Critical Thinking and Its Discontents

Paul Yingling

Good scholarship asks important questions and provides compelling arguments. Michael W. Mosser's "Puzzles versus Problems: The Alleged Disconnect between Academics and Military Practitioners" is a superb example of such scholarship. Mosser asks if a gap exists between scholars and military practitioners, and if so, what is being done to rectify it. Citing a large and growing body of anecdotal evidence, Mosser concludes that this gap is real. He identifies the source of this gap as "the oppositional nature of the worldviews that each community possesses."[1] Scholars are interested in explaining puzzles of interest to the academy, while military practitioners are focused on solving policy problems that employ the armed forces as an instrument of national power. However, this gap is more one of degree than scope, and is therefore amenable to reconciliation. Mosser finds that the tenure process for academics is a significant obstacle to such reconciliation. He concludes by identifying several ongoing and proposed initiatives, including the Pentagon's Minerva Project and the Army's operational design concept, to integrate more fully the efforts of academics and military practitioners.

This argument is original and insightful, but contains three important flaws. First, Mosser overstates the differences in thought processes between explaining academic puzzles and solving military problems. Second, Mosser addresses the perverse incentive systems of the academy, but fails to explore similar perversities within the military. Third and perhaps most importantly, Mosser does not explore the degree to which perverse incentive systems corrupt many large enterprises; not only the academy and the military, but politics and business as well.

Lieutenant Colonel Paul Yingling, U.S. Army, is Professor of Security Studies and Deputy Director, Program on Terrorism and Security Studies at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies in Garmisch, Germany (paul.yingling@us.army.mil). He is a doctoral candidate at the University of Chicago, and has served five tours in combat and stability operations. The views expressed here are the author's, and do not represent those of the U.S Army or the Department of Defense.

The Unity of Critical Thinking

The distinction between "puzzles" and "problems" is central to Mosser's argument, as these terms represent the "radically different" worldviews of academics and military practitioners. Mosser argues that "scholars see the world in the form of a series of interesting puzzles requiring their personal attention."[2] Scholars must "structure a research agenda to solve (or at least address) them." For academics, "a puzzle worth solving is worth solving perfectly" and therefore "ideal solutions abound." In contrast, military practitioners operate in a world that "demands solutions" under circumstances in which time, information, and other resources are often scarce. Under such conditions, "perfect is the enemy of good." Military problem-solving processes are therefore highly structured in order to eliminate extraneous information, producing "solutions" that may or may not be "right" or "correct."[3]

Mosser acknowledges that the dichotomy between puzzles and problems may be overdrawn. However, he does not explore the remarkable correlation in critical thinking between soldiers and scholars. Good critical thinking begins by asking an important question clearly. The fact that scholars pick their questions while soldiers receive their questions in the form of missions is beside the point. An ill-defined question is unlikely to produce a worthwhile argument, regardless of its source.

Critical thinking then proceeds by assessing the existing relevant knowledge concerning the question at hand. Scholars refer to this process as a literature review. As Mosser points out, soldiers are now rethinking their process for assessing existing relevant knowledge. The military decision making process construed this task narrowly, listing facts and assumptions bearing on the mission. The "art of design" seeks to broaden the scope of this inquiry, but the aim remains the same—to understand the question more completely by gaining an appreciation of what is already known or believed to be known about it.

The most important and least understood step in thinking critically is proposing an original answer to the question. Scholars refer to this proposed answer as a hypothesis, and soldiers describe it as a "course of action." Again, the terminology is unimportant. The truly important fact in

doi:10.1017/S1537592710003257

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592710003257 Published online by Cambridge University Press

this step is that an original argument springs from the imagination in ways that we do not fully understand. We don't really know how Einstein reinvented physics by imagining himself riding a beam of light, or how Napoleon reinvented war by imagining the power of the *levee en masse*. The key variables appear to be a broad knowledge of the subject, a healthy dose of skepticism regarding conventional wisdom, and youth. Einstein was just 26 when he published his first paper on special relativity, and Napoleon was only 27 when he led his first campaign in Italy. The great unknown term in the equation is genius itself. Knowledge, skepticism, and youth are all too common, but few of us even glimpse at the Olympian heights occupied by Galileo, Newton, Einstein, or Napoleon.[4]

The final steps in the process are more mechanical and procedural—testing the argument against the available alternatives and publishing the results. Ironically, academia uses relatively straightforward terms to express these steps, while the military prefers the more arcane "wargaming" and "orders production." As with the proceeding steps, the thought process is the same even if the terminology is not. Critical thinking is reason itself, and therefore does not recognize essentially artificial and often irrational disciplinary boundaries. To paraphrase Clausewitz, soldiers and scholars may have their own grammar, but not their own logic.

The Corrupting Effect of Perverse Incentives

Mosser is at his best when examining the aims of scholarship and the incentives of academia. He asks, "To what ends and for what purpose is scholarship undertaken?" He does not answer this question directly, but instead describes how the tenure system affects the manner in which scholars go about their work:

> Tenure-track faculty are faced with a conundrum. They are independent contractors, busily working to establish their academic *bona fides* to garner the professional respect and acclaim they need for tenure, but by doing so they wall themselves off from the rest of the world. They do so because the tenure process asks for understanding, a deep appreciation of the complexity of the puzzle the faculty member has chosen to address.[5]

However, this critique of academia does not answer Mosser's original question—"for what purposes is scholarship undertaken?" Mosser is not arguing that the purpose of scholarship is to provide tenure for scholars. Rather, he is arguing that tenure distorts or detracts from the true ends of scholarship, without specifying just what those ends are.

A preliminary answer to Mosser's question might sound something like this: scholarship seeks to preserve and expand humanity's knowledge of the universe, and to transmit that knowledge to society at large. Tenure ought to be a means to this end, ensuring that scholars may question conventional wisdom without fear of retribution. Tenure imposes both costs and risks on society at large by providing a level of job security that few other professions enjoy. A scholar may abuse this security, enjoying the individual advantages of tenure while providing few social benefits in return. However, because society has an interest in the ends of scholarship, the benefits of judiciously granted tenure are worth the costs and risks.

Mosser's argument, then, is that the incentive system of academia is out of synch with the social purposes of scholarship. While scholarship ought to be concerned with expanding the boundaries of what society knows, the tenure process may in some cases actually discourage pressing too hard against such boundaries. Success in academia comes largely from publishing through peer-reviewed journals and university presses. Academic writing is too often by, for, and to academics, with little consideration for how such scholarship impacts the world outside of the academy. Indeed, the term "academic" has become synonymous with impracticality.[6] Mosser might have amplified this argument by pointing out the pacifying effect of aging during this process. By the time a scholar earns a Ph.D., publishes a half-dozen journal articles and at least one book, and earns tenure, she or he is approaching the age of 40. Mid-life is a poor launching point for bold enterprises; house payments and looming college tuition bills have a tempering effect on even adventuresome spirits. Under this incentive system, tenure-track faculty have little incentive for broad interdisciplinary inquires, and powerful disincentives for boldness. The tenure system may inadvertently reward behaviors that are the antithesis of good scholarship.

Mosser's greatest omission is in failing to recognize that perverse incentives apply equally to the military. Mosser states that "the US military excels at executing military resolutions of tactical, operational, or strategic quandaries." He argues that military practitioners "see the world in terms of problems to be solved." As a normative statement of institutional goals, these statements are true. The military exists to advise policy makers on the application of military power to achieve the aims of policy, and to design and carry out operations to implement policy aims at acceptable costs in blood and treasure. However, the skepticism with which Mosser views academia's tenure system all but disappears when he discusses the military. He assumes that the incentives of individual military practitioners are aligned with the aims of the military as a social institution.

The conduct of the US military over the course of the last fifty years casts doubt on this assumption. In Vietnam and Iraq, senior US military leaders were guilty of remarkably similar failures—to prepare forces for irregular war, to design operations to achieve the aims of policy, and to provide candid assessments to policy makers on the probability of success. Moreover, these failures were as much

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592710003257 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the result of moral shortcomings as of intellectual shortsightedness. In both conflicts, senior military officers had grave misgivings about the prospects for victory. However, service parochialism and personal ambition caused them to remain silent, even as they sent thousands of American service members to their deaths.[7]

This appalling record is only partially mitigated by the important, albeit incomplete, military reforms of the last four years. Led by the Army's General David Petraeus and the Marine Corps' General James Mattis, the Pentagon in 2006 revised its counterinsurgency doctrine for the first time in a generation. Petraeus put that doctrine to work in Iraq, and contributed to a fortuitous, if still fragile, turnaround in security conditions. Again led by Mattis and Petraeus, the US military is attempting to produce a similar turnaround in Afghanistan. Based on hard lessons learned from nearly a decade of war, the US military has changed the way that it trains and operates. While impressive, this learning process took too long and cost too much. The lessons learned on counterinsurgency were available in the public library before the first shot was fired in Iraq or Afghanistan. Moreover, these reforms are largely limited to the parts of the military closest to the battlefield.

Away from the battlefield, the institutional military has proven far less adaptive. Despite the remarkably similar leadership failures in Vietnam and Iraq, the Pentagon's system for selecting generals remains unchanged since the Cold War.[8] While two irregular conflicts claimed thousands of American lives, military acquisition priorities remained focused on high-technology conventional weaponry such as the Army's Future Combat System or the Air Force's F-22 fighter plane. These priorities changed only when Secretary of Defense Robert Gates overruled the service chiefs' budget plans, demanding that they focus on "the war that we are in." The Pentagon's force structure has changed only modestly since 9/11, and still contains too few ground forces. Shortfalls remain particularly acute in specialties most needed in irregular warfare—intelligence, civil affairs, language, special operations, military police, and security force development.[9]

Much more so than battlefield forces, the institutional military is corrupted by service parochialism, personal ambition, and greed. Officials responsible for developing force structure have a vested interest in defending the status quo, even if the existing force structure does not meet wartime needs. Those responsible for procurement are influenced by "revolving door" relationships between retired military officers and defense contractors.[10] Perhaps most importantly, military officers are solely dependent upon the approval of their superiors for promotion. These officers face powerful incentives to conform to senior officers' views, even if those views are out of touch with battlefield realities. Unlike combat forces, the institutional military operates under an incentive system that rewards conformity and discourages adaptation. Mosser's critique of academia applies equally to the military—the incentive system for military officers rewards behaviors that are often contrary to society's expectations for the institution as a whole.

The Age of the Empty Suit

While Mosser overestimates the uniqueness of the academy's woes, he is nevertheless onto something important: "something has gone seriously wrong in the advice from the Quakers to 'speak truth to power.'" However, this criticism applies equally to soldiers and scholars. The relevant gap is not between academics and military practitioners, but rather between society's expectations of elites and their actual behavior.

Tenured faculty members, senior military officers, corporate executives and politicians all enjoy remarkable privileges, especially in a society that prides itself on egalitarianism. Those who lead important institutions enjoy both financial compensation and public esteem; no space at the head of an important institution goes unfilled due to lack of interest. The costs of these privileges are borne by those who rely upon these institutions—tax payers, shareholders, soldiers, workers, and students. Ordinary Americans pay these costs with the expectation that elites direct their institutions in ways that are consistent with society's values and beneficial to its interests.

The recent record of American elites in fulfilling these expectations is at best mixed. Political hopefuls curried public favor by promising benefits that they know the government can neither deliver nor afford. Corporate executives earned lucrative bonuses while their investors lost their life savings and their workers lost their jobs and pension plans. Generals sent soldiers into battle with no realistic expectation of victory, and denied responsibility for the resulting defeats. The independent evaluative institutions designed to monitor elite behavior—academia and the press—were often silent, or their attention was elsewhere. The public's watch dogs were too often the institutions' lap dogs. As one Manhattan woman was overheard to say in the midst of the 2008 financial crisis, "It's the age of the empty suit."[11]

This emptiness is not the result of elites living on "different planets" or holding "oppositional worldviews." America's elites are indeed thinking critically, using the same thought processes, and pursuing the same end—personal or parochial advantage. The question they are concerned with is how to gain tenure, promotion, power, or wealth, and their actions are optimally designed to achieve these ends. Those elites who mismanage their institutions and betray their obligations do so for much the same reason that Willie Sutton robbed banks. America's institutions too often reward elite behaviors that are contrary to the public interest, so it's little surprise that such behaviors are so prevalent. It's not that American elites are somehow uniquely evil, but rather that they are all too

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592710003257 Published online by Cambridge University Press

human. They are merely responding to the incentive structures under which they live.

Given incentives that reward self-seeking behavior, examples of social responsibility among elites are all the more impressive. Nonetheless, every major institutional failure in recent memory has been accompanied by a corresponding warning from a handful of elites acting in the public interest. Prior to the war in Iraq, 33 international relations scholars published an advertisement in the New York Times arguing that "war with Iraq is not in America's national interest."[12] Many of their warnings proved prophetic, including the absence of an exit strategy and the diversion of resources away from the struggle against al-Qaeda. Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Army Chief of Staff General Eric Shinsecki predicted that stabilizing Iraq would require "several hundred thousand" troops.[13] However, the scholars were ignored and the general was pilloried; their outspokenness was as impressive as it was futile.

Society benefits when elites ask hard questions, think critically about important issues, speak truth to power, and accept responsibility for the results they produce. The challenge, then, is to create institutional arrangements that reward such behavior. Great enterprises require ordinary people to take risks and make sacrifices that benefit not only themselves, but society as a whole. Doing so is an act of faith and an expression of trust in the institutions intended to safeguard society and its members. No society can achieve anything of consequence in the absence of such trust. Trust cannot be earned by words alone; only those who place something of themselves at risk have the credibility to ask others to do likewise. People will not trust empty suits, whether those suits have patches on their elbows or medals on their chests. Therefore, restoring and maintaining popular trust in important institutions is a challenge worthy of our best minds—in academia, the military, politics, and business.

Notes

1 Mosser 2010.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 For a discussion on the relationship between youth and military genius, see Fuller 1936.
5 Mosser 2010.
6 See Isaac 1995.
7 See Yingling 2007.
8 See Yingling 2009.
9 See Gates 2008.
10 See Vanden Brook and Dilanian 2009. See also Priest and Arkin 2010.
11 Noonan 2008. Noonan reflects on and ultimately rejects this comment as overly pessimistic, penning a paean to American ingenuity and can-do-it-iveness. She writes as if American ingenuity is an inherent component of our national character, mystically springing from the soil or water, rather than as a byproduct of institutions that reward socially beneficial behavior.
12 *New York Times* 2002.
13 Gordon and Trainor 2006, 102.

References

Cloud, David, and Greg Jaffe. 2009. *The Fourth Star: Four Generals and the Epic Struggle for the Future of the United States Army*. New York: Crown Publishers.
Eisenhower, Dwight D. 1961. "Farewell Address to the Nation." January 17.
Freud, Sigmund. 1961. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.
Fuller, J.F.C. 1936. *Generalship: Its Diseases and Their Cure*. Harrisburg, PA: Military Service Publishing Company.
Gates, Robert. 2008. "Remarks to the Heritage Foundation," (May 13). (http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1240), accessed June 22, 2010.
Gordon, Michael R., and General Bernard E. Trainor. 2006. *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq*. New York: Pantheon Books.
Isaac, Jeffrey C. 1995. "The Strange Silence of Political Theory." *Political Theory* 23(4): 636–52.
Isaacson, Walter. 2007. *Einstein: His Life and Universe*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
Machiavelli, Niccolo. 1996. *Discourses on Livy*. Trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
McMaster, H.R. 1997. *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs and the Lies That led to Vietnam*. New York: Harper Collins.
Mosser, Michael W. 2010. "Puzzles versus Problems: The Alleged Disconnect between Academics and Military Practitioners." *Perspectives on Politics* 8(4): 1077–1086.
New York Times. 2002. Advertisement. (26 September): A29.
Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1996. *Human, All-Too-Human*. Trans. R.J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Noonan, Peggy. 2008. "Who We (Still) Are." *Wall Street Journal,* December 19, A15.
Priest, Dana, and William M. Arkin. 2010. "Top Secret America." *Washington Post,* July 19–21. (http://projects.washingtonpost.com/top-secret-america/), accessed July 29, 2010.
Rocks, Thomas E. 2006. *Fiasco: The American Adventure in Iraq*. New York: The Penguin Press.
Vanden Brook, Tom, and Ken Dilanian. 2009. "Retired Officer's Dual Roles for Pentagon Raise Questions."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592710003257 Published online by Cambridge University Press

USA Today, December 15. (http://www.usatoday.com/news/military/2009-12-14-bedard-military-mentor_N.htm), accessed June 22, 2010.
Yingling, Paul. 2007. "A Failure in Generalship," *Armed Forces Journal,* May.
———. 2009. "Irregular Warfare and Adaptive Leadership." Presented to the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College's Leadership Lecture Series, April 4, 2009, (http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2009/04/irregular-warfare-and-adaptive), accessed June 22, 2010.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592710003257 Published online by Cambridge University Press