

## PRESIDENT'S FORUM

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### *Some Reflections on Innovation, Problem Solving, and Original Research*

WE RECENTLY HAD VISITS from the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) and General James Mattis (Commander, U.S. Joint Forces Command) to Newport. CNO likes to talk about the advantages of students having “unstructured” time to think while at the Naval War College. Granted, there are courses, research, conferences, and the like constantly in progress, so it’s not completely unstructured. That said, a famous scholar of the Middle Ages, Joseph Strayer of Princeton, liked to critique his students’ work as needing more “looking out the window” time.<sup>1</sup> Having in mind the million-dollar view out the windows in Newport, rain or shine, it is the idea of taking this time to think about our profession and problems that I’d like to talk about. In his recent remarks General Mattis made the point that we always need to know “what problem we’re trying to solve”—good guidance for a place like Newport.

If you read the books *Plan Orange* or *Agents of Innovation*, you will find that in the period leading up to the Second World War there was a relatively simple process by which the fleet and the Navy’s leadership could use the intellectual capital of the Naval War College to look at issues of importance to the Navy and Marine Corps.<sup>2</sup> The results took the form, for example, of “Naval War College Suggestions” to the General Board (naval leadership and senior action group, which lasted for just over fifty years and was disestablished in 1951). Gaming done in Newport was predominantly tactical, but it also involved campaign planning, trying to resolve issues that were considered problems for the Navy. This was not just a matter of the introduction of new technologies, like naval aviation, but of attempts to overcome the nonfortification clause of the Washington Naval Treaty, to study logistics, and to conceptualize the network of bases that would be needed to conduct operations over vast distances. Resolving that

latter issue led to thinking about the scale of operations needed to capture and hold the many islands that would have to be taken in the coming war with Japan. Another good example is the story of Naval War College faculty member Captain Joseph Mason Reeves, who as head of the Tactics Department at the height of the controversy over battleship vulnerability in 1925 convincingly showed the General Board that naval aviation would undoubtedly influence the outcome of future sea battles.<sup>3</sup> Later, in 1929, as the Navy's first qualified aviator to become a flag officer, Reeves participated in Fleet Problem IX, in which he "attacked" the Panama Canal, showing in practice how to use this new capability for offense and demonstrating that aviation could do far more than scout for the battleships.

My point is that though the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 made the fight much more joint, and for good reason, there are still naval problems to solve. Here in Newport we are chartered to put intellectual effort into looking for the solutions to these and other problems. Frustration breeds innovation. To paraphrase John Boyd, "machines don't fight wars, people do. And they use their minds."

It's the "using our minds" piece that has my attention—and trying to answer the "why" questions with a huge dose of intellectual honesty.

Sitting in my office last week, I was listening to a recording made in 1962, now transferred to a CD, of a talk Admiral Chester Nimitz gave here at the College. I had never heard Nimitz's voice. He said that his preparation in Newport had given him the intellectual wherewithal to consider the scale of operations that would have to be accomplished in a Pacific campaign. When the time came, he already had an idea what it would mean—for instance, he needed to expand the Navy's officer corps by a "factor of fifteen." That's a huge impact. (Remember, Nimitz established one of the first six Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps units, at the University of California at Berkeley.) He went on to say that during the war he hardly had to look at a map, as he had become familiar with the Pacific islands and atolls during his studies in Newport in 1923, which had forced him for the first time to consider the logistics of such a massive Pacific naval campaign.

The other aspect of the College, besides a top-flight education afforded by a distinguished faculty and unstructured time to think, is original research, which normally goes to the heart of "why" questions. We have that going on here in a variety of areas. We have faculty experts in both the teaching and research ranks, as you can see from the lineup of articles in this issue of the *Naval War College Review*: "Chinese Missile Strategy," "Maritime Information-Sharing Strategy," and work on tactics. There are also studies in progress on small wars, nuclear weapons in North Korea, international law and operations in exclusive economic zones, and a variety of work concerning South Asia, cyber issues, command and control, outer space, and ballistic-missile defense. There is no staff of

“action officers” here, only a dedicated and distinguished faculty doing work that—at least from where I sit—matters. They examine regional issues across the world, working to help fleet commanders, combatant commanders, and CNO to address some current “wicked hard” issues and to anticipate future issues. The other part of this original research is student/faculty research done by the Halsey Groups, which work on operational and regional problems, as well as the Mahan Group, which works deterrence issues.

There is also the College of Operational and Strategic Leadership (COSL), specializing in leadership and officer-development issues and overseeing the Stockdale Group students. Its faculty is currently combing through three years of original research for conclusions we might draw about how to educate and develop our future leaders. COSL recently produced a very interesting ethics conference and is conducting award-winning research on “Capabilities-Based Competencies Assessment,” which could offer new ways to figure out how the Navy should man, train, and equip itself.<sup>4</sup> It’s an attempt to think in new ways about how to get the right people into the right jobs in an organization as huge as the U.S. Navy. We are working closely with the fleet on that, starting with what type of people is needed in the Maritime Operations Centers. We’re teaming with several organizations and will shortly be asking the numbered-fleet commanders questions about what kinds of folks they want and need to do their work and how the system can respond to the demand. You get the picture.

This research is solid, and some of it is being done only here in Newport, though we often work in close partnership with other parts of the Navy to ensure we’re connected and not off in some “ivory tower”—one of the reasons we had a small team at Carnegie Mellon in early April, for example. We’re simply looking for the best ideas and trying to attract the best talent to come to Newport to help us work on them, whether in uniform or civilian—we just want the best.

The final example is war gaming, which, in the United States, originated in Newport and now comes in a variety of sizes and shapes. A lot of this work feeds into research going on in other places or can spin off into new research efforts. This work merits a slot in a future “President’s Forum.” For example, as this goes to press we are in Colombia for a regional seminar, with officers from a dozen countries, gaming scenarios for maritime domain awareness. So a combination of teaching faculty, research faculty, and students makes up the intellectual capital we’re trying to get to the right places, whether in the Navy bureaus or in the fleet. It’s a pretty interesting institution to be a part of, especially now.

A former President of the College, Admiral Stansfield Turner, once correctly said, “Scholarship for its own sake is of no interest to us.” We are interested in how research can influence policy, influence our decision making, and generally improve how the naval services work to serve the nation. So I see one of my main

duties as helping get the best of our intellectual efforts in front of the right folks and bringing them to bear in the right places in our own institutions, where they can do some good. No one up here in Newport thinks we have all the answers, but it's progress to be asking the right questions and then at least trying to get the results to where they might actually make a difference. We are, after all, engaged in the longest conflict in our history, and we owe CNO, the Navy, and the nation our best efforts—anything less, and we might as well pack up and go home.

There are times I feel a real sense of urgency about getting to the right answers quickly, and that is the nature of things sometimes in our nation's capital, where they must live with the twenty-four-hour news cycle. But the history of the Naval War College is not about quick, snappy answers; it's about doing the work. It's almost a biological process, like not expecting to eat popcorn the day after planting the seeds. War and its prevention are among the most complex activities we human beings take on. Here in Newport we are trying our best to get our thinking as right as we can. It's about gaining insights—sometimes inexact, even vague, and only after painstaking analysis and gaming, followed by synthesis, sometimes over a period of years; getting the Navy leadership to accept or reject the research, after iterative experimentation and testing; writing up the lessons to inform doctrine; and then building on the lessons, year after year.

The composer Benjamin Britten once said, "Composing is like driving down a foggy road toward a house. Slowly you see more details of the house—the color of the slates and bricks, the shape of the windows. The notes are the bricks and the mortar of the house." I think this is a fitting metaphor, one that aptly describes, in part, the nature of our work at the Naval War College. Our record, as a nation, of predicting the future is not great; we are often in the fog, often get things really wrong, and sometimes we miss indicators that are obvious in hindsight.

That doesn't mean we should give up trying to peer into the fog and darkness to see the way ahead—the work is too important—but it does mean that here in Newport, as we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century, we should always be prepared for surprises, that we should be thinking continually about what the people who have to make the tough decisions for the Navy of the future will need to do business.

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**NOTES**

1. Norman F. Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages: The Lives, Works, and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth Century* (New York: William Morrow, 1991).
2. Edward S. Miller, *War Plan Orange: The U.S. Strategy to Defeat Japan, 1897–1945* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1991); John T. Kuehn, *Agents of Innovation: The General Board and the Design of the Fleet That Defeated the Japanese Navy* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2008).
3. Thomas Wildenberg, *Admiral Joseph Mason Reeves and the Origins of Carrier Airpower* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 2003), p. 118.
4. Richard Suttie, "Linking Education to Capabilities," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* 135 (April 2009), pp. 20–24. For the ethics conference see [www.usnwc.edu/Events/Ethics-Conference-2010.aspx](http://www.usnwc.edu/Events/Ethics-Conference-2010.aspx).