

**Joan Johnson-Freese.** *Educating America's Military*. Cass Military Studies Series. New York: Routledge, 2013. 160 pp. \$35.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-415-63499-1.



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In March 2013 remarks to the World Affairs Council of Washington DC, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey characterized himself as being both the highest-ranking teacher and the highest-ranking student in uniform. “Part of being a leader is a deep dedication to lifelong learning. If you don’t continue to learn, you’re stagnant and you fall behind.”[1] While many military officers would agree with this rhetoric, a corresponding willingness on the part of the services to make serious investments in higher education is all too often absent. Officers who wish to pursue available graduate degree programs must be willing to act against career incentive structures and prevailing cultural norms, usually assuming at least short-term risks to their prospects for advancement. These dynamics also play out in the military’s own educational institutions, as Joan Johnson-Freese explains in her new book, *Educating America’s Military*. A member of the Naval War College faculty who has taught in the military education system for twenty years, she can speak with authority on this topic.

It may be surprising to read about the unwillingness of the services to invest in education, given that each branch has impressive professional military education (PME) systems. As officers progress through their careers, they complete courses at the junior and mid-grade ranks. High-performing officers with the potential to serve at flag rank (as generals or admirals) are then selected for resident attendance at one of the country’s war colleges. These accredited institutions of higher education offer a ten-month academic experience and confer a master’s degree (the specific degree title varies across the war colleges). However, according to Johnson-Freese, “guidance and follow-through support from the military is lacking, and so the education provided to War College students is not what it could be, or needs to be” (p. 17).

Though her book provides a valuable insider’s look, it also suffers from a tendency toward unsupported generalizations across the various levels of PME; across the country’s six war colleges (Army War College, Naval War College, Air

War College, Marine Corps War College, National War College, and Industrial College of the Armed Forces); and across the military services. However, this is a weakness that Johnson-Freese acknowledges up front, saying that the book “is partly a social-science effort and partly a journalistic enterprise, and even to some extent a memoir of my own career and experiences” (p. viii). Overall, weaknesses in evidence do not cause the book to fail in its core purpose, which she hopes will be to “assist in the development of *appropriate questions* to ask in the gathering of data in the future” (p. 17). These questions would examine the structural challenges that the war colleges face, as well as the effects of tensions that exist between the ideal of lifelong learning and contradictory elements of military culture on their mission accomplishments.

In providing a quality educational opportunity to their students, the war colleges face significant structural challenges. First, it can be difficult to maintain academic standards since these colleges have no control over the academic qualifications of incoming students and face perceived pressure to grant a degree to every member of the student body who completes the course. Second, these institutions have imperfect control over the quality of their faculties. Though civilian faculty members are generally selected through competitive search processes, some of the military faculty members may be assigned by their services with little regard to aptitude or qualification. Third, the war colleges have occasionally selected administrators who have little or no background in higher education. As the author points out, the assumption is that an individual who commanded a helicopter squadron can surely lead an academic department. In reality, however, this assumption is as bad as the assumption would be that an academic department head is automatically qualified to command a helicopter squadron. Finally, educators at these colleges have to work against the occasional anti-intellectualism and discomfort exhibited by institutional leaders and visiting flag

officers, who mock rather than celebrate the endeavor with jokes such as “it is only a lot of reading if you do it.” All too often, senior military leaders pander to the lowest common denominator, emphasizing how they improved their golf games during their war college years. These statements work against fostering the serious intellectual inquiry encouraged by quality institutions of higher education.

It is when Johnson-Freese probes the cultural tensions that exist within the war colleges that her book is at its best. For example, she acknowledges the tension in all PME institutions between training that explains “*what* to think, especially when lives are at stake,” and education designed to help one figure out “*how* to think” (p. 98). Training is often intended to be directly relevant to current or next assignments, while educational goals are longer term. Of course, military officers need both training and education. In the war colleges, however, where officers are transitioning from leading at tactical and operational levels to serving as institutional developers, strategic leaders, and political-military advisors, the intellectual agility fostered by education deserves greater weight. It is a rare occurrence, indeed, when a significant policy or strategic challenge can be addressed successfully using a purely formulaic approach. Yet it can be difficult to foster appropriate habits of mind in officers who have spent decades being rewarded for success as tactical operators—particularly if those who have advanced before them deride the investment that serious inquiry requires.

Johnson-Freese also probes some of the basic differences in military and academic cultures and how these may play out on the faculties of PME institutions. She points out that military officers, on the one hand, tend to be process oriented, which can be functional, “as following process can keep them alive in high-risk operational situations” (p. 23). In an academic environment, this can lead to a focus on teaching rather than schol-

arship. Academics, on the other hand, tend to be product oriented, judging output less by process followed than results achieved. This can lead to a focus on scholarship rather than teaching, especially since scholarship establishes the standing of scholars within their fields. Of course, these are just tendencies, and military officers can be outstanding scholars just as civilian academics can be exceptional teachers. The challenge for PME institutions is to recognize that both are necessary. Their institutional models must clearly incentivize their faculties to invest in teaching as well as research, or else the curriculum will stagnate and the quality of the student's educational experience will suffer.

A more serious concern with the book is, in making the case for the war colleges and their importance, the author's own emphasis on direct relevance is more consistent with training than with education. This comes out in her discussion of civilian graduate education as an alternative to the war colleges. She is surely right to say that the programs involved serve different missions and that neither is a ready replacement for the other. As she makes this argument, however, she downplays the value to military officers of the opportunity to pursue demanding civilian graduate programs with the best and brightest of their peers from all walks of life. In fact, she suggests that officers in civilian graduate programs may waste their time on niche classes, such as "Republicanism and the Good Society" ... not relevant to military practitioners" (p. 20). If education is about "how to think" not "what to think," why would a good course on this topic necessarily be irrelevant? In addition, civilian graduate programs enable officers to forge important connections with the society that they are commissioned to defend. Many of the country's top graduate programs may lack offerings on national strategic planning that are comparable to war college courses, but may nonetheless be at least as effective at fostering the

"deep dedication to lifelong learning" that General Dempsey finds so valuable.

If the military services truly value lifelong learning, the most valuable resource that they could make available to their officers is time. Despite the challenges noted above, many students do approach their war college years with intellectual curiosity and a desire to learn. For those officers whose careers have proceeded at breakneck pace—particularly over the last decade of war—they may need a period of recovery. But this period should not coincide with the year set aside for the education that will prepare them for service at the highest levels. In addition, younger officers who aspire to attend civilian graduate programs should not be discouraged by their leaders, who instead should contemplate how such additional education can further empower these officers during their subsequent service. In fact, one more difficulty that Johnson-Freese glosses over is that if incoming war college students have not already embraced lifelong learning to some degree, they are unlikely to be converted after twenty years of successful service. A demanding civilian degree program during the first decade of an officer's career can be a great complement to a year spent later at a war college, laying the groundwork at an early stage for the professionally focused education that a war college can provide.

Not all officers possess a passion for lifelong learning. However, those who do should be encouraged to pursue it. The United States faces complicated and difficult national security challenges; the armed forces and the country should want the intellectually as well as the morally and the physically courageous to be on the frontlines in addressing them.

#### Note

[1]. Quoted in Amaani Lyle, "Dempsey: Education Provides Foundation of Democracy," American Forces Press Service, Washington DC, March 8, 2013, <http://www.jcs.mil/newsarticle.aspx?id=1106>.

*Editor's Note: The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect the position of the United States Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or the Department of Defense.*

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