

A Deeper Shade of Blue

The School of Advanced Air and Space Studies

By STEPHEN D. CHIABOTTI



Although Alfred Hurley and others have extolled the virtues of “serving two professions,”¹ military education is, by and large, an oxymoronic expression. The reasons are manifold, but the essence has to do with loyalty and logic. The military profession revolves around loyalty. It is “the first axiom of command” and is generally expressed in following orders. Education is centered in logic. It is the touchstone of dialectic and is generally expressed through thoughtful and provoking questions.

In other words, loyalty demands answers in the adherence to orders, while education evokes questions—concerning just about everything. Hence, students attending military schools often suffer a form of psychological whiplash. The very nature of education suggests that students question established practices and, by inference, the people who institute them. The military profession, on the other hand, generally demands adherence to the established order and loyalty to the people in charge. The so-called terrazzo gap that defines the plaza between the academic building and the commandant of cadets office at the Air Force Academy is thus very real and almost unavoidable. What the gap suggests is that military students need to separate their studies from their military instincts. No institution does this better than the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies (SAASS).

History

The School of Advanced Air and Space Studies was established 19 years ago by Air Force Chief of Staff Larry Welch in response to a question from a Representative from Missouri, who is currently the Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee. The Honorable Ike Skelton was concerned about

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strategy and wondered where and how the Air Force would produce the next generation of strategists. SAASS was the answer, and its mission was narrowly defined to do exactly that: produce *strategists*—not leaders, not warriors, not even planners. Strategy became the portal to the rigorous liberal education that has defined the first generation of SAASS graduates. Although the school has never developed a formal definition of strategy, the curriculum suggests that it is best derived from a thoroughgoing study of history and theory. That was indeed the conclusion of the original 10 faculty members who deliberated nearly a year on the curriculum before entertaining their first class of 25 students in 1991.

A commitment to history is evident in the school motto: “From the Past, the Future.” A foundation of theory pervades nearly every course offered. In some ways, the curriculum is fashioned after the scientific method, which Robert Boyle expressed so succinctly in 1664 as “investigation by hypothesis subjected to rigorous experimental cross examination.”²² At SAASS, military, political, and organizational theories form the hypotheses, and history and experience the cross examination. Students are then invited to further synthesis in exercises as diverse as course papers, war-games, staff rides, and thesis research and composition.

The result, as the one-time dean of American military historians Theodore Ropp once stated, “has no practical value whatsoever, but reasoning through the interplay of theory and history will make your students better at just about everything else they do.” Why? Because modern war is a thinking person’s game, and SAASS teaches people to think. Just how is revealed in an examination of the students, faculty, and curriculum.

SAASS is, by definition, an advanced study group. It has complements in the Army’s School of Advanced Military Studies, the Marine School of Advanced Warfighting, and the Naval Operational Planners Course. All these programs require prior or simultaneous (in the case of the Naval Operational Planners Course) attendance of resident intermediate education. The Joint Advanced Warfighting School breaks ranks with the other programs and functions as either intermediate or senior education for its students, without prerequisites. All of the advanced programs exhibit more differences than similarities as they serve the needs of their constituencies. SAASS is the most clearly focused on strategy, and

because of that it is perhaps the most “academic” in character.

Air Force and sister-Service students must volunteer and have attended resident intermediate education at one of the following: the four traditional Service intermediate schools, Naval Postgraduate School, Air Force Institute of Technology, National Defense Intelligence College, Advanced School of Air Mobility, or the Air Force Intern Program with its residency requirements at The George Washington University. International students must have attended an

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English-speaking intermediate-level residence program and score in the top 5 percent of the Test of English as a Foreign Language. These entrance requirements serve several purposes. First, they ensure a relatively high-quality recruitment base, as most of the Services send only their best officers to intermediate-level education. Second, the previous year in school affords a cognitive platform regarding makeup and general function of Department of Defense (DOD) agencies as well as a preliminary investigation of warfare at the operational and strategic levels. Finally, SAASS students benefit from socialization in seminar

manners, reading, writing, and research. Their intellectual turbines are already turning when they come aboard.

Qualifications

All candidates meet a central selection board in early November. Among the Air Force constituency (about 80 percent of the class makeup), nearly one in four officers who are eligible applies, and about one in five is accepted. One member each of the Air National Guard, the Air Force Reserve, Army, Navy, Marines, and three allied foreign nations round out the annual complement of students. While the exact numbers are elusive, promotion statistics and career progression data suggest that these men and women come from the top 5 to 10 percent of their groups. Early classes were heavily populated with fighter and bomber crew members and were overwhelmingly operational in their credentials. The increasing percentage of space professionals, special operators, intelligence officers, communications specialists, and people from career fields as diverse as weather, maintenance, Judge Advocate General, and public affairs in recent classes reflects both the changing nature of warfare and the maturity of the school. Strategy is a mongrel, perhaps best derived from several pedigrees. While this principle applies to the curriculum, it also pervades the selection of students and faculty.

Although most informed observers would point to students as the true strength

Student gives presentation on strategy in Normandy, France



and most unique asset of SAASS, the faculty is not far behind. Again, mongrel in lot but all thoroughbreds, the faculty is 60 percent civilian and 40 percent military. Members represent various fields of either political science or history. Nearly half of the civilians are retired military officers, but all faculty members hold doctorates from some of the top universities in the world, and nearly all are recognized experts in their field. Of note, SAASS grows its own military faculty members by sending two of its more promising students off for PhDs each year. After completing their schooling, these unique officers “reblue” in a high-impact command or staff job before returning for faculty duty. This commitment to faculty—both in terms of quality, with terminal degrees, and quantity, with a student-to-faculty ratio of three to one or less—is unique in military education and almost unrivaled in the civilian sector as well. This combination of qualified faculty and motivated students sets a fine table for curriculum, which is, at base, a conversation among principals.

Curriculum

Michael Howard once suggested that we should study military history in width, depth, and context.³ SAASS attempts the same with strategy. Subjects as diverse as organizational theory, quantum mechanics, information theory, politics, religion, history, and psychology are addressed to help weave the tapestry

of strategy. Students normally read a book a night. By the end of the year, they have worked through over 150 volumes, which they keep as part of their professional library. Although they read nearly 35,000 pages, it is the accountability for the material that motivates the exercise. Students meet with professors in seminars of 10 or fewer for 2 hours, 4 times a week. Professors evaluate student comprehension and conceptualization of the material. Eleven mandatory courses range from military and naval theory to irregular warfare,

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terrorism, and information. The interlocking narrative of airpower history and theory is also featured.

Courses vary from 2 to 5 weeks in length, and each requires both seminar participation and a paper, usually 10 pages in length. Oral comprehensive exams at the end of the year evaluate both retention and synthesis. The school itself is situated in the Fairchild Research Information Center (updated parlance for “library”), perhaps the best in DOD for security-related research. The same building houses the substantial archival holdings of the Air Force Historical Research

Agency. Enconced in the research laboratory, each student is issued a laptop computer and a private study carrel (sometimes referred to as a “four-by-eight den of sorrow”). Other perks include a 10-day staff ride to Europe or Asia in the fall and a week of air operations center training at Hurlburt Field in the Florida panhandle, usually in March. These exercises connect abstractions in the curriculum to the reality of history and current operations, with a little motivation thrown into the mix.

Students repay for the good times by producing a thesis. This is the only elective in the curriculum and generates the most angst among students. In fact, in the end-of-course surveys, it is the most despised event in the curriculum—though students appreciate it as the years pass. In fact, 5 years after graduation, the thesis is viewed as the most valuable and enduring exercise of the SAASS experience. Despite pressure for directed research, students are encouraged to pick their own topics—to ask questions bearing on strategy that originate from their experience in the field and ruminate in the halls of theory and history encountered in the curriculum. Each student is assigned a faculty committee of two professors, who must agree that the work meets publication standards before they approve it. Thesis work represents the most time-intensive part of the curriculum for faculty and students. Eight weeks of research and writing time are interspersed throughout the total 49 weeks of the program. Topic selection begins in August, committees are finalized in October, and advisors and students begin working drafts in February. The school funds both travel for research and publication of the manuscripts.

Many thesis topics appear offbeat, and some of the conclusions and recommendations challenge the established order, but all advance the field of strategic thinking. For example, a recent thesis on the neglect of aerial refueling resources was titled “De-ranged: Global Power and Air Mobility in the New Millennium.” Another seems counterintuitive: “Learning to Leave: The Pre-eminence of Disengagement in American Military Strategy.” Others, such as “Centering the Ball: Command and Control in Joint Warfare,” advance perspectives well beyond the mediums traditionally inhabited by Airmen. At the end of the day, SAASS theses are the second most important product of the school, falling behind only the graduates.

Students exchange ideas in seminar



Graduates

SAASS graduate assignments fit no template. There are no coded positions for graduates in the Air Force, and the entire placement algorithm is reinvented each year. Graduates go on to key staff and command positions throughout DOD. To obtain a graduate, agencies must make a request providing justification. Since there are nearly three times as many requests as graduates, the Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans racks and stacks the requisitions while the SAASS commandant plays the traditional commander's role in recommending which faces should fill the spaces deemed most important. Background, performance, and disposition color recommendations. Ultimately, the Air Force Personnel Center makes the assignments, although it is not unusual for four-star generals to get involved, as they do in other assignments.

There is perhaps too much emphasis on the first posting after school and not enough on subsequent assignments. SAASS is, after all, an education for the remainder of a career, and the program is almost completely devoid of training for specific staff, planning, or command jobs. Consequently, dialogue with the personnel system can be problematic. Phrases such as “pay-back tour” and “coded positions” have little meaning when it comes to graduate assignments. Some graduates return immediately to operations because career imperatives dictate as much. Others go to jobs never before occupied by SAASS graduates because the flavor of work or the situation in the security community calls for a strategist.

In general, this “ad hocery” in assigning graduates has worked well. The flexibility of the process allows last-minute changes that correspond to shifts in the security climate, and few graduates are left to molder in the

crevices and backwaters that arise from static systems. As a result, they contribute with impact where things are happening on the Air Staff, in combatant commands, numbered air forces, and key government agencies. Supervisors continually laud “the different quality of thinking” that graduates bring to new situations and ill-defined problems. Modifying theory to fit context appears to be the signature capability afforded by their education, and this behavior has been rewarded handsomely.

Although SAASS was not designed to fill a square in the promotion ladder, the extra year of schooling appears to have hurt very few of its graduates. While statistics represent a moving target, we know the following after 16 classes: 100 percent of graduates have been promoted to O-5, nearly 95 percent to O-6, and among those senior enough to meet the general-officer board, almost 25 percent to O-7 or higher. In all, 18 graduates have made flag rank, with many more anticipated as subsequent classes hit the window of opportunity.

Anecdotal evidence from the school's selection boards suggests a continued upward trend. Not only is the number of applications increasing each year (from 25 in 1992 to over 150 in the years beyond 2004), but so is the quality of applicants. Most of the colonels scoring records at the selection boards are graduates—by design. At the end of the day, many admit they would not have made the cut among the applicants they scored. Some of the faculty who have been with the school since its inception also comment on the improving intellectual capacity of each inbound class. Spectacular performance of graduates pursuing faculty-development PhDs in some of the country's most highly regarded programs speaks to first-rate intellect and work ethic, as well as solid preparation. In other words, SAASS has produced warrior-scholars of the first magnitude, but not without turbulence.

One of the issues continually facing faculty and students is the line between zealotry and responsible advocacy. Although SAASS was configured as an airpower school within the air Service, its charter to produce strategists generates a curriculum concerned with the use of military force in support of statecraft. Some would contend that there is no such thing as an airpower strategy, only the role that airpower might properly play in strategy writ large. Others would opine that strategy is inherently a joint activity and that the focus on strategy makes SAASS

an inherently joint school. Clearly, the curriculum is more directed at producing a joint force commander than the leader of an air component, although graduates emerge fully equipped to discuss and analyze airpower in all its complexity. Some of the more strident air and space proponents are disappointed by this approach and its outcome. They contend that SAASS has succeeded only in producing smarter critics or more clever apologists, high praise indeed from the fire-breathers and afterburners! The biggest problem with zealots is that they are seldom listened to. Responsible advocates, on the other hand, whether airminded or otherwise, create influence in proportion to the power of their logic and persuasion of their rhetoric.

The desideratum of the American military is joint warfighting. Although it can stand improvement, the United States has, throughout much of its history, fought jointly better than any other nation. *Joint Force Quarterly* itself testifies to a continued commitment, and the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies maintains a similar disposition. Despite those who would steer a more parochial course, the faculty and students continue to view strategy as an exceedingly complex problem that eludes any form of single-factor or single-Service solution. Students and faculty may sit in Aeron chairs, but the webbing is a subtle shade of purple, as are the carpeting and wallpaper that deck the halls. More importantly, so is the thinking. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Alfred F. Hurley and D.M. Bishop, “Serving Two Professions: History at the Air Force Academy” (Colorado Springs: U.S. Air Force, 1979).

² Robert Boyle, *Some Considerations Touching the Usefulness of Experimental Natural Philosophy* (n.p., 1664), 12–13.

³ Michael E. Howard, *The Causes of War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 195–196.



Students confer in study carrel area of library

SAASS