



SPEAKING OUT

It's Time for State to Educate Senior Officers

BY ROBERT B. NEWLIN

Fifty years ago, in September 1958, 16 Foreign Service officers, three colonels from the Army, Air Force and Marine Corps, and a captain from the Navy assembled for the first course of what would become known as the Senior Seminar in Foreign Affairs. The Department of State had followed the example of the Department of Defense in creating the seminar, modeled on the National War College.

Such luminaries as John Foster Dulles and Loy Henderson participated in the decision to create the course for senior Foreign Service officers. Willard Barber was the first director of the program. In addition to senior FSOs and high-ranking armed forces officers, the course grew to include members of other departments and agencies with a direct stake in the formulation and implementation of foreign policy. This increased the average student presence to about 30, half of them from State. Each seminar was conducted for an academic year.

As implied by the name of the course, seminars were the primary academic technique. A stellar list of opinion and policy leaders from a wide range of institutions — universities, think-tanks, Congress, other executive branch departments and the judiciary — presented ideas to the class. Comments were typically not for attribution, in order to spark dialogue. Remarks were always followed by in-depth, often animated discussion.

One of the overarching characteristics of the program from the begin-

The Senior Seminar is unlikely to return, but a new program could revive the best aspects of the original approach.



ning was domestic travel. The purpose was to give participants firsthand experience with the full range of American issues before they went abroad to represent our country in senior positions. The classes met with teachers in classrooms, rode with police officers in inner cities, spent time and did chores with farm families, and talked with civic leaders and local-government officials across the nation. Such trips gave the members exposure to the ideas and experiences of those who would otherwise not be available to speak to the class in the Washington area.

A unique feature of the course was the direct role that the students played in organizing the program. Under the leadership and supervision of a more senior FSO, usually an officer who had served as an ambassador, the students chose the topics that they wanted to explore during the year. They then pursued speakers and arranged the academic schedule, both here in Washington and on the various trips.

Requiring the members to do much of the organizing work kept

staff overhead to a minimum and created opportunities to develop management proficiency. To build executive talents, the course included instruction and practical exercises in such time-proven abilities as negotiating, public speaking, press relations, health and fitness, and personal and embassy security.

Secretary of State George Shultz was a supporter of the Senior Seminar. He characterized it as an adult educational experience, not a training program. He said that education broadens one's horizon and changes attitudes or behaviors; training is the transfer of a skill from one to another. He went on to declare that the Senior Seminar was designed for education, not for training.

While the Senior Seminar was modeled on the National War College, offering travel, world-class speakers, thought-provoking discussions and study, it failed to evolve to meet changing times and needs. So in 2004, State turned its back on the seminar and walked away from long-term professional education for senior Foreign Service officers. In doing so, the department abandoned its role as "first among equals" when it came to educating its officers and others for their place in the development and execution of U.S. foreign policy.

In contrast, two professional military education programs — one American, one Canadian — faced similar challenges and took action to remain relevant in their respective defense establishments. Their examples are instructive.



The National War College

Through the 1950s, the National War College was regarded as offering the premier professional military education program for the United States Department of Defense. The students were carefully selected by their services for their demonstrated potential for continued service at higher grades and in positions of greater responsibility. They were colonels in the Army, Air Force and Marine Corps, and captains from the Navy. As such, they typically had more than 20 years of service, making them eligible to retire. The student body was augmented by members of other executive branch departments, including the Department of State.

The program consisted of exposure to leaders of the Defense Department, the foreign affairs establishment, think-tanks, and academics from respected universities. Additionally, with extra effort, the students received a master's degree in international affairs from The George Washington University. All participants traveled together all over the world, in military aircraft dedicated for their use, visiting allied and non-aligned countries.

In the 1960s, for a combination of reasons, graduates of the National War College began to retire shortly after completing the program. (Remember that most were retirement-eligible when they began the course.) They took their NWC diplomas and GWU master's degrees and parlayed them into second careers, creating a brain drain of these talented officers with no payback for their year of expensive professional education.

Defense officials took action to counter this exodus of gifted officers. First, they lowered the grade of the students to lieutenant colonel in the Army, Air Force and Marine Corps, and commander in the Navy. Second, they ceased the virtually automatic

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master's degree arrangement with GWU. Third, they established a two-year period of obligated service following graduation. And fourth, they reduced the extensive world travel of the course. Other reforms followed in the 1980s and 1990s to increase the academic rigor of the course and to bring it into line with the requirements of the Goldwater-Nichols Act.

Canada's National Defense College

Something similar happened north of the border some years later. In 1946 the Canadian Department of National Defense established a yearlong course similar to the National War College curriculum. Known as the National Defense College and based in Kingston, Ontario, it consisted of Army and Air Force colonels and Navy captains. Allied officers, including Americans, attended regularly. Civil servants and civilians from defense-related industries also took part.

Like the National War College, the NDC had an ambitious international travel program. But over time the program came to be regarded by some senior officials in the Canadian Defense Ministry as elitist, expensive and of poor educational value. In

1994, the course and college were terminated by ministerial fiat.

A few years passed with no professional military education available in Canada for officers above the grades of major and lieutenant commander. Fortunately, new leaders recognized the deficiency and established two new courses for the education of senior officers. The semester-long courses were self-contained but complementary; some officers attended both courses in one academic year.


One course, the Advanced Military Studies Program, prepared selected colonels and naval captains for operational-level command and senior staff assignments within operational-level joint and combined headquarters. The other course, the National Security Studies Program, prepared general and flag officers, selected colonels, naval captains and civilian equivalents for strategic leadership responsibilities in the development, direction and management of national security and defense policy.

As before, American officers and their counterparts from other countries participated in both programs. Both sets of students traveled, but not as much as the National Defense College did: the itinerary was limited to key centers, such as Ottawa, Washington, D.C., New York City (for the United Nations) and Brussels (for NATO).

This high-level program of courses continues to evolve. Originally, the students attended on a temporary-duty basis, leaving empty desks at their duty stations. Naturally, this made it difficult to get senior officers to release talented subordinates to be absent for one or two semesters of professional education. In September the two courses were combined, and students are now assigned on permanent-change-of-station basis. The new, yearlong course is called the National Security Program.

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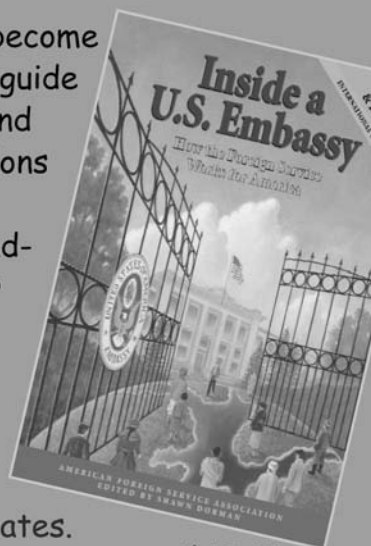


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What Happened at State?

The Senior Seminar must have met its goals, for it operated for 46 academic-year sessions. Many of the graduates went on to serve as ambassadors, general and flag officers, and members of the Senior Executive Service. The reasons for closing the Seminar were never made clear to those who closely watched it, such as the officers and board members of the Senior Seminar Alumni Association. Various officials gave different explanations. Some said that it was elitist because only about 15 State members attended the course annually. Others said that it was too expensive or that the course involved too much travel. Still others said that it lacked academic rigor or structure. And some said that State was not getting its money's worth out of it because some graduates were retiring shortly after completing the program.

In any case, in 2004 the last Senior Seminar concluded. In its place State conducts several shorter courses on a temporary-duty basis. While these courses may fill a niche, they have one serious shortcoming: the lack of the kind of long-term, relationship-building interaction that the Senior Seminar fostered among senior officers across the executive branch.

The Senior Seminar as it evolved over five decades is unlikely to return. But as the American and Canadian cases show, it is possible to adapt and reform to meet a need. The best of the original program can be revived and the undesirable can be discarded.

If the old course was elitist, expand the membership. If the old course had too many members who were simply "available for assignment for a year," then establish a thorough selection process to ensure that only officers who have demonstrated exceptional growth potential are sent to the course, thereby making it a desirable assignment. If participants

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traveled too much, scale back the trips to only those that directly support the mission of the course. If State graduates retire too soon after the course, impose a service extension requirement. And if the Foreign Service is stretched too thin, ask the armed services for some advice on how to manage the flow of officers for professional education in an era of intense operational commitment.

It is time for the Department of State to assert its responsibility as "first among equals" and establish a new long-term program that draws senior officers from USAID, the Foreign Agricultural and Commercial Services, the armed forces, CIA, Homeland Security and other departments. These are officers who need to learn to work together; to understand each others' cultures, and to appreciate the contribution each makes to the development and execution of foreign policy. ■

Robert B. Newlin, a retired Marine colonel, attended the 32nd Senior Seminar (1989-1990). Among other assignments, he served as the Marine Corps representative to the Canadian Forces College in Toronto (1987-1988) and as the assistant naval attaché in London (1991-1994).

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