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THE old joke about military intelligence being an oxymoron reveals a common societal bias about the role of independent thought in military operations. Indeed, so deep is this societal prejudice that the military often embraces it itself. The culture of military “professionalism” is often a strongly anti-intellectual one, conditioned on an ethic of practice as opposed to one of intellectual reflection. Many an officer’s career has been terminated early by the assessment that he “styles himself an academic”.



At last! The Perfect Soldier!
Robert Minor, New Masses, 1916

Famously, military intellectuals have often been outsiders, forced out of the service, warehoused in deadend assignments, or denied promotion. Clausewitz needed the protection of the German general Gneisenau. Mahan remained a Captain (only promoted by an act of Congress following his retirement). Billy Mitchell was court-martialed for his promotion of air power in the inter-war period. Free thought can be career-damaging in the military.

Education as Drill

Professional Military Education has also been traditionally less than self-reflective. The need to educate (train, really) soldiers in a mass sense emerged in early modern Europe with the introduction of firearms. In order to concentrate fire, muskets needed to be loaded and fired in a precise sequence of events, all while soldiers were themselves being fired on. Modern drill emerged in the form of printed manuals describing the precise series of movements, anticipating the thought of Frederick Taylor and his principles of Scientific Management for rationalizing factory production methods. In the early 19th Century, the Prussians developed their *Kriegsakademie* in order to educate their officer class in the theories of operational art, formerly the preserve of aristocrats. Still, despite the seeming recognition that war was too important to be left to the amateurs, the military colleges followed a model not unlike the drill books of the 30 Years War. “Staff solutions” to exercise problems were predetermined models, similar to a list of principles to be memorized and applied in rote-like fashion.

Such a style of education served militaries relatively well throughout the 19th and 20th century. While one can always point to vast calamities such as the Western Front of World

War One, and smaller but still poignant disasters like the loss of Singapore in World War Two, this style of education is suited to an environment when the application of military force is “symmetrical”, that is like confronting like. Situations could be anticipated, options exercised through war games, and plans made based on the results of such activities. Indeed, Adm. Chester Nimitz famously remarked that there was nothing that occurred in the course of the Pacific campaign that had not already been considered in the course of several decades of war games conducted in the halls of the US Navy’s Naval War College in Newport Rhode Island.

Thinking about Complex Military Environments

The modern military environment is far different from that faced by the students of traditional military staff schools. Rather than the relatively predictable symmetrical environment analysed by past war colleges, the challenges faced by modern militaries are considerably more complex. In the 1990s, the former Commandant of the US Marine Corps developed what he called the “Three-Block War” model in order to illustrate the complexity faced in contemporary military operations. Military forces might find themselves delivering aid and conducting humanitarian operations on one city block. On the adjacent block, they might find themselves conducting very traditional peacekeeping and stability operations, interposing themselves between hostile forces. On the last block, they might be engaging in war-fighting operations themselves. It is an apt description that one can see in the examples of the 1993 Somalia intervention, in East Timor, and Kosovo.

In such environments, there is an extraordinary premium placed on the critical thinking skills of military personnel. The type of mindset required in humanitarian operations is different from that in stability operations, and again, entirely different in fighting wars. Further, the three-block model does not describe a static situation where the events on each block have no influence on the others. Indeed, as seen in Somalia, the three blocks easily slip into one another and military action can easily cause such shifts inadvertently. Militaries frequently refer to the idea of a “strategic corporal” where a low-ranking personnel cause enormous strategic impacts through very localized action. Again, the massacre of a small number of civilians by US Marines in Haditha last year had a strategic impact on the conduct of operations in Iraq all out of proportion to the number of individuals involved.

The challenge faced by militaries engaged in complex operations is that the number of actors and critical variables are beyond their capability to address in tactics and doctrine manuals. Today’s partner is easily tomorrow’s enemy. The power of non-traditional actors is multiplied by new technology. Viral videos, manipulated computer images, and rumours spread through text messages and blogs all complicate the ability of traditional militaries to respond in standard ways. In this environment, traditional concepts of victory, defeat, mean very little or are ambiguous, national interest is remote or entirely absent, “civilian” and “military are blurred together, and the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of warfare are all merged into a single continuum. The permutations and combination of factors means that military personnel must be equipped with as broad a range of thinking tools to evaluate the unpredictable environment in which they find themselves.

Academic/Military Partnerships

Such environments demand more than the study of planning models and simple application of doctrine that is inculcated in Staff and War colleges. The demands of such environments require more “academic” approaches to professional education. Critical thinking, or the reflective questioning of the assumptions on which we base our understanding of the world around us, implies a greater partnership between academics and military professionals. It is perhaps one of the single most important civil military relationships that must emerge in developed states; the absence of an academic/military partnership is the first step on the road towards operational and strategic failure in a world of complex political, social, economic, and religious inter-relationships.

For most of its history, the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) has been par exemplar of a traditional military. Its mission has been that of deterrence, and in the *ultima ratio*, the defence of the nation’s interests. In this role, however, it has been largely barrack-bound. In the last decade the SAF has become an increasingly important foreign policy tool of the Singaporean state, being deployed first into East Timor, then Aceh, and now serving in the Persian Gulf in a variety of missions. This is indicative of the growing interdependent relationships between Singapore and the rest of the world. There is nothing to suggest that this trend will slow or reverse itself. Indeed, it is likely that the SAF will become increasingly operationally busy rather than less. And where it becomes busy will be rarely the symmetrical battlefield it has prepared itself for since independence. Three-block-wars are more likely to occur for the SAF than any other scenario, and some of these may be unavoidable politically for the Singaporean state. Success in this world will depend most not on the excellence of technology, nor on rigorous planning, but on the inherent flexibility and adaptability of military thinking.

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