

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**A DELIBERATE PROCESS: DEVELOPING STRATEGIC LEADERS IN THE
UNITED STATES AIR FORCE**

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ABSTRACT

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The rapidly changing global environment of the twenty-first century requires properly developed strategic leaders. To meet these challenges officers are professionally developed throughout their careers as a result of legislative and related Officer Professional Military Education Policy. Is this sufficient in a contemporary and post Goldwater-Nichols environment? Deliberate education and training is required to properly develop military leaders that have the traits and competencies to deal with the nature of this changing environment. Due to the nature of the United States Air Force mission, the service tends to concentrate training of its officers on technical proficiency in their functional area rather than in broad leadership competencies, especially early in their careers. This project will study the USAF officer development program to determine if there is a deliberate process to develop strategic leaders.

A DELIBERATE PROCESS: DEVELOPING STRATEGIC LEADERS IN THE UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

“It became clear to me at the age of 58, I would have to learn new tricks that were not taught in the military manuals or on the battlefield. In this position I am a political soldier and will have to put my training in rapping out orders and making snap decisions on the back burner, and have to learn the arts of persuasion and guile. I must become an expert in a whole new set of skills.”

General George C. Marshall

Twenty-first century military strategic leadership, particularly in today’s tremendously complex global environment, is an extremely challenging venture. Strategic leader competencies should be developed continuously and properly to prepare officers for these challenges as they may be even more complex in the future. The future military strategic leaders of 2025-2035 are today in the service ranks as lieutenants. Already, the Air Force has begun to build their leadership development foundation. It is critical that the Air Force process for developing strategic leaders is sound to ensure these individuals are prepared for the world of the future.

There are multiple junior and mid-grade officer programs focused on leadership development. First, formal Air Force officer leadership development begins with accession programs, such as the U.S. Air Force Academy, the Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps, and the Officer Training School. Second, development of an officer’s leadership skills continues while attending specific functional area training after commissioning. Third, through the officer evaluation and promotion systems, officers are provided formal feedback on job performance, leadership skills, and potential, along with mentoring from more senior officers. Fourth, Professional Military Education programs such as Basic Developmental Education, Intermediate Developmental Education, and Senior Developmental Education are in place to develop Air Force leaders in an academic environment. Lastly, commanders and officer Development Teams vector officers within the Air Force assignment system with the service expectation that officers first gain technical experience early in their career, followed by education, and leadership experiences later in their career, which are all necessary to lead at the strategic level.

Leadership at the strategic level requires competencies that are learned through education, training, and experience.¹ This paper will examine Air Force officer development within the context of the programs discussed above and address two fundamental questions: 1) Does the Air Force have a deliberate process to develop strategic leaders? 2) Is the process

sufficient enough to provide strategic leaders with the proper competencies necessary to competently lead the military and make decisions of national consequences in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment?²

Meeting this challenge, the Air Force officer professional development program is well established and structured properly. Implemented correctly, all the elements are in place to ensure leaders successfully develop skills required to lead in the strategic environment. While current force development initiatives appear sufficient and should result in officers prepared for strategic leadership positions, it is essential that current leaders support this deliberate process. U.S. Code Title 10 provides the basis upon which the military professionally develops officers to ensure strategic leaders are prepared to confront the challenges of the twenty-first century. Each of the services is required to provide officers with the education, training, and mentoring that gives them the tools necessary to meet these challenges.³

Strategic Leadership Defined

Strategic leadership defies a precise definition. Throughout relevant literature, both civilian and military, the definition varies widely; however, some common themes emerge. One proposed concise definition concludes “the ability of an experienced, senior leader who has the wisdom and vision to create and execute plans and make consequential decisions in the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous strategic environment.”⁴ Wisdom and vision encompass a wide range of competencies for the senior leader.

The Air Force divides leadership into three levels which are directly tied to the three levels of warfare: tactical, operational, and strategic. Leadership at the tactical level is the most direct, encompassing a hands-on approach at the lowest levels of the organization. As officers rise to the operational level of leadership, tasks become more difficult and complicated. Strategic leaders become responsible for large and dynamic organizations and systems.⁵ Specific competencies are the focus at each level of leadership; however, several key elements reside at all levels.

At all levels is the competency of personal leadership. Personal leadership focuses on those interpersonal relationships that influence behavior and values, build unit cohesiveness, and allow subordinates to share in decisionmaking. To accomplish this, leaders should be technically proficient themselves, while they should also know the technical expertise of their people. They should lead problem solving and subordinate mentoring to ensure the mission is accomplished.⁶

The next competency, people/team leadership, again touches all levels, but is primarily found at the operational level. Along with technical ability, leaders use this competency to shape structure and direct operations across the organization by influencing others and establishing policies that foster a healthy climate. With this competency mid to long range mission accomplishment is the leader's focus.⁷

The competency of institutional leadership specifically resides at the strategic level:

Effective institutional leadership skill sets include technical competence on force structure and integration; on unified, joint, multinational, and interagency operations; on resource allocation; and on management of complex systems; in addition to conceptual competence in creating policy and vision and interpersonal skills emphasizing consensus building and influencing peers and other policy makers – both internal and external to the organization. This level is the nexus of warfighting leadership skills for the Air Force. It is achieved through having learned the lessons from the earlier leadership competencies.⁸

Although these leadership competencies encompass the skill sets required at all levels of leadership, to include the strategic level, strategic leadership competencies can be even more succinctly described.

Near the end of 2001, then Chief of Staff of the Army, General Eric K. Shinseki, tasked the U.S. Army War College to explore and identify the skills required for officers in the post-911 world. The study concluded that there were many long lists of knowledge, skills, and abilities needed for future strategic leaders. The study group was able to condense these skills to six metacompetencies: identity, mental agility, cross-cultural savvy, interpersonal maturity, world-class warrior, and professional astuteness.⁹ Although the original intent of the study was to provide a guide for strategic leader development specifically for Army officers, these metacompetencies are extremely useful for all strategic leaders.

The first of the metacompetencies, identity, is an assessment of one's self. It can be described, in part, as self-awareness, which is the knowledge to assess one's own capabilities, to define one's own strengths and weaknesses, and the ability to learn how to correct those deficiencies. This also includes an understanding of one's own values and how those values relate to an organization's values. The basis of self-identity transitions from personal contributions to the organization to serving as an organizational catalyst for the contributions and success of subordinates as a leader matures.¹⁰ The second metacompetency is mental agility. Because strategic leaders operate in a VUCA environment, they should have the cognitive skills and adaptability to make sense of a complex world and lead effectively within it. More importantly, they should be able to swiftly adjust the actions of their organizations when faced with situations that lack structure and where important information is cryptic or

contradictory. This competency allows leaders to gather and process information, analyze the information properly, and become adept at making important decisions while understanding and envisioning the future effect that their decisions will have on the organization.¹¹ These two metacompetencies are characteristics of a leader that have the greatest impact internally to an organization.

Cross-cultural savvy is the third metacompetency and deals primarily with a leader's effectiveness external to the organization. Culture, in the classic sense, can refer to other countries or peoples other than U.S.. However, to the effective strategic leader, it is more. Due to globalization, interagency cooperation, and joint operations, leaders should be comfortable and well versed in interacting with and in leading diverse organizations and people. These can be anything from elected officials to other nations' militaries to non-governmental organizations.¹²

At this level of leadership the fourth metacompetency, interpersonal maturity, straddles the organization's internal and external cohorts. Strategic leaders spend more time interacting with external strategic leaders in more lateral relationships. As a result, interpersonal skills become vital to their effectiveness. Sharing power with subordinates and peers becomes critical because the complexity of the tasks will not allow leaders to solve problems on their own. As a result, interpersonal maturity involves effective listening, persuasiveness, collaboration, and consensus building. These skills enable the strategic leader to negotiate agreeable solutions leading to success. Internal to the organization, the strategic leader should have the ability to manage change. Recognizing the ongoing presence of cultural change allows the leader to communicate their vision clearly and gain buy-in within the organization to support the vision. Finally, interpersonal maturity allows strategic leaders to take responsibility for developing future strategic leaders, critically balancing mission accomplishment with the development and mentoring of new leaders.¹³

The last two metacompetencies, world-class warrior and professional astuteness, are very much interrelated. To become experts in theater and campaign strategy, along with joint, multinational, and interagency operations, strategic leaders are taught and trained to understand the use of all elements of national power. Simultaneously, they necessarily transition from members of a profession to leaders in the profession. Personal ego should give way to making decisions to get the mission accomplished. In their deliberations, effective strategic leaders consider what is best for the military profession and the nation versus what is best for them.¹⁴

Air Force Leadership Development

Current Air Force leadership development guidance is found in Air Force Doctrine 1-1, Leadership and Force Development, and also on the USAF Force Development website. The leadership development model found in these documents is a building block approach that identifies skill sets that are important beginning at the tactical level, progressing through the operational level, and finally culminating at the strategic level. With this three-tiered structure, training and education should focus on the competencies required for that given level of leadership.

At the tactical level, officers are expected to master their primary duty skills. While applying those skills, they gain experience and start to acquire the knowledge necessary to be an effective tactical leader.¹⁵ The focus for officers at this level is technical proficiency. For each career field, this proficiency is attained at different points because some career fields require more time to reach this level of technical proficiency, while others require more leadership skills to be learned more quickly. This deviation in timeframes often creates differences in the time devoted to formal or personal leadership training. However, all officers at the tactical level are required to reach and exhibit the same basic competencies: exercise sound judgment, adapt and perform under pressure, inspire trust, lead courageously, self-assessment, and foster effective communication.¹⁶

Operational leadership, sometimes called “organizational leadership,” is focused on understanding a broader perspective while integrating diverse people and capabilities to execute the mission. This is the move from being a technical expert in a particular career field to leading across many functional areas. Operational leadership training focuses on how to develop teams and how to understand the dynamics of those teams. In a broad sense, operational leaders develop an understanding of the relationship between the unit at the organizational level and how it integrates into the Air Force as an institution.¹⁷ Building on the tactical competencies, operational leadership requires the following competencies: drive performance through shared vision, values and accountability; influence through win/win solutions; mentor and coach for growth and success; promote collaboration and teamwork; and partner to maximize results.¹⁸

Broad leadership capabilities along with technical and operational competencies combine to enable leadership at the strategic level. Air Force strategic leaders are developed to have a broad comprehension of Air Force missions allowing them to understand and apply the synergistic effects of tactics, techniques, procedures, technology, and people. Also, Air Force policy strives to ensure that they be well versed in interagency and multilateral relationships at

the institutional level. Strategic leaders gain these competencies through education and training at many levels to include institutional Air Force, joint, intergovernmental, and international opportunities.¹⁹ Specific strategic leadership competencies include: shaping Air Force strategy and direction; organization and mission success through enterprise integration and resource stewardship; embrace change and transformation; drive execution; and attract, retain, and develop talent.²⁰

Commissioning Sources

The foundation of an officer's strategic leadership begins even as early as pre-commissioning programs. The U.S. Army War College leadership study points out that mental agility should be developed early in an officer's career. The problems encountered and skills required to deal with those situations are based more on the organization level of leadership rather than an officer's rank. The study also suggests that pre-commissioning and officer basics courses should introduce quantitative decisionmaking, critical thinking, and systems thinking, rather than waiting until later professional military education.²¹

Strategic leadership development has its roots in the commissioning sources. Four principle commissioning sources are used to develop Air Force Officers – the U.S. Air Force Academy (USAFA), the Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps (AFROTC), Officer Training School (OTS), and Air National Guard (ANG) Academy of Military Science (AMS). For many years, each pre-commissioning program developed a curriculum specifically to meet their needs. Understanding that all officers required basic, common leadership skills, the Air Staff directed a comprehensive curriculum review in 1971, which produced a core curriculum common to the Air Force Academy, AFROTC, and OTS.²² All still retain unique aspects in their training programs; however, all include focused leadership education and training.

According to the USAFA fact sheet, one of the academy's functions is to develop leaders in the interest of our future national security. This program educates outstanding young men and women to become officers with knowledge, character, and discipline. "Before its graduates enter various flying and support specialties, the Academy trains them to be, first and foremost, Air Force officers."²³ Of all the commissioning sources, USAFA is best structured to provide the most comprehensive education for military strategic leaders. The curriculum includes core courses focused on leadership, strategy, and national security policy. In addition, cadets receive presentations by senior political, cultural, and military leaders over a 4-year education. This exposes them to tactical, operational, and strategic leadership forums.

The AFROTC program constitutes the Air Force's largest commissioning source and focuses both on academics and leadership. The curriculum encompasses four major areas of study: profession of arms, communicative skills, leadership studies, and military studies/international security studies.²⁴ During the junior and senior years, students study leadership, military, and international security. The leadership course focuses on the anatomy of leadership, the need for quality and management leadership, the role of discipline in leadership situations, and the variables affecting leadership. During the national security studies course cadets learn about the role of the professional military leader in a democratic society, societal attitudes toward the armed forces, requisites for maintaining adequate national defense structure, the impact of technological and international developments on strategic preparedness and the overall policymaking process, and military law.²⁵ Although some AFROTC cadets may receive presentations from senior military and political leaders during their studies, these are not part of the formal curriculum as with the USAFA program.

Two training courses make up the OTS program. The Basic Officer Training (BOT) course focuses on leadership, discipline, attention to detail, and dedication to service. Although only twelve weeks, the training provides numerous opportunities to develop leadership skills through classroom and field training exercises. The Commissioned Officer Training (COT) program provides comprehensive training in the fundamentals of officership and initial leadership training required for judge advocate general, chaplain, and medical officers receiving direct commissions based on previous professional experience.²⁶ Academic leadership courses are extremely condensed versions of USAFA and AFROTC courses, numbering fifty-one hours for BOT and thirty-seven for COT.²⁷ Practical exercises supplement these academic courses to further provide a sound foundation in leadership skills.

The differences in the course content of the three commissioning programs could cause disparity in the leadership foundation among young officers. Early in his tenure as Chief of Staff of the Air Force, Gen Michael E. Ryan realized the importance of developing the proper leadership for the twenty-first century and established the Developing Aerospace Leaders (DAL) program. Under the direction of Maj Gen Charles Link, USAF-Ret, DAL was chartered to "examine and recommend actions necessary to prepare the USAF Total Force for leadership into the 21st century."²⁸ DAL eventually became the USAF Force Development Division, but its functions remain essentially the same. One of the early recommendations of the DAL program was to look at further integrating commissioning sources to ensure that all officers were being trained and educated to provide a foundation for the development of aerospace leaders. A study by two Air Force officers concluded that, although differences in commissioning programs

provided added value to all, integration among these programs, led by the Air Force Academy, would capitalize on the strengths of all and make all programs more successful.²⁹

Professional Military Education

Air Force Professional Military Education (PME) prepares officers for more responsibility as they progress throughout their career. Each level of PME attempts to build on the education and training provided at the previous level. One can find five core focus areas at all levels of PME: the profession of arms, military studies, international security studies, communication studies, and leadership and management studies.³⁰ Basic Developmental Education (BDE), Intermediate Developmental Education (IDE), and Senior Developmental Education (SDE) are the three levels of education designed for Company Grade Officers, Field Grade Officers, and Senior Officers, respectively. Air University at Maxwell AFB consists of three colleges to support each level: Squadron Officer College for BDE, which includes the Air and Space Basic Course (ASBC) and the Squadron Officer School (SOS); Air Command and Staff College (ACSC) for IDE; and Air War College (AWC) for SDE. At each level, officers may be selected to attend USAF or other service schools, or civilian equivalents. All the military senior service schools offer both residence and distance learning programs.

As the first post-commissioning PME experience, the ASBC program offers a month long curriculum designed to inform new lieutenants, regardless of their career field, of basic concepts on how the Air Force fights air and space wars. The curriculum includes study on the profession of arms, leadership and management, military studies, communication studies, and international studies. Officers study doctrine and team concepts and how key weapons systems are employed in combat with over fifty percent of the academic hours focused on the profession of arms.³¹ The curriculum also includes lessons consisting of an introduction to war theory, historical airpower principles, strategic concepts, and the basics of air, space, and cyberspace doctrine. Of this diverse curriculum, three areas provide some foundation for future strategic leadership. During the profession of arms lessons, the officer experiences phases of study on other services, joint organization, coalition and multinational operations, and interagency coordination. While studying leadership and management, officers focus on team building and problem solving. They also attend presentations from senior leaders to gain their perspectives. International studies cover the nature of conflict and instruments of power.³² The curriculum provides a basic foundation to strategic leadership concepts upon which to build. Air Force policy states that all lieutenants attend ASBC during their first year of service.

Established during the Korean War, SOS initially organized as a war leadership school, teaching Air Force captains about aerial warfare and command responsibilities in combat. Today, SOS educates officers about military leadership; air, space, and cyberspace doctrine; international security issues; and communication skills. Integrated throughout the curriculum in 2004, AFDD 1-1, Leadership and Force Development, focuses on the enduring leadership competencies required of Air Force leaders. Over seventy percent of the curriculum is devoted to leadership, problem solving, and the Air Force as an institution. SOS students are challenged to move away from their technical skills and broaden their view of the Air Force as an institutional fighting force.³³ Captains attend SOS between their fourth and seventh year of commissioned service. Most officers attend in residence; however, for those that do not, the academic curriculum for the distance learning course is nearly the same.

ACSC traces its roots to the Air Corps Tactical School from 1931 to 1942. Designed to prepare field grade officers to assume positions of higher responsibility within the military and other government arenas, ACSC is the Air Force's IDE level program. The college allows officers to acquire the perspective, doctrinal underpinnings, and organizational understanding necessary to conduct air and space operations in support of a joint campaign. This builds on Air Force doctrine which maintains that success in war depends as much on intellectual acumen as it does on technical superiority. ACSC focuses on the development of critical thinking skills, along with courses on the profession of arms, with an emphasis on joint campaign planning and the operational art of war. The 10-month program also consists of blocks of education on leadership and staff positions, the practice of command, national security and warfare, and leadership and warfare.³⁴ Air Force field grade officers are selected as designees to attend IDE in residence through the majors' board promotion process, and then chosen by an IDE board to attend in a particular academic year.

The mission of the Air Force's SDE program, administered by the Air War College, is to "develop and support senior leaders through education, research, and information programs focused on strategic and institutional leadership, joint and multinational warfighting, multiagency international security operations, air and space force development, and national security planning."³⁵ Clearly, this mission focuses on the strategic level of leadership. At this level, the AWC is similar to other services' senior service schools. The Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff Officer Professional Military Education Policy, directs all service schools provide courses that study the competencies required to prepare strategic leaders for the future, focusing on the perspective of the host service. While these competencies are taught at this level, the ability to grasp these concepts would be nearly impossible if a solid knowledge base on leadership had

not first been introduced at BDE and later reinforced during IDE. As such, it is essential to provide BDE and IDE so that officers are allowed to better capitalize on the education and training focused on at the senior schools.

Officer Evaluation and Promotion System

How does the officer evaluation and promotion system fit into the development of strategic leaders? Air Force strategic leaders come from the ranks at and above the grade of Colonel. The promotion system has a significant effect on which officers are selected to become those leaders. In addition, as discussed earlier, this system identifies specific officers to attend IDE and SDE in residence. The Officer Performance Report (OPR) and Promotion Recommendation Form (PRF) are used to capture not only past performance, but also communicates the ratee's potential to serve in positions of greater responsibility. Essentially, this system contributes to the decision on who becomes eligible to become a strategic leader. As such performance reviews and promotion recommendations play critical roles in the development of leaders.

One key component of the Officer Evaluation System is the formal feedback provided to officers. The purpose of performance feedback is for a supervisor to inform his subordinate as to what performance is expected and how well the officer is meeting those expectations. This information helps to improve performance and professionally mature individuals. During these "feedback sessions," supervisors should use the feedback form as a guide to mentor subordinates. Topics discussed include strengths and areas for improvement, suggested short and long-term career goals, professional military and academic education, future assignments and jobs, and leadership abilities and potential.³⁶ This formal system serves as the basis for a supervisor to guide a subordinate's professional development.

The OPR is at best, just one element that can be used as a mentoring tool. In its current form as it does not provide the officer with meaningful guidance, since many comments are forbidden on the report. For example, policy does not allow direct or implied promotion recommendations, reference to advanced academic degrees or PME completion, and stratification statements outside the rater's and additional rater's sphere of responsibility.³⁷ Because of this, the OPR provides a useful synopsis of the officer's performance and how this performance affected the mission of the organization, but not a direct resource for developing strategic leadership.

An officer's senior rater, generally a colonel, wing commander, or general officer for colonels, writes the PRF prior to an officer meeting a promotion board. The PRF reflects

performance-based leadership potential while communicating a comprehensive promotion recommendation to the Central Selection Board in a concise narrative of only nine lines. Senior raters use OPRs that have been written over the officer's career as source documents and assess the officer's capability to serve in a higher grade as demonstrated by performance in his or her current position and past jobs. In assessing an officer's potential, senior raters consider the level of duty performance, leadership skills, decisionmaking, and organizational skills. For lieutenants through lieutenant colonel, PRFs are not a permanent part of an officer's record, so they are removed after each selection board.³⁸

Officer Force Development

Not all officers desire to become senior leaders, but ensuring that those officers who have the potential and drive to be strategic leaders gain the job experience required is critical. In 2003, the Air Force recognized this challenge and revamped the Officer Assignment System (OAS). The new system involves more senior leader input in "vectoring" officers to assignments that capitalize on their strengths and give them the experience necessary to continue their development. This was provided either by in-residence professional military education or by advanced academic degrees that would allow the individual to obtain new competencies. Before this system, officers were assigned on a more functional, career field driven basis versus a broader view. Under the Chief of Staff of the Air Force's guidance, this new system was implemented with a leadership philosophy of developing officers and their respective career fields at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels.³⁹

The system is fairly straightforward. First, an officer receives officer professional development briefings to understand where they are in their career, potential career paths, and professional and personal education requirements. Then, they determine their own personal desires, review the career pyramid for their specific functional area, discuss options with their supervisor and commander, and submit their desires via the Transitional Officer Development Plan (T-ODP). This form is submitted electronically through the OAS and forwarded to the officer's commander for comments. Commander's inputs are significant to this process since this is the best opportunity for an experienced officer to offer developmental direction. The commander then forwards the T-ODP to the Air Force Personnel Center (AFPC) to be reviewed by the developmental team.

Developmental teams (DT) provide oversight and input to officer development. The Functional Manager, either a Major General, Brigadier General, or equivalent within a specific career field, chairs the DT. DTs normally convene three times each year; early spring and late

fall for assignment vectors, and mid-summer for squadron commander candidate selection and developmental education selection. The FM establishes the participants based on the developmental decision to be made but normally includes, as a minimum; the chairperson, a career field manager (CFM), an AFPC assignment team (AT) representative, and appropriate functional and geographic MAJCOM leaders. It also may include subject matter experts, as required, and meets at a seniority level that matches the developmental decisions to be made. Key tasks of the DTs include: provide developmental feedback to officers and commanders via the T-ODP; provide input into the DE selection process directly for BDE or recommendations for officers meeting a Central Designation Board for IDE/SDE selection; provide squadron commanders special selection panels to identify squadron commander candidates; and ensure personnel recommended for Joint Duty assignment consideration are of sufficient quality to achieve promotion rates in line with Joint promotion objectives outlined in Title 10 United States Code, Section 662.⁴⁰ These extremely critical decisions made by the members of the DT significantly influence which officers will rise to leadership at the strategic level.

Senior Leader Development

For general officers, the Air Force provides focused learning opportunities to continue leadership development. These opportunities are separated into two categories: mandatory training and deliberate targeting. The responsibility for overseeing this development rests with the Air Force Vice Chief of Staff, while the General Officer Management Office implements the policy. A summit developmental education designation board (DEDB) meets annually to schedule all senior-level developmental education for the upcoming year. The goal is to target occupational and enduring competency development of senior leaders to ensure the Air Force strategic leader needs are met.⁴¹

General officers attend two required training courses. The first is the Senior Leader Orientation Course, held each year in late July and early August. During this course, new brigadier generals receive briefings from senior Air Force and Department of Defense leaders with a focus on making them more effective representatives of the Air Force. The second mandatory training course offered four times per year is CAPSTONE. General officers attend this 6-week course at the National Defense University in Washington DC. During the course, senior leaders participate in seminars, case studies, and informal discussions with senior commanders and retired four-star general and flag officers focusing on the joint and combined employment of forces to support national policy objectives. The course also includes visits to key military commands within the United States, along with trips to Europe, the Pacific, and the

Western Hemisphere. These visits allow for personal interaction with Combatant Commanders and their staffs.⁴²

Other development opportunities for senior leaders exist through deliberate targeting of education. These programs, conducted by Air University, other government agencies, and civilian institutions, offer courses and seminars in categories of development such as national security, joint warfighting, geo-political, business skills, public policy, and enduring leadership competencies. The term “deliberate targeting” is used because the ultimate goal is to place individuals into one of the categories of development based on the requirements of the position the senior leader will hold. While all positions are eligible for the enduring leadership competencies development programs, specific categories are linked to positions, which drive which course the senior leader will attend. Other inputs include individual preferences, recommendations⁴³ from the chain of command, functional background, and future assignments.⁴³ For 2006, forty general officers were selected by the DEDB to attend these deliberate programs, thirty-two in the area of national security, three each in public policy and leadership areas, and two in business skills. None were scheduled to attend programs focusing on joint warfighting and geo-political areas. The DEDB also selected 138 colonels to attend these programs. The board vectored seventy-seven to attend various leadership development programs, twenty-six for public policy education, sixteen for national security studies, fifteen focusing on business skills, and four in the geo-political arena.⁴⁴

Conclusions and Recommendations

This research project studied the key elements that contribute to Air Force officer development to determine if there is a deliberate process in place to develop strategic leaders. Required leadership competencies are gained in a myriad of ways, but the need to have a continuous process in place which teaches strategic leadership and identify strategic leaders at an early point in an officer’s career is essential. Even during pre-commissioning programs, it is critical that officers be taught leadership and intellectual skills that provide a foundation which allows these skills to mature through experience, academic and professional education, and mentoring over their career. While current force development initiatives appear sufficient to grow Air Force leaders and prepare them for strategic leadership positions, current leaders should continue to emphasize deliberate development.

Does the Air Force process to develop senior officers prepare them to lead in the strategic environment? Of the nine unified commands, five are regional combatant commands (COCOM): Pacific Command, European Command, Central Command, Northern Command,

and Southern Command. One can assume that the commanders of regional commands clearly require the strategic leadership metacompetencies addressed earlier in this paper. From 1990 until 2006, COCOM commanders number a total of twenty-eight general officers, thirteen Army, eight Navy, five Marine, and two Air Force.⁴⁵ This clear imbalance of service representation bears a greater depth of understanding and poses questions as to why Air Force leaders were not selected.

Command of a regional COCOM, normally the supported command during a crisis, requires officers who can effectively lead in the national, international, and political environment. If one considers selection for this type of leadership a measure of strategic leadership development success, the Air Force has fallen well short. It appears the service has a deliberate leadership development process; however, one can question whether the process is sufficient. Some questions one may consider. Does the Air Force as an institution develop leaders who have a sufficiently firm foundation in joint doctrine? Is there a deliberate effort to ensure officers have assignments to allow them to gain sufficiently broad joint, international, overseas, and multi-cultural operational experience? Does the O-6 assignment process allow personal preference and competing major command (MAJCOM) influence outweigh the broader Air Force institutional needs? Because the Air Force structure is flat, is the service contributing to lack of experience in leadership roles during combat? For example, does the Air Force take a myopic view and place more emphasis on leading at the wing level, arguably, a supporting leadership role, versus leading at the joint forces level? Do the Air Force senior leader development policies, and the programs that implement them, focus too narrowly on developing Numbered Air Force, MAJCOM, and Air Staff leaders at the expense of joint, COCOM, and international leaders? Does the service create Air Force senior leaders well versed in force projection and force employment required to win the war, but lack the experiential and doctrinal foundations to competitively lead in joint, ground centric, stability, security, transition, and reconstruction operations at the operational and strategic level necessary to win the peace?

The established officer development process shows that senior Air Force leaders have recognized that growing leaders who can think strategically occurs over a long period of time and includes facets far beyond attending a senior service school for ten months. Hands on management of an officer's career to expose them to situations at the appropriate time allow him or her to gain the experience and knowledge necessary to be successful in the future. A professional officer requires depth and breadth of experience as well as functional technical and academic expertise. Functional skills are developed deliberately through formal courses and experience – leadership should continue to be developed using that same framework. When an

officer is selected for promotion to colonel, strategic leadership concepts should be familiar ones that are already well seeded.

The future strategic environment surely will present more challenges than any other time in U.S. history – threats to U.S. national security and interests are still being defined; globalization has impacted the use of our nation’s instruments of power, especially diplomatic, information, and economic; the pace of technological advances are unmatched since the turn of the last century; and decline of American civilian support for military operations as the country faces twenty-first century struggles.

To meet the challenge of this environment, the Air Force has a highly structured, well established officer professional development program with oversight at the appropriate level. When implemented properly, all the elements are in place to ensure success leading in the strategic environment, but it should be deliberate. The Force Development office, Developmental Teams’ execution of force development policies, and the chain of command are keys to this success and should continue to receive senior Air Force corporate involvement and support. Seeking answers to the right balance of leadership development focus, leadership development goals and policies should further motivate the service to keep leadership as the common thread to successful Air Force, joint, and U.S. strategic engagement.

Endnotes

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