

# We Have to Focus on Strategic Education

**PME for the future fight**  
by Maj Gordon Emmanuel

The Marine Corps must reimagine how it invests in education to become a more capable warfighting organization. In May 2020, the Joint Chiefs of Staff published guidance titled *Developing Today's Joint Officers for Tomorrow's Ways of War*.<sup>1</sup> The guidance is meant to address the lack of educational creativity and investment within the military as highlighted by the *2018 National Defense Strategy*.<sup>2</sup> When perusing these documents, one can quickly surmise that the need for education most specifically means "strategic education."<sup>3</sup> America's international competitors and adversaries have out-cycled it on the strategic stage. Militarily, each of the Armed Services is facing threats to their role within the joint force because of their inability to strategically anticipate

and adapt to the changing character of war. More specifically, the Marine Corps has found itself in an emergency because of a lack of strategic foresight and an inability to develop competent strategic thinkers with leadership potential. Therefore, it is imperative that the Marine Corps prioritizes the development of future strategists so that it can gain and maintain a strategic military advantage over its adversaries now and in the future.

## **A Lack of Strategic Competence within the Ranks has led to a Strategic Emergency**

Since the Second World War, the U.S. military has done an ineffective job planning and executing at the strategic level of war. The Korean War found the U.S. military in a strategic

stalemate after severely misjudging the capabilities of the enemy and confusing his strategic end-state. The Vietnam War exposed the military's strategic incompetence and inability to understand the problem which ultimately ended in 58,000 service members killed and the enemy accomplishing its strategic goal of spreading communism to the south. In fact, an American colonel once told his NVA counterpart during a meeting in Hanoi, "You know you never beat us on the battlefield." The NVA counterpart simply replied, "That may be so, but it is also irrelevant." Currently, the military is awkwardly trying to withdraw from conflicts in Afghanistan and the greater Middle East that has been plaguing the Nation for the better part of twenty years.<sup>4</sup>

None of these wars of choice achieved the desired strategic effect in large part because military leaders have not been educated in strategy effectively enough. Countless calls for a reimagining of how we invest in strategic education have been made, but ultimately the response by the Marine Corps and the other Services has been minimal. This has caused us to find ourselves in yet another strategic emergency looking for solutions to a problem that should have been identified decades ago.

The last twenty years has found the Marine Corps at war in Iraq and Afghanistan while the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has attained the

***"The society that separates the scholars from its warriors will have its thinking done by cowards and its fighting done by fools."***

**—Thucydides**



**Professional reading is a mainstay of Marine Corps PME. (Photo provided by author.)**

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strategic initiative. The Navy and Marine Corps team has traditionally been known to maintain openness across the global commons, but today, the CCP has all but achieved a *fait accompli* in the South China Sea—which is one of the most important strategic waterways in the world.<sup>5</sup> They have also been able to develop a robust anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategy that seeks to challenge America's ability to project combat power within the first island chain.<sup>6</sup> They effectively analyzed the way that our Navy projects combat power and invested in weapon systems that cost-effectively deters us from operating within these waterways without putting our overly expensive platforms at risk.<sup>7</sup>

Concurrently, the Russian Federation was able to bend the character of war by effectively operating in a “gray-zone,” leaving us utterly unresponsive to their incursions in Crimea and Ukraine as well as future scenarios that may arise in the Baltics. They too were able to exploit gaps within our strategic thinking and ultimately gain an edge in the geopolitical arena. They assessed our capabilities as it pertains to the strength of the NATO alliance and correctly surmised that the risk of annexing Crimea in 2014 was well worth the reward. The result of this military and geopolitical shift in Europe has left America and the European Union with strategic egg on its face.<sup>8</sup>

None of these aforementioned wars and conflicts were the result of tactical blundering. In fact, the U.S. military, most specifically the Marine Corps, has displayed and maintained tactical dominance throughout much of these wars. The blundering occurred at the strategic level and thus presents an opportunity for investment in strategic education now to enable significant capability growth for the Marine Corps in the future.

This article aims to highlight three avenues to close this capability gap: (1) implementing strategic education for officers starting earlier in their careers, (2) growing organic strategic expertise by expanding the number of field grade officers enrolled in graduate-level strategic studies education, and last but not least



**Should twenty years of service be the first time a Marine officer truly feels required to think at the strategic level?** (Photo by Cpl Robert Gonzales.)

(3) igniting and maintaining enthusiasm for continuous learning through self-study to fill the gaps between formal education.

**Facilitating Strategic Competence: Implement Strategic Education Early and Often**

The Marine Corps should immediately begin introducing strategic studies at The Basic School where lieutenants are taught. This may initially cause consternation with those who believe that we need to focus on the “tactical” level of war with lieutenants and should not waste time with strategy, but the argument can be made that this mindset is what has caused our strategic decline. Currently, the first time a Marine officer is formally exposed to strategic studies is at Top Level School. These officers are predominantly lieutenant colonels with eighteen to twenty years of experience. We then expect that ten months of strategic studies will be enough to lay a strategic foundation for our future strategists. This is a misjudgment and severely hampers our ability to gain strategic momentum earlier, which would benefit the Service in the long run.

The Marine Corps needs to teach strategic studies as early as possible because strategic insight and foresight

can only be garnered from decades of sustained study and reflection. Doing so will facilitate strategic curiosity in those who value self-study and display a penchant towards building on one's knowledge base. Moreover, these Marines will be able to analyze current events with a strategic lens that would serve to further their education during novel geopolitical instances.

Additionally, the Marine Corps needs to ensure that its formal schools are rigorous. There has been much debate over the relaxed nature of the military's Intermediate Level and Top Level Schools.<sup>9</sup> Many students have been told by peers and mentors to utilize the year to “take a break.” This is the wrong approach. Though the Marines' daily duties may not require long hours in the field or leading Marines, they should be mentally engaged with the subject matter and invest the time required to attain a first-class education. This requires self-discipline as well as a top down expectation from the institution.

Every successive formal school should aggressively build upon the strategic foundation laid since that Marine's attendance at The Basic School. In fact, the strategic rigor should increase exponentially because of the amount of time that most Marines have between attending formal schools. During these

gaps, the expectation is that the Marine has been conducting self-study, keeping up with current events, and anticipating attendance to their next formal school. It is critical for the Marine Corps to fully expect that Marines will return to formal schooling with increased knowledge of strategic affairs. Additionally, it should be expected that certain individual capabilities such as writing and oral presentation will continue to evolve during a Marine's service despite his or her attendance at a formal school. Doing these things will force self-study in the years when most of the Marine Corps is not in a formal school. The benefit will be increased strategic tempo that will provide a capability at the Marine Corps' upper echelon staffs and commands.

### **Facilitating Strategic Competence: Growing Organic Strategic Expertise**

The Marine Corps instituted a strategic program whereby every year it selects a handful of field grade officers to attain a PhD within the strategic studies field. This is an admirable first step, but it is not enough to build the foundational, strategic expertise that 21st century competition will require. First, the number of officers currently selected for this program is not enough to make a strategic impact at the institutional level.<sup>10</sup> Strategic depth will require vast numbers of officers at the senior levels with this type of education in order to justify the program and ensure it has the desired effect.

Another option that the Marine Corps might consider is selecting 30 majors (O-4) from across the Service, likely most from resident Intermediate Level Schools, to apply for strategic studies programs. Today, the Marine Corps sends two field-grade officers each year to Johns Hopkins as part of the Strategic Thinker's Program to attain a master's degree, but this too is not a big enough investment to benefit the Service writ large.<sup>11</sup> The goal should be to prioritize strategic thinking with a long-term investment beginning immediately. A board should select this group of majors, identifying those who have displayed strategic thinking through self-study, publication, resident and

non-resident performance, reporting senior and reviewing officer endorsement of strategist potential, and the Marine's leadership performance and ability to influence peers and seniors. These officers would then be sent to the most effective strategic studies programs across the world and immediately serve in a utilization tour at a joint command, combatant command, think tank, or another strategic-level billet. This would only be the beginning of a tangible strategic investment in what we would expect to be at least a decade or more of service beyond the first-class education. If done correctly, this will build a core of strategists that will continue to provide diverse insight to the leadership of the Marine Corps through various interactions, senior-level billets, and publication in military journals. This will assist in ensuring that the Marine Corps stays ahead of the strategic curve and bends the character of warfare in its favor.

*"Once you're through learning, you're through."  
—Coach John Wooden*

### **Facilitating Strategic Competence: Continuous Learning through Self-Study**

The ultimate concept that ensures that the aforementioned recommendations equate to strategic competence is continuous learning through self-study. Marine officers will always be knee-deep in learning the requirements of their current job, but the Marine Corps needs to set the expectation that Marine officers are learning about the requirements of their potential future jobs as well. As highlighted throughout this article, no amount of technical expertise can overcome an ineffective strategy. Therefore, it is important for Marine officers to have a rigorous self-study program that not only prepares them for attendance to formal schools but also prepares them for assignment to strategic-level billets.

There are a couple things the Marine Corps can do to immediately set itself on a trajectory to facilitate self-study. First, the Marine Corps must take the Commandant's Professional Reading List (CPRL) more seriously. The latest glance at the CPRL does not require an officer to ever read *On War* by Clausewitz. I do not find it necessary to debate the merits of the book, but I will argue that an officer that is of flag rank that has not read Clausewitz does not have the strategic foundation that is required. *On War* is a book that can easily fit onto the "Career Level Officer" list so that captains are aware of Clausewitz's articulation of the "nature of war." The purpose of this is not to create a cohort of "Clausewitzians" who treat his work as dogma but to build a cohort of strategist that are contextually aware of the body of theory that most militaries around the world are studying.

The number of strategic-level books that an officer reads should increase as one progresses through the ranks. As mentioned, it takes years of reflection to gain the necessary insight and foresight to effectively learn and apply the strategic lessons learned from self-study. A company-grade officer must master his technical requirements but should also be able to articulate the strategic conundrums that the nation is facing during his day. This can only be garnered through reading and self-study since the Marine Corps cannot benefit from sending officers to schools for years on end. The solution to taking the CPRL more seriously is to make it a requirement prior to promotion to have read the books required for the rank. Additionally, reporting seniors can decide how they would verify that said books were read, but a mandatory comment should be required to highlight the officer's ability to conduct self-study and to benefit from said study.

The next thing the Marine Corps must do is highlight the Marine officers who are creating hubs of strategic education within their spheres of influence. The current fitness report has an attribute titled "Developing Subordinates," but it is unclear if this attribute and, more importantly, this concept is being prioritized across the Service. Officers

need to be tangibly evaluated on the number of potential strategists that they are able to cultivate. ROs should be required to comment on an RS's ability to identify and develop talent that is likely to serve effectively in strategic billets.

success. This is ultimately what matters to policymakers.

Military strategy is largely the province of officers. The competence of the cohort of officers devising strategy will ultimately determine if the tactical re-

***The Marine Corps must provide more than just tactical excellence and the ability to respond when the Nation is least ready.***

RSs and ROs should also be required to comment specifically on the culture that an officer creates as it pertains to self-study amongst one's subordinates. These are the type of leaders that the Marine Corps should ultimately want to invest in to further educate and assign to billets of strategic impact.

***“A leader without either interest in or knowledge of the history and theory of warfare—the intellectual content of the military profession—is a leader in appearance only.”***  
—MCDP 1, Warfighting

**Disclaimer**

Readers will notice that my argument is focused on the strategic education of Marine Corps officers. This is purposeful. As previously mentioned, the Marine Corps has performed exceptionally at the tactical level of war. This level of warfare is largely dominated by enlisted Marines. They have ensured that the last 600 meters of battle has brought the enemy an early expiration. Unfortunately, those tactical accomplishments have not equated to strategic

sults attained by enlisted Marines are worth the cost. Marine officers are charged with linking the policy objectives with the military objective. This is strategy. When strategy is ineffectively developed, enlisted Marines die in vain—despite their tactical successes. The institution is therefore morally obligated to ensure strategic education is prioritized so that enlisted Marines' successes are not irrelevant.

**Conclusion**

The Marine Corps is always either fighting against a foreign adversary in some far away battlefield or fighting for its existence on the battlefield of Capitol Hill. The Marine Corps must provide more than just tactical excellence and the ability to respond when the Nation is least ready. It needs to re-awaken its tradition of looking forward at the changing character of warfare as well as the geopolitical implications of those changes. The only way for the Marine Corps to do this is to heavily invest in the strategic education of its officers. This education must come earlier than usually expected, and it must be consistent. The expectation of Marine officers from the institution should be that self-study and familiarity with strategic affairs is a must and the ability to serve as a strategist is required. If the Marine Corps makes these investments and commitments, it will be able to anticipate the strategic challenges of the future and posture itself to maintain the strategic initiative over America's adversaries.

**Notes**

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