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A LARGER MEANING, A LARGER PURPOSE

Admiral Gregory G. Johnson, U.S. Navy

We must always be thinking about the next war, about the twenty-first century. The only thing that we can say with certainty is that things will change. They will change dramatically, and we will be surprised.

Twenty-nine years ago, when I matriculated at the Naval War College in August 1974, the world was also undergoing a time of great change and surprise. President Richard Nixon resigned, and Gerald Ford became president. Congressman Carl Albert was the speaker of the House. Mike Mansfield was the majority leader. The year I graduated, 1975, was a very difficult one for me and for the nation. The Vietnam experience was coming to a conclusion when on 30 April we evacuated Saigon, which became Ho Chi Minh City. I remember the College's military-media conference of that year, and its uneasy tension. That year saw the beginning of the end of the old system in Congress: that year the Democratic Congress came back; Congressman F. Edward Hebert from Louisiana was replaced as Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee by Melvin Price; and John Stennis became the Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee. Retention in the Navy was 15 percent on a good day. The combat readiness of our forces was abysmal. We were plagued by drug abuse and racial tension.

Not all was bad and disheartening. There were good things happening in the armed forces. The draft had ended in 1973, and we were just beginning to evolve into the all-volunteer force that today serves our nation so well. The twenty-eight years since then is 25 percent of the life of the Naval War College. Since its establishment in 1884, the College has formed the professional soul of over twenty-five thousand officers and senior government officials from fifty

nations around the world and has produced some of the nations' most influential leaders across all walks of public service—the best and brightest of our nation's services, departments, and agencies, as well as those of other nations. Graduates of this fine institution have walked on the moon and have become service chiefs, ambassadors, chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and even heads of state—for instance, the president of Lebanon, President Emile Lahud.

The academic year that I spent here determined my fate. That was twenty-nine years ago, which means one of two things—that I am very old now (perhaps true) or that I was very young when I attended the College (also true). When I arrived as a student, I had been in the Navy five years. I had been a lieutenant for all of two years, and I was raring to learn something. I had heard that lieutenants were wanted at the Naval War College. I had just finished my first sea tour and was an A-7 Crusader instructor pilot at Cecil Field near Jacksonville, Florida. There, as one of perhaps fifty lieutenants, I was unhappy about the leadership—all that mattered was logging flight hours and carrier landings. Our nation did not, I thought, spend the money it did for aircraft carriers, the aircraft on them, the support they required, and our training simply so that we could fill up our logbooks; there had to be some larger meaning, some larger purpose. I could not quite figure it out myself, and none of my leaders could explain it to me.

So I asked the officer assignment branch in Washington to send me to Newport. The detailer advised me to inform my commanding officer, which I did. That was a naive thing to do, because I did not expect his response. My CO threw me out of his office; he did not want anyone in "his Navy," he said, who would give up a seat in a cockpit to go to the Naval War College. That was how I came to this great institution with a fitness report from my former command that the Bureau of Personnel might use as an example of how to write a damning evaluation.

I was disgruntled. It was a hard time for our military. I had effectively been kicked out of naval aviation, and I did not know if I was going to stay in the Navy. But Newport embraced me, and I embraced it. I felt that I was in the presence of greatness; it started to change my attitude, my worldview. My seminar mates included two lieutenant commanders eight years senior to me; both of them (Lieutenant Commanders Ted Lockhart and Len Oden; they both later became distinguished flag officers) were wonderful role models for me. My professors—Bing West in Strategy and Policy, and Rich Lloyd in National Security Decision Making—showed remarkable patience with this immature, precocious lieutenant. It made a difference. They began to teach me what critical thinking was really about. I remember a case study about close air support. Of course, being an A-7 pilot, I had strong opinions and gave my two cents' worth about how the Air Force never really wanted to do close air support and therefore never really wanted to buy the A-7. An Air Force major, fresh from supplying close air

support to the Army in Vietnam, let me have it right between the eyes. I will never forget that; when he was done with me, I thought to myself, perhaps I *don't* know everything.

I began to think about the business that I was in. I was no longer just a pilot trying to fill up my logbook; I was a member of the national security profession, and national security was, in my view, the nation's highest calling. As my eyes opened, I began to realize that though I was very proud to be a pilot, flying was simply a means to an end, not an end in itself. So many of my commanding officers had thought it was the end of the world when their command tours ended and they went to desk jobs. That, I thought, cannot be right. So it was that my wife Joy and I had one of those kitchen-table conversations and made the decision that I would stay in the Navy. My Naval War College study was to serve me well.

As the institution's founder, Commodore Stephen B. Luce, declared, the Naval War College was established as a place to study the art and science of war. The aim is simply to invite officers to meet together to discuss questions pertaining to the higher branches of their profession and to enable each one, according to his or her inclination, to prepare for the highest and most responsible duties that can devolve upon a naval officer. That is exactly what this institution did for me. It extended my horizons to the higher branches of this profession, and I will ever be in its debt.

On 3 October 1889, Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain—a distinguished Civil War soldier who, like me, was modestly proud of being from Maine—declared at the dedication of the Maine monuments of the Gettysburg battlefield, "In great deeds something abides." The founding of this institution was a great deed. The spirit and legacy of inquisitive and critical study of the higher branches of the military profession will abide in each of its students as they lead our Navy, our armed forces, and our nation in the twenty-first century.