

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE

CHANGE OF COMMAND ADDRESS

13 OCTOBER 1977

Governor Garrahy, Admiral Holloway, ladies and gentlemen. As I savor this moment, which is the realization of at least ten years of dreams, I pray that today and in all my dealings with this College, "...the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight O Lord my strength and my redeemer."

Hunt Hardisty, you have clearly won the esteem of this College and of the City of Newport. And as I said before, somewhat facetiously, I wish you a long and productive tour in the Philippines, a long and successful tour at sea, and that after all of those years you come back and relieve me for a full tour as the President of this College. I accept from you a school that is on an even keel, with programs that are the envy of every senior service college in the United States (this fact came to me clearly during last week's meeting of military college Presidents). I thank you for a faculty that is also second to none. It has been said that "...everything depends upon the person who stands in the front of the classroom. The teacher is not an automatic fountain from which intellectual beverages may be obtained. He is a witness to guide a pupil into the promised land; but he must have been there himself." This faculty has been there, and they hold the respect that goes with that qualification.

I spent this week with the Academic Department Heads. And, at the urging of Professor Phil Cowl, by way of preparation, I consulted The Oracle. If you remember Phil's article in the Naval War College Review, you will recall that his is not The Oracle of Delphi but The Oracle of Newport, Rhode Island, a man I can now call my predecessor, Alfred Thayer Mahan. I've studied lectures Mahan gave here nearly one hundred years ago--one given in the year 1888 right over here at Founders Hall in the third year of his first term as President; another given four years later in 1892, just after he came back for his second term as President, delivered here to my right in what was then the brand new Luce Hall. Besides their courtliness (they are always addressed to the "Gentlemen of the Navy," which I thought rather classy), one of the first things to strike you is the timelessness of these talks. Their content verifies the wisdom of the philosophy he institutionalized here.

In my words, "that in the profession of arms, historic evidence indicates that the method of their employment is at least as important to victory as their design, and that the capstone of a mature officer's education should focus on style rather than hardware." In Mahan's words, "the great warrior must study history."

Mahan is not blindly dogmatic and he is openly distrustful of simplistic historic analogies. But he nevertheless believes that an educated man with sufficient classical background can often perceive recognizable trends in events that occasionally allow him "that quickness to seize the decisive features of a situation and to apply at once the proper remedy--a stroke which the French call coup d'oeil, a phrase for which I know no English equivalent." He explains that what he speaks of is a memory bank full of historic facts that, after a fashion, form distinctive and educational patterns. Examples are facts such as that in the late 18th Century, French armorers discovered a method of casting cannon barrels that not only improved their accuracy but made them much lighter. To the pedestrian officer the latter advantage was a convenience. But to the Corsican Corporal of Artillery with a sense of history, and more than a little genius, the change portended an entirely new and different utilization of the weapon. It was not to be towed slowly across the plains by oxen, but quickly across the Alps by horses. Forts were to be bypassed, firepower concentrated. What was to the man on the street a metallurgical event of convenience was to Napoleon a geopolitical event that led to the conquest of Europe. History is full of similar examples. In our age, what was to us a nuclear event was to Hyman Rickover quite a different thing.

Another of the timeless aspects of Mahan's lectures was the clear evidence of the pressures and cross currents concerning War College course content that he experienced even when this school was in its infancy, the world's first War College. Throughout his talks he's obsessed with the definitions of practicality and theoreticalness. And he talks somewhat humorously of his contacts with friends in Washington when they ask him, as he steps out of the Army-Navy Club on a brisk evening, "Are you going back to the War College?" "Do you expect to have a session there?" "Yes," he answers. One of his senior friends then sneers, "Are you going to do anything practical this time?" Offended, Mahan replies with questions like "What do you mean by practicality?" and so on and so forth. This theme is woven throughout his lectures. The preoccupation is there, and it is clear that he was under pressure. This pressure can still be felt.

Now, subject to possible direction by my boss, Admiral Holloway, I would like to state that I plan to make no abrupt changes in the curriculum. I get a lot of mail on this subject, from everybody from old retired acquaintances to boyhood friends. One letter that I got from a boyhood friend a few days ago read in part as follows, "...on the subject of the College curriculum, you mentioned that you have been bombarded with conflicting advice. That cross will be yours to bear as long as you are there. My advice is that you ignore all of us and get on about your own business..." That letter was dated the 3rd of October 1977 and signed by Stansfield Turner.

So I do this afternoon get on about this business of educating our most promising mid-career officers. And I do so with a sense of mission and, in all honesty, with a very comfortable degree of self-confidence. For although it will take me a few months to get up to speed on all the disciplines taught here--and I think they are the right disciplines--each in my view has blind spots in critical areas vis a vis "the nature of war itself." On the national scale, failure to account for this has cost us dearly in the recent past.

If I can firmly establish and illuminate to the students here the inevitable blindnesses of these particularized specialties or disciplines in which we must work--blindness to the psychological and subjective, as well as the objective totality of the human experience we call war--I think I will have done something for my country.

We have, at times, made assumptions that did not account for such facts as: (1) War is a serious business; (2) People get mad in war; (3) The laws of logic are valueless in bargaining under those circumstances; and so on. We, they, everybody should be assumed to be ready to throw proffered options in the face of the enemy. After all, their and our honor is at stake. A force at war can't feint, and engage and disengage like an adagio dancer, and it's well to know that before you go into combat.

As the German soldier and philosopher Clausewitz has said, "war is nothing but a duel on a national scale." And I think a professional military man can learn some bad habits by leading a life that is totally devoted to orderly processes. Duels, or street fights, are not orderly processes. Yet they are very good analogies to war.

In short, I don't think there is anything new under the sun, or that we're seeing the dawn of any new age. I think we can be grossly misled by statement of some of the so-called defense intellectuals of the sort not uncommonly appearing even now, in the post-Vietnam era. For example, I quote from a scholar in a recent issue of a highly respected journal. "Waging war is no different from any resource transformation process and should be just as eligible for the improvements in proficiency that have accrued elsewhere from technological substitution." My experience, and it has been rather recent, puts me back in old Clausewitz' camp. He said, "War is a special profession. However general its relation may be and even if all the male population of a country capable of bearing arms were able to practice it, war would still continue to be different and separate from any other activity which occupies the life of man." Another old warrior, William Tecumseh Sherman said, "War is cruelty and you can't refine it."

In view of the fact that in searching 4,000 years of recorded history, Will and Auriel Durant could find only 268 years during which this earth saw no war, I think, faculty and students, that we are involved in an enterprise that deserves our best attention. And I am glad to address it with you.

Thank you.