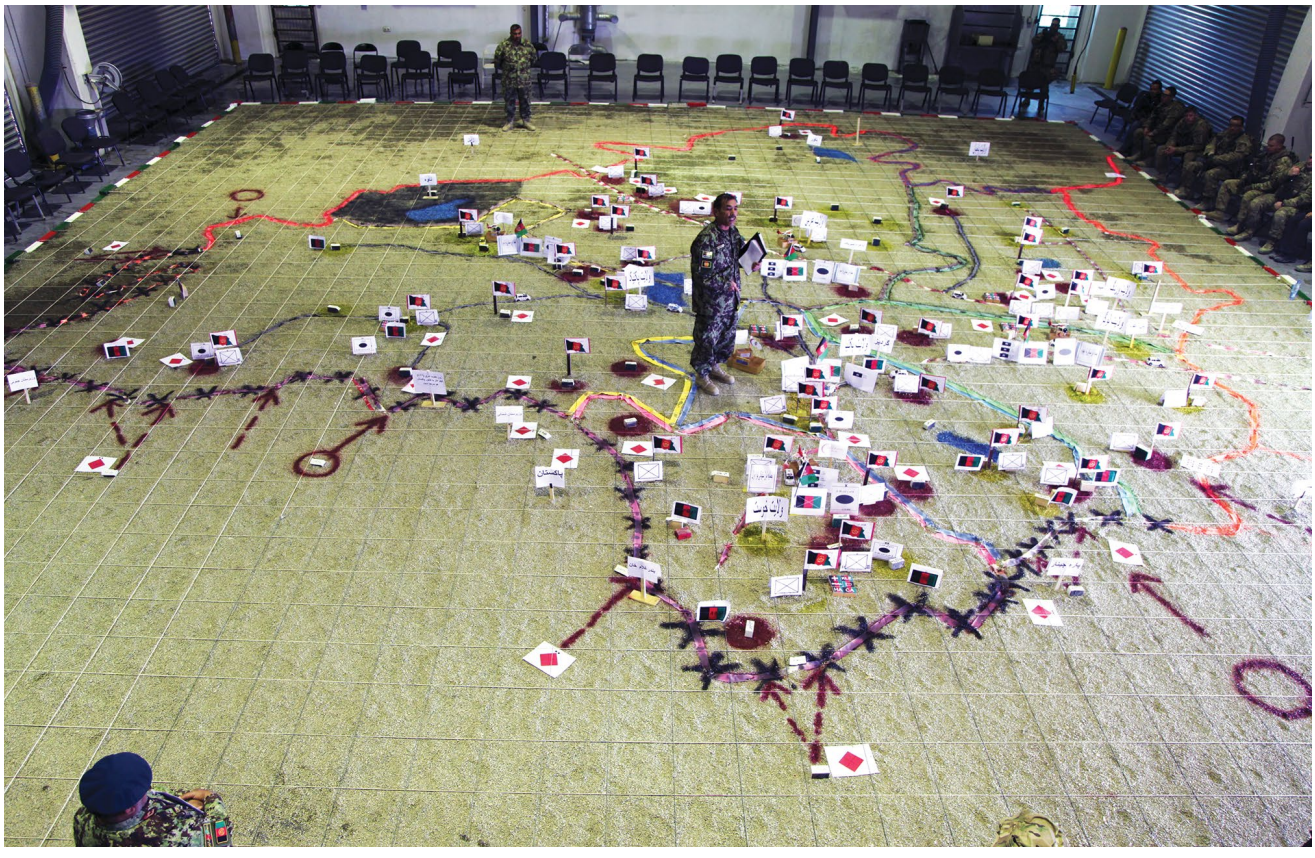
1st Lt. Elyse Ping Medvigy calls for fire 22 August 2014 during an artillery shoot south of Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan. Medvigy, a fire support officer assigned to the 4th Infantry Division's Company D, 1st Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment, 4th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, is the first female company fire support officer to serve in an infantry brigade combat team supporting Operation Enduring Freedom. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Whitney Houston, U.S. Army)

Here they receive the U.S. Army's accumulated wisdom on offense, defense, stability operations, and defense support to civil authorities. They learn to create detailed plans that strictly accord with this doctrine. No one claims that this doctrine is inerrant. Yet adherence to it provides valuable consistency "on which decision makers higher in the chain can depend."[9] In the messy reality of war, doctrine saves time, allowing leaders to make decisions in advance of events. Good doctrine "simply overwhelms minor variations and unexpected reactions."[10] It may sometimes fail, but in aggregate it enables tactical units to communicate their plans to one another, synchronize their efforts, and achieve crushing victories against their adversaries. Though many company grade officers chafe against it, most act within it. Doctrine provides context for tactics. It is the frame that informs our professional responsibilities.

Doctrine demands that we accept our lessons in warfare on the authority of others. We can partake vicariously in the wartime experiences of our predecessors through documentaries and books, but without actual combat experience, we cannot personally verify the truth of what we are taught. To the extent that we do have such opportunities during deployments or training events, we often see only enough to convince us of the overall validity of our training without putting most of it to the test. We are like J. B. Bury's primitive man who learned from his elders that the neighboring hills held both bears and evil spirits and who, upon seeing a bear, concluded that evil spirits must also be real.[11] Likewise, we are taught both ambushes and counterinsurgency doctrine; receiving a "Go" on an ambush training lane, we assume the efficacy of counterinsurgency doctrine. Coming from the same source, we assume each equally valid. Young officers have little ability to weigh and validate the relative merits of the many things they must learn. So they simply learn the lessons well and accept their value on the authority of the instructors. Newly minted experts at ambushes, young officers assume the efficacy of counterinsurgency to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan people, a people they



An Afghan soldier briefs a combined force at a sand table representing East Afghanistan during a combined arms rehearsal 3 March 2014 at Forward Operating Base Thunder, Paktia Province, Afghanistan. (Photo by Pfc. Nikayla Shodeen, U.S. Army)

do not understand. Like new lieutenants, we all come to accept our doctrine by faith supported by a paucity of (often irrelevant) experiences.

We receive our young officers from a school and university system that consistently produces poor reasoners, and then attempt to make them experts in a very specific monological discipline of tactical problem solving. We give them all the "right" answers and launch them into the fray.[12] One result is that we set lifetime habits of thought and reinforce them at each level of the Officer Education System. Each program teaches adherence to doctrine, conformity in terminology and language, and a specific interpretation of world events and their significance to the United States. Although opportunities abound at the higher levels of the Officer Education System for officers to learn the reflective disciplines of multilogical "strong-sense" critical thought, most fail to make the transition.[13] Perhaps this is because Army promotions actively penalize officers that demonstrate conceptual ability.[14] Perhaps it is the inevitable outcome of a military culture that shuns quality writing in favor of PowerPoint slides and e-mail.[15] Perhaps many officers simply fail to realize that such a transition is necessary. Whatever the reason, we produce legions of doctrinal technicians but very few independent thinkers.

Strong-Sense Critical Thought, Intellectual Freedom, and the Way of Ignorance

Multilogical, "strong-sense" critical thought is "the ability to think accurately and fairmindedly within opposing points of view and contradictory frames of reference."[16] Multilogical problems are those that can be approached from many different perspectives and understood by means of widely divergent ideologies. To truly understand them requires a suspension of inborn ethno- and ego-centricity and a willingness to reason from within others' understanding of the world. It requires us to calmly consider that our terrorists are another's freedom fighters; that what we perceive as naked aggression may to another be the fulfillment of national destiny; that our liberty may be

another's godless hedonism. It requires us to commit the ultimate ideological heresy—to admit that our national self-interest and cultural values are no more intrinsically worthwhile than anyone else's. Yet in the midst of this apostasy, we must remain capable of fighting faithfully for those same national interests and values.

The difficulties inherent in this are immense. To enjoy such intellectual freedom means quietly discarding the philosophy underpinning the *National Security Strategy*, which loudly proclaims that "American values are reflective of the universal values we champion all around the world," thereby declaring our country the world's arbiter of moral justice and freedom.[17] This egocentric commitment to value projection "defies rational explanation beyond an excessive belief in the universality of our own model of democracy."[18] More importantly, it blinds us to reality as much of the world's population currently experiences it. Yet, as leaders of our nation's Army, we have an obligation to implement this very policy.

And so, we find ourselves faced with the central dilemma of intellectual freedom in the military. To be truly free is to unfetter the mind and seek truth for its own sake. Yet, we serve a profession that requires significant ideological commitment. We are trained from commissioning to stand, rifle in hand, on behalf of the national interest. Our first loyalty is to the Constitution, the flag, the people from whom we come and to whom we will return. We cannot abandon this commitment—and cannot even responsibly question it. It is a fundamental prerequisite of our profession that we be willing to fight and kill for our nation, and in so doing violently impose our national will and national values on other peoples around the world. Yet the intellectual freedom we require to engage the world today demands that we reason from the perspective of our opponents *as though we shared their beliefs*. Even in the absence of the strong monological tendencies of military training, this would pose a significant obstacle to developing truly independent, multilogical thinkers in our ranks.

Somehow we must learn how to hold these opposing ideas in our minds, navigating fluently the inherent tension between them, and enter into true multilogical freedom of thought. Then, having attained a sort of professional enlightenment, we must discover how to teach this insight to generations of young officers to come. It is no mistake if this sounds vaguely spiritual in nature. This is not a battle for behavioral scientists, statisticians, or psychologists. It is a challenge instead for the reflective, experienced, senior military leaders within our ranks. This is a job for soldier-philosophers with the courage to challenge the assumptions upon which they have built decades-long careers.

Of course, not all the demands of succeeding in our current operating environment require such deep introspective challenges to the nature of our profession. Often, we need only step back from a situation where our training and experience are demonstrably ineffective and have the courage to try a novel, nondoctrinal, creative solution. Yet the basic challenge is the same. The uncritical self-assurance that informs our *National Security Strategy* and our oath of commissioning also pervades our battle drills and doctrine. It is the assumption that we already have all, or most, of the right answers, and success is merely a matter of effective implementation. It is only when we consciously affirm that we do not know everything and when we assume an attitude of intellectual humility, that we begin to attain true critical thought—even wisdom.

Essayist Wendell Berry, writing of the verse that forms the epigraph to this paper, describes this humility as the "way of ignorance."[19] It is living in the constant conscious affirmation of our unknowing, our inability to know everything that we ought to know. It is the mindset of the person who does not lightly accept harm, who does not casually "destroy a village in order to save it, ... destroy freedom in order to save it, ... destroy the world in order to live in it."[20] It is understanding the limits of our own experience and training. For, as T. S. Eliot writes,

> *There is, it seems to us,*
> *At best, only a limited value*
> *In the knowledge derived from experience.*
> *The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,*
> *For the pattern is new in every moment*
> *And every moment is a new and shocking*
> *Valuation of all we have been.*[21]

It is all very well, of course, to espouse the virtues of some lofty philosophy of critical thought. These words reach out as vague accusations of our current system's failures. The burden of proof is immediately on the reader either to affirm or refute these allegations. Intuitively, we know that there is much to cherish in our military institutions, regardless of their inevitable shortcomings or defects. So, the vignette that follows is offered as compelling evidence that the attributes of intellectual humility and critical thinking here endorsed are already present

in today's Army. What we need is perhaps not so much a revolutionary reappraisal of our training and officer education system as a frank discussion of the need for intellectual humility and candor throughout our ranks. As that discussion occurs, it behooves us to teach our young leaders the intellectual humility and open-minded critical thinking skills that will allow them to win on the battlefields of tomorrow.

Strong-Sense Critical Thought in Action: Defeating the RKG-3 in Iraq, 2008 to 2009

Lt. Col. John Richardson commanded a cavalry squadron in Iraq in 2008 to 2009. Prior to deployment, his unit mastered the Army's extant counter-improvised explosive device (IED) tactics. In theater they quickly discovered that the local insurgent forces had exchanged IEDs for the RKG-3, a Soviet-era antitank hand grenade. Counter-IED tactics were of no avail against this new threat. RKG-3 casualties began to mount. Richardson, who "had trained for seventeen years to prepare himself to be a leader in this situation, to use good judgment and make decisive, ethical, and tactically sound decisions in a time of crisis," immediately directed a number of "technical solutions based on previous personal combat actions and years of experience."[22] Reasoning from within his own personal experience and extensive tactical training, he took decisive action to defeat a threat he did not understand. Nevertheless, his unit continued to take casualties from RKG-3 attacks. His monological response to the threat failed.

The RKG (*Ruchnaya Kumulyativnaya Granata*) is a Russian-made handheld shaped-charge grenade developed in the 1950s to defeat armor plating. One version of the RKG features a small, spring-loaded parachute that enables the RKG to attack the top of armored vehicles where armor is often thinnest. This parachute stabilizes the grenade in descent to ensure that the charge makes contact with the armor at a 90-degree angle. Other versions of the RKG do not have a parachute and are simply thrown against the sides of passing vehicles. It became a favored weapon of Iraqi insurgents operating in urban environments because individuals could throw them then quickly disappear among the civilian population. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

Fortunately, Richardson, instead of accepting RKG-3 casualties as the inevitable cost of doing business, decided to try another approach. He assembled a small group of soldiers who he believed had "developed innovative training in the past, ... showed a propensity for taking prudent risk, ... invented new tactics or new equipment configurations, ... and ... demonstrated an ability to transfer knowledge," and he tasked them to provide him with a solution.[23] This they did. By the end of the deployment, Richardson's unit had eliminated the RKG-3 threat and destroyed the insurgent network behind it. Richardson realized, and acted to overcome, the deficiencies of his training and experience. He demonstrated intellectual humility and enabled multilogical, strong-sense critical thought in his subordinates. In so doing, he defeated the main threat in his area of operations, doubtless saved some of his soldiers' lives, and proved that even a hardened career combat arms officer can walk the "way of ignorance."

Ultimately we can each say with assurance that all we know of the future is that it is coming. What it will look like, and what demands it will place upon us, is impossible to foresee. We cannot train for a threat we have not imagined any more than we can speak a language we have not heard. We cannot know what we do not know. But we can certainly inculcate the habits of humble, multilogical critical thought that will enable today's platoon leaders to be tomorrow's adaptive battalion commanders. For in combat as in life,

The only wisdom we can hope to acquire
Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.[24] ■

Notes

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