

Chapter 3

Operational Net Assessment Or, Preparing to Lose the Next War

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*Our awareness of the world and our capacity to deal intelligently with its problems are shaped not only by the history we know but by what we do not know. Ignorance, especially the ignorance of educated men, can be a more powerful force than knowledge.*²

In the early years of this century one of the bureaucrats on the staff of Joint Forces Command, who passed for a thinker in that dismal backwater of the American military, developed a concept which he termed “operational net assessment.”³ The concept received considerable attention not only in the command, but throughout the Department of Defense. In fact a number of expensive exercises were planned and executed – all at considerable waste to the American taxpayer. In the end, one of the best educated senior leaders in the American military, General James Mattis, became the commander of Joint Forces Command. He promptly fired the individual and discarded these contentless concepts such as “operational net assessment” and “effects based operations,” as the useless Potemkin villages that they were.

So, you might ask, why is it that I have agreed to discuss this useless, foolish effort that has already completely disappeared from the lexicon of American military thought. There is, I believe, a cautionary tale here that I hope will exercise some modicum of influence over the American military as well as the militaries of its allies, as we all enter the looming postwar, interwar period of the

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² Michael Howard, *The Lessons of History* (New Haven, CT, 1991), p. 16.

³ Astonishingly, the individual, a retired army colonel, never consulted with the Office of Net Assessment to discover what that office and its director, Andrew Marshall had been doing over the past forty years in grappling with the concept of “net assessment.”

coming years. This tale has to do with the crucial importance of professional military education and how its disregard can exercise a significant impact on the preparation of senior commanders for the crucial tasks they will undoubtedly confront in the employment of military forces in that murderous, uncertain, and difficult endeavor that we term war

Our story begins in the 1970s and 1980s as the American military recovered from its devastating experience in Vietnam – to all intents and purposes, the worst strategic defeat the United States has suffered in its relatively short history.⁴ Confronted with the massive Soviet buildup that had begun in the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis, the American military transitioned from a conscript force to an all-volunteer force during the period. Not capable of matching Soviet numbers and certainly with no desire to fight a nuclear war against the Soviet Union, the “new look” U.S. military emphasized superior training and technological prowess.⁵ The training revolution of calibrated ranges and careful, critical analysis of the performance of pilots, soldiers, and weapons systems created training realism that had rarely, if ever, occurred before in human history.⁶ The training grounds of “Red Flag,” “Top Gun,” Twenty-Nine Palms,” and the National Training center honed U.S. ground and air forces to an extraordinary level of peacetime military effectiveness. The results showed clearly in the 1991 Gulf War.

Equally impressive was the improvement in the technological sophistication of American weapons systems. By the mid-1980s that sophistication had reached the point where the Soviet Marshal Ogarkov commented that the technological changes occurring in America’s armaments “make it possible to sharply increase (by at least an order of magnitude) the destructive potential of conventional weapons, bringing them closer, so to speak, to weapons of mass destruction in

⁴ In a tactical sense the War of 1812 represented a more disastrous performance by the ground forces of the United States with even the national capital burned by the British. But in the end America suffered no strategic loss except to its prestige.

⁵ The “new look” military was a catch phrase of Dwight Eisenhower’s military in the post-Korean War period, but it is certainly applicable to the American military during this period.

⁶ German combat training during the Second World War may have prepared troops as well for the battlefield, but did so only by killing and wounding large numbers of soldiers.

terms of effectiveness.”⁷ However, for the most part, American analysts failed to see the enormous improvement in precision and technology that the huge changes in U.S. weaponry had wrought, nor did they fully recognize the advantages that the training regimen would provide U.S. tactical forces, once they found themselves engaged in conventional combat. Thus, it was not surprising that there was considerable hand wringing among American defense analysts about the supposed military effectiveness of Saddam Hussein’s military forces, supposedly “battle-hardened” by the experiences of the Iran-Iraq War, in the run up to the first Gulf War in early 1991.⁸

The shattering American victories in January and February 1991 came as a stunning surprise not only to the American public, but to many in the American military as well. The president announced an end to the trauma of Vietnam. For the most part the examination of the war within the American military was largely self-congratulatory.⁹ The failure to topple Saddam appeared as a relatively minor matter, at least to those on the outside.¹⁰

What happened thereafter was the laying out of what turned out to be a road to disaster. Too many throughout the officer corps as well as in the analytic communities believed that a new era had dawned. Technology was now going to allow America’s military forces to remove friction from the battlefield; precision was going to allow U.S. forces to achieve unheard of kill ratios on the battlefields of the future; and every move made by the enemy was going to occur under the watchful eyes of American reconnaissance assets. There was unfortunately insufficient counter argument heard from the educational system of the military,

⁷ Quoted in Barry D. Watts and Williamson Murray, “Military Innovation in Peacetime,” in Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett, *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 376-377. The implications of Ogarkov’s remarks led to a recognition that American advances had largely undermined the military advantages that had accrued the Soviets as a result of their massive buildup.

⁸ Among those supposed experts who bemoaned the supposed awesome capabilities of Iraq’s “battle-hardened” military forces from the Iran-Iraq War was Edward Luttwak. The author heard marine officers at Quantico argue shortly before the ground war that U.S. forces would suffer well over 10,000 casualties should the Coalition be forced to fight the Iraqis on the ground.

⁹ The only exception was the *Gulf War Air Power Survey*, but that examination only occurred because the secretary of the Air Force, Donald Rice, established the study group against the strong opposition of the institutional air force.

¹⁰ For Iraqis, however, it was another matter since the dictator used helicopter gunships and gas to put down the rebellion that broke out throughout the country, with the exception of al-Anbar province. Despite his calls for the Iraqis to revolt, President Bush made no effort to protect them from the regime’s savagery.

the staff and war colleges. Thus, there was a failure of the American military system to prepare its future generals and admirals to understand the fundamental nature of war or the importance of grasping the context of the war on which one has embarked. That failure lay to a considerable extent in the failure of the American professional military educational system.¹¹

Of all the professions in which human beings engage, that of the military is not only the most demanding physically, but intellectually as well.¹² The interwar period between the Vietnam and Gulf Wars saw outstanding preparation for the physical side of war; the training, tactical, and operational preparation to fight. On the other hand, the intellectual side saw a far less satisfactory picture. Outside the Naval War College – and even there the navy consistently failed to send its best officers to Newport – the other major institutions of professional military education saw minimal focus on the study of war. Rather the services appear to have regarded their staff and war colleges as places for officers to rest in their busy careers.¹³ In other words, unlike the period between the world wars, when the system of professional military education had been one marked by serious study and honest, thorough efforts to understand where technological change was leading military capabilities, most of the staff and war colleges became backwaters where real education simply did not take place.¹⁴ In terms of preparing for a world of a single major opponent, the Soviet Union, that did not matter.

To all intents and purposes the result was an American military trained to fight one kind of war: a great conventional conflict that aimed to deny the Red

¹¹ This would have required a careful theoretical preparation as well as historical preparation of future officers with an emphasis on the classics of Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, and Thucydides at the forefront. At the Army War College in 1998, the students read no Thucydides, no Sun Tzu, and ten pages of *On War*, which they discussed during a seminar that lasted only a single hour.

¹² Clausewitz suggests “in our view even junior positions of command require outstanding intellectual qualities...” Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ, 1976), p. 111.

¹³ The Naval War College went through a wrenching change in the early 1970s under the leadership of Admiral Stansfield Turner, who introduced a graduate level approach to the education of officers and created the most outstanding course on the study of strategy – one that remains a model for how one should approach the study of strategy.

¹⁴ There were, of course, exceptions: in particular the Naval War College and the second year programs at the staff colleges (the School of Advanced Military Studies at Fort Leavenworth, the School of Advanced Warfighting at Marine Base Quantico, and the School of Advanced Airpower Studies at Maxwell Air Force Base). Unfortunately, these schools only educated a relatively small portion of the officer corps.

Army victory on the plains of northern Europe. As for serious intellectual preparation for understanding war and strategy in the widest sense, it did not exist. In both 1991 and 2003 the American military got the kind of conventional war for which they had prepared.¹⁵ The not surprising results in both cases were devastating victories against a third world opponent whose military forces represented a poor replacement for the capabilities the Red Army would have brought to any fight.

The weakness in professional military education did not matter so much in the 1970s and 1980s when virtually all of the field grade officers had had extensive experience in Vietnam and the realities of war, as opposed to war on paper or war in theory. For them, there was no magic, silver bullet of technology that would turn war into a simple, predictable contest. But as the American military entered the 1990s, fewer and fewer veterans of the Vietnam War remained. Even in the higher ranks, those who had had the experience of a war in which strategy, recognizing the political context within which the war was fought, and understanding that they were fighting against a ferocious, well-trained, and highly motivated opponent all had mattered, gradually retired and found themselves replaced by those who had lived through the tactical and technological regeneration of the American military, but had not experienced the realities of a conflict such as that in South Vietnam or in the skies over North Vietnam.

The result was that for many of the officers, particularly in the navy and air force, but some also in the army as well, a new era had dawned – one where the technological virtuosity of the American military would allow for unheard of capabilities. The argument went along the following lines: the overwhelming technological superiority of the American military and the sheer crunching capabilities of the computers that it possessed could and would remove what Clausewitz had termed friction from the “battle space.” In other words, U.S. forces would be able to achieve what the Pentagon termed “battle space dominance” against any opponent so rash as to challenge the United States. One of the more bizarre corollaries was the argument that U.S. Forces would be able

¹⁵ Fortunately, Saddam made no preparations to fight an insurgent war in spite of the advice of several of his more competent commanders. For Iraq’s preparations and Saddam’s concepts and assumptions for defending his regime see Kevin Woods, Michael R. Pease, Mark E. Stout, Williamson Murray, and James G. Lacey, *The Iraqi Perspectives Report, Saddam’s Senior Leadership on Operation Iraqi Freedom from the Official Joint Forces Command Report* (Annapolis, MD, 2006).

to gain something called “information dominance” over their opponents. Ironically, during the initial stages of the invasion of Iraq, CNN quoted the Coalition’s chief of intelligence that he was “drowning in intelligence reports.”

The most farfetched of these arguments was propagated by the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Bill Owens. Owens claimed that the advances in technological capabilities would allow U.S. forces to see and understand everything that was happening in an area 200 miles by 200 miles, and do so in real time.¹⁶ Moreover, Owens went so far as to claim that America’s computing power would remove friction from the battlefield, a claim that flew in the face of common sense, not to mention the realities of a non-linear universe.¹⁷ One should note that such views were not only prevalent throughout substantial portions of the officer corps, but among civilians like Paul Wolfowitz and Donald Rumsfeld, both of whom would play such dismal roles in the Iraq tragedy.

Throughout the 1990s, analysts at think tanks wrote papers and assembled briefing charts dealing with concepts such as “effects based operations,” “rapid decisive operations,” “information dominance,” “revolutions in military affairs,” and, of course, “operational net assessment.”¹⁸ There was even an attempt to suggest that the principles of war should be rewritten to provide an understanding of how the technological revolution had entirely overturned past thinking on military affairs.¹⁹ In fact, those concepts rested on no historical basis. Most of their authors either were entirely ignorant of history, or were so enthusiastic about the onrushing technological revolution that they simply dismissed the study of historical antecedence as of no relevance to the current possibilities open to the American military.

Clausewitz has a wonderful critique of the nonsensical theories of his own time that fits what was going on within the American military:

¹⁶ See William A. Owens, with Ed Offley, *Lifting the Fog of War* (New York, 2001)

¹⁷ For a brilliant refutation of this nonsense see Barry D. Watts, *Clausewitzian Friction and Future War* (Washington, DC, 1996).

¹⁸ In spite of the best efforts of the Office of Net Assessment to bring a sensible, historical based understanding to the concept of “revolutions in military affairs,” Andrew Marshall had little success. For a historically based examination of the concept see MacGregor Knox and Williamson Murray, *The Dynamics of Military Revolution, 1300-2050* (Cambridge, 2000).

¹⁹ This author was asked to participate in such an effort: His paper, “Changing the Principles of War?” is included in a collection of his essays: see Williamson Murray, *War, Strategy, and Military Effectiveness* (Cambridge, 2011).

A far more serious menace is the retinue of *jargon, technicalities, and metaphors* that attend these systems. They swarm everywhere – a lawless rabble of camp followers. Any critic who has not seen fit to adopt a system – either because he has not found one that he likes or because he has not got that far – will still apply a scrap of one as if it were a ruler... Thus, it has come about that our theoretical and critical literature, instead of giving plain, straightforward arguments in which the author at least always knows what he is saying and the reader what he is reading, is crammed with jargon, ending at obscure crossroads where the author loses his reader.²⁰

The difficulty that all these concepts and theories of future war confronted was the fact that none of them had any connection with the lessons and reality of war in the past. Their devotees trumpeted their steadfast belief that history was no longer relevant to the examination of future war; in other words computers and technology had replaced its study. The very ahistoricism of the senior officers incapable of perceiving the fact that the emperor had no clothes allowed such concepts to creep into the very *Weltanschauungen* of too many of those who would be responsible for conducting the efforts against the insurgency in Iraq from summer 2003 through to 2006. Quite simply, when the American military exited from Vietnam, its officers drew two basic conclusions. The first was that given the conventional and nuclear threat that the Soviets posed in Europe – and elsewhere – the United States needed to prepare to fight war at the high end. Wars of insurgency were going to be largely irrelevant to America’s military. In retrospect, there was nothing inherently wrong with that assumption, given the extent of the Soviet threat. But the danger lay in the problem of how well would the American military respond to the threats of a world where the Soviet Union no longer existed, confined as it would be to the “dustbin of history.”²¹

The second conclusion was that since the United States would be unlikely to fight an insurgency in the near future, its officers did not need to study such conflicts. From the perspective of those who returned from multiple tours in

²⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 168-169.

²¹ Leon Trotsky’s phrase.

Southeast Asia, that second assumption made sense, since they had experienced a war of insurgency firsthand. The problem with that assumption was that by the early 1990s the experience of Vietnam was steadily being washed out of the officer corps, even among the senior officer corps. With a system of professional military education that gave virtually no emphasis to the study of military history, the officers who came on active duty after 1972 received no serious education in the past lessons of wars against insurgencies, or in the parlance of the time, guerrilla war.

The crucial educational experience that the serious study of past wars imparts to those who are exposed to military and strategic history is that it provides officers with the ability to recognize patterns, and the recognition of the patterns in a present conflict allows military leaders to recognize the nature of the war on which they have been embarked.²² In other words, it opens up the ability to ask the right questions based on real human rather than theoretical experience or assumptions. Without the ability to ask the right questions, one will be incapable of understanding the war that one is fighting. In effect, one will end up in asking the wrong questions, and no matter how sophisticated the analysis, the wrong questions will always lead to answers that are either irrelevant or dangerously misleading.

History also suggests that there is a correlation between military institutions that innovate successfully in peacetime and those that adapt to the real conditions of war.²³ Military institutions have invariably gotten the parameters of the next war wrong to one extent or another, largely because their prewar conceptions have not matched reality. In this regard the peacetime education of officers has proven essential to providing the intellectual tools necessary for commanders to recognize the nature of the war in which they are engaged. At its best, such education has not only examined the study of war and the potential for tactical and operational innovations, but has honed their ability to think critically. The detailed study of campaigns, military culture, and the nature of command and leadership by the great generals and admirals of the past provides officers with the critical faculty to make crucial and realistic judgments in the future.

²² For an examination of the importance of history to the preparation of the military profession see Williamson Murray and Richard Hart Sinnreich, *The Past as Prologue, The Importance of History to the Military Profession* (Cambridge, 2004).

²³ See Watts and Murray, "Military innovation in peacetime," p. 414.

In an email to a professor at the National War College, whose students were questioning the need to study history in their professional development, General Mattis put the importance of history to the military profession in the starkest terms:

[U]ltimately a real understanding of history means that we face nothing new under the sun. For all the ‘Fourth Generation of War’ intellectuals running around today saying that the fundamental nature of war has fundamentally changed, the tactics are wholly new, etc., I must respectfully say: ‘Not really.’ Alexander the Great would not be the least perplexed by the enemy we face right now in Iraq, and our leaders going into this fight do their troops a disservice by not studying (studying, versus just reading) the men who have gone before us. We have been fighting on this planet for 5,000 years and we should take advantage of their experience. ‘Winging it’ and filling body bags as we sort out what works reminds us of the moral dictates and the cost of competence in our profession.²⁴

Unfortunately, General Mattis’ email was all too prophetic. Those in charge of the American occupation of Iraq, military as well as civilian, chose to learn from filling body bags rather than from history. It was not as if the American forces occupying the wreckage of Saddam Hussein’s murderous dictatorship were the first in modern times to confront an insurgency in Mesopotamia. In fact, the British had confronted a massive uprising of the Iraqi tribes in 1920 in the first years of their occupation of the territory they would eventually turn into Iraq. The British general who was responsible for putting down the insurgency then wrote his memoirs of that effort, a memoir that reads eerily like the experiences of the American occupation after April 2003. As he noted in his memoirs about his experiences: “I regret that on my arrival in Mesopotamia I was too much preoccupied with military matters and too little informed regarding the political problems.”²⁵ For those who have read the memoirs, the American

²⁴ Email from major General Mattis to a professor at National Defense University, 2003. Used with permission of the author

²⁵ See Lieutenant General Aylmer I. Haldane, *The Insurrection in Mesopotamia* (London, 1922).

occupation was indeed a case of “*déjà vu* all over again.”²⁶

But it was not as if the Iraqi insurgency of 1920 had been the only insurgent effort to occur during the course of the twentieth century. In fact insurgent wars have occurred more often than conventional conflicts: Central America, the Philippines, China, Malaya, Kenya, Greece, Vietnam (not once, but twice), Yemen, Algeria, the list is almost endless. Yet, virtually none of these conflicts appeared in the syllabi of the staff and war colleges in the period from 1973 through to 2005. For example, this author found himself astonished by the fact that none of the majors in his elective at the Marine Corps Command and Staff College had ever heard of, much less seen *The Battle of Algiers*, the classic film on the French experience in fighting the Algerian insurgency.²⁷ With the serious study of history eliminated from the intellectual preparation of officers for high command,²⁸ then it was relatively easy for the charlatans to not only gain a hearing but persuade senior officers of their wisdom.

Thus, in 2003 it seemed nothing more than a simple matter to destroy Iraq’s armed forces in a lightning campaign that was termed rapid decisive operations. However, when an insurgency then sprung up out of the wreckage of Saddam’s murderous regime, most American commanders in Iraq were not prepared to respond. This was the case not only in an individual, but in an organizational sense. It was not until well into the conflict that the army and marine corps seriously undertook the writing of a counter-insurgency manual to guide commanders in the field. Thus, the war against the insurgency simply did not fit into the patterns of the military operations their professional education had posited. Colonel Peter Mansoor, a brigade commander in the 1st Armored Division during the first year of the insurgency, commented to the author about the performance of many senior commanders during this period:

Too many leaders (both civilian and military) at the highest level [brigade commander and above] or those positioned in staffs at operational headquarter or in strategic executive branch positions

²⁶ A bon mot attributed to the great American baseball player and philosopher Yogi Berra.

²⁷ Nor had any of them heard of Alistair Horne’s magnificent study of that conflict, *A Savage War of Peace, Algeria, 1954-1962* (New York, 1982).

²⁸ There were and are exceptions with senior officers who have seriously embarked on their intellectual preparation for higher command through a rigorous study of history and other disciplines.

were excessively involved in what was happening in tactical units at the expense of developing a long-term strategy and operational concept to implement it.... There was little conception of the operational art at CJTF-7.²⁹ Units initially occupied zones that transcended local governmental boundaries.... Military units were more or less distributed evenly across Iraq, even though it soon became apparent that the heart of the insurgency lay in the Sunni triangle.... Shortage of forces, lack of vision, or lack of will prevented a more permanent presence in the area and an effective plan to deal with Fallujah until after it had become a symbol of the insurgency.... Movement of Coalition forces to consolidated bases should have been contingent upon the creation of effective local security forces. By leaving early, we ceded portions [of the countryside] to the insurgents.³⁰

In Iraq, too many U.S. military leaders at the higher levels learned how to deal with the insurgency over an extended period of time. In other words, they learned by filling body bags. And during that time the insurgents managed to sink their roots down into fertile soil. Those commanders were not able to draw on intellectual preparations from peacetime.³¹ To a considerable extent, their performance in the first year of the insurgency was almost as if there were no applicable lessons from America's experiences in the Vietnam War, much less from the recent history of the Mesopotamian Valley.³² Thus, they were incapable or unwilling to recognize the patterns from the past. The sad story is that the United States and its military forces managed to repeat virtually all of the

²⁹ Combined Joint Task Force-7.

³⁰ Colonel Peter Mansoor, email to the author. Colonel Mansoor is now the Raymond Mason Professor of Military History at The Ohio State University.

³¹ After his return to the United States, Major General Buff Blount, commander of the 3rd Infantry Division, which had carried the bulk of the fighting, was highly critical to the author about the senior military and civilian leadership in Iraq during the initial months of the occupation, their ignorance of Iraq and Arab culture, and their unwillingness to recognize the nature of the swelling insurgency. But then, General Blount had spent more than six years in Saudi Arabia in a variety of positions.

³² For a devastating critique of the civilian and military performance of America's representatives in Iraq during the war's first year see the documentary film: *No End in Sight*.

mistakes of the Vietnam War.³³

Conclusion

It may seem to be a stretch to ascribe so much to the baleful influence of nonsensical concepts such as “operational net assessment,” as this paper has done. Yet, the focus of the development of concepts that had no basis in history or for that matter in any serious study of the nature of human conflict reflected a larger problem. Quite simply, too much of the American military focused throughout the period from 1972 through to 2003 on the nuts and bolts of the profession. The emphasis was on doers and not thinkers. But, if I am correct, and the military profession demands serious intellectual study, then by its lack of interest in serious professional education, the senior leadership did a major disservice to the men and women who were to be caught up in fighting the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan.

It is particularly germane to remember Michael Howard’s comment that military organizations almost always get the next war wrong.³⁴ Thus, it is paramount that military leaders determine the nature and character of the conflict on which they have embarked. As Clausewitz suggests:

No one starts a war — or rather, no one in their senses ought to do so — without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it... This is the governing principle which will set [the war’s course], prescribe the scale of means and effort which is required, and make its influence felt throughout down to the smallest operational detail.³⁵

In fact, Clausewitz is being ironic, because few cases in history have

³³ And it would seem that those lessons in combating an insurgency were obvious: 1) the political context of the war is all important; 2) external military forces cannot defeat an insurgency by themselves; 3) therefore, the primary military focus must be on establishing and building up the internal police and military forces; and 4) understanding the local culture and politics, in other words, the other.

³⁴ Michael Howard, “The use and abuse of Military History,” *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute*, February 1962.

³⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 579.

featured political and military leaders who have managed to figure out ahead of time the kind of war on which they are embarking. Nor have most displayed much willingness to alter their perceptions and assumptions in the face of reality – at least until defeat and disaster have stared them in the face.

And if Professor Howard is correct, then political and military leaders must be willing to challenge their most closely held assumptions, if they are to adapt to the actual conditions of war. The inability to recognize that one has failed to understand the kind of war on which one has embarked or that one has miscalculated the balance of forces or the nature of one's opponent has in the past caused the greatest difficulties. Adaptation to reality requires that military leaders, and their political counterparts understand not only the tactical and operational nature of the conflict, but the political and strategic context as well. If they have filled their heads with concepts that have no connection with the fundamental nature of human conflict, they will learn, as General Mattis has suggested, by filling body bags.

The only way to prevent such a future course would be a willingness to emphasize the professional education of officers in a fashion that has largely not been true since the 1920s and 1930s. There is little chance for a resurrection of the nonsensical concepts and assumptions that plagued the American military until Iraq. The officer corps has had too much of a dose of realism to listen to nonsensical nostrums. But slowly but surely as the experiences of the bitter insurgencies of Iraq and Afghanistan fade in the rear view mirror, a new generation of wishful technocrats will arise and distort the possibilities with useless powerpoint presentations. And they will be listened to unless there are fundamental changes in how the services and the joint community address the issue of serious professional military education.