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### Set and Drift—"Remarks (Winter 1977)"

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*U.S. Navy (Ret.)*

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*From Our Winter 1977 Issue . . .*

## Remarks

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Admiral Arleigh Burke, U.S. Navy, Retired

**I**T IS NOT VERY OFTEN THAT an old retired sailor has the opportunity to meet old friends, and so it is with special gratitude that I thank [Vice] Admiral [Julian] LeBourgeois [President of the Naval War College, 1974–1977] for his kind invitation to me to attend this assembly of distinguished graduates of the Naval Command College. It is also a great honor for me to be among men who have contributed so much to the security of their own countries.

These are troublesome times in our rapidly changing world. There are many problems confronting all nations. The problems are not only huge, they cover the spectrum of all a nation's activities—both internally and internationally. They are economic, political, and military problems, and the actions taken in one discipline or in one geographic area affect the solutions of the problems in other disciplines and in other areas. Very few problems these days are self-contained. It is a confused world we live in—made more complex by rapid communications and new technical innovations—so it is sometimes necessary for a nation to take action without long deliberation. It is difficult to determine whether the information so quickly transmitted by many different methods is accurate or complete, let alone whether that information is deceptive or has

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Admiral Arleigh Burke (1901–1996) was one of the most celebrated U.S. naval combat commanders of the twentieth century, distinguishing himself in World War II first in twenty-two surface actions in the Solomons—where he won his nickname, "Thirty-One Knot Burke." He was Chief of Naval Operations for an unprecedented six years, 1955–1961, a period in which the Polaris ballistic missile submarine program was developed.

Admiral Burke's experience in allied and Nato operations led him in the initial year of his tour as CNO to found the first international program at the Naval War College—the Naval Command Course (now College); it convened in 1956. Admiral Burke, who had retired in 1961, gave these remarks on 13 July 1976 at the dedication of International Plaza (between Spruance, Mahan, and Pringle halls) in commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the NCC.

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been deliberately distorted. Truly the responsibilities resting on the shoulders of naval officers are great. Their actions and advice may have great influence on the futures of their countries—and of the world.

But nations have always had problems, and I suppose each generation believes that its problems are more complex and difficult than those of any preceding generation—and they may be right. But decisions on what to do about these many problems still must be made by men.

Men have vastly different opinions on how to solve these issues. That is natural and good, for societies are composed of many groups with different backgrounds, with different objectives and with different convictions as to what would be best for their society as a whole. Of course, there are always some men and some groups who work very hard to obtain advantages and benefits for themselves at the expense of other groups by either demanding more from their society or producing less to support that society. There are always those who want to exercise control and to force their ideas on everybody else.

This is true within a nation as well as among nations. It is also true within a navy. There are always strongly held but differing opinions as to what kind of navy a country should have to best protect the interests of that country within the resources it can provide. Men have strong convictions about whether the resources available should go to big ships or little ships, about types of ships, weapons systems, and propulsion, to say nothing of the strategy and tactics that are best for the nation.

These strongly held, different convictions are not frivolous conclusions of irresponsible men. Most of those men have spent years of devoted, hard work in their service, and their views are not to be disregarded lightly. Yet decisions must be made, and the best decision is not necessarily a compromise decision. Usually the differing views are based on different ideas of what is expected to happen in the future, and what happens in the future is again dependent on what many other men and other groups try to do, and what means they employ to do it. The future is not wholly imponderable, but neither is it predictable with any certainty.

On what basis should these and other decisions be made? There are two factors that must always be taken into account. The first is the capability of other nations to force their domination or undue influence on another nation. Present capabilities of all nations are generally evident. Possible future capabilities can be estimated by analysis of trends and research effort. It takes a long time, frequently many years, for any nation to develop significantly increased capabilities.

The second factor is intent, which is not so easy to determine. Words in statements and proclamations may reveal intent, but they may be used equally well to deceive. Guesses can be made on what another nation's intent may be, but that exercise is prone to error. There is only one good indicator: what has

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been done in the past. The actions that a man has taken in the past bespeak the type of actions he will probably take in the future. But it is wise to remember: history is full of examples where intent has changed overnight. A man, or a nation, cannot rely on another's intent, unless he has proven trust and confidence in that man or nation.

As a man gains experience in the navy, or in any other profession, he learns to rely on other men in whom he has trust and confidence. He learns from his association that certain men have integrity, a high sense of values. He knows that certain men are scrupulous, staunch, and trustworthy. Therefore, they are reliable.

And when a man reaches the end of his active career in his service he finds—as many men before him have found also—that the greatest assets accrued from his lifetime's work are his friends: men who know all about him and still like him; men whom he knows and respects and admires; and above all, men he can trust.

That is the genesis of the Naval Command College.

In 1955, when the heavy responsibilities of the Chief of Naval Operations became my duties, I learned once again what I had already found: one man by himself cannot do much good. Harm he can do with ease—but good, not much. However, many men working together can do tremendous things. The hard work of my brother officers—my friends—proved this to be so. The advice and counsel of many foreign friends in other navies had its place in helping us solve some of our problems. The job was made possible by the staunch support of many men.

But I had found many of my foreign friends late in life, and I regretted that I did not know them years before. Perhaps if we all had had more friends in other navies, events might have taken another turn. I wondered what could be done about that.

Would it really be beneficial to bring together mature, experienced officers from several navies for a period long enough for them to form real friendships with officers of other navies? Would that long period out of the most important part of their careers be helpful to them? Would such duty be beneficial to the nations who sent their best officers? Those questions began to shape themselves into an idea. If the general idea seemed worthwhile, what sort of an organization should be formed? How many people should be involved in any one year? What could be done to improve the officers' knowledge and skills?

In time such general matters were discussed with my friends in other navies, and the response was mainly favorable—provided the groups were not too big and consisted of well-qualified officers. The thought was that the officers should be assembled someplace where they were not subjected to other duties. An advanced school seemed to be indicated. We thought it was worth a try. If it didn't work out well, it could be disbanded easily enough.

So it was determined that a special course would be set up in the Naval War College. Nations would select outstanding officers of the rank of captain or commander, and ideally their wives would accompany them to Newport. Each class would number about twenty to thirty officers. The most important instruction would come from the attending officers themselves through their mutual exchange of views and ideas. The main objective was for the attending officers to know—really know—their brother officers of other navies and to develop trust and confidence in each other.

We knew that the impact on world affairs of such a college would not—could not—be significant. We did not expect great results. It would not solve any major problems.

All it could do, even over many years, would be to produce a group of conscientious officers who knew officers in other navies and who also were favorably known by those officers. Maybe such respected friends might be able to help each other when problems arose in the future. Maybe they could keep in touch with one another in the future and exchange views that would be helpful.

It's easy enough to figure out wonderful concepts of what should be done and even how it should be done, but concepts are only dreams. To turn a concept into reality requires work and initiative and understanding and solid convictions. If this concept was going to work, I had to find an exceptional officer to start it.

Captain Dick Colbert\* proved to be just the man who was needed. He was enthusiastic about the idea. He was a hard-working, conscientious, and brilliant man, but those were not the only characteristics we needed. Dick was a quiet man. He had that rare quality of real humility, and so he would dedicate himself wholeheartedly to his task. He was warmhearted and understanding. He liked people. He listened. He was a skillful professional in all naval matters—he was the ideal man for this important responsibility. And so Dick Colbert left his indelible imprint on this Naval Command College. The warm, friendly atmosphere established at the beginning persists to this day.

When Dick Colbert slipped his cable, we—each of us—lost a gallant and true friend.

You, the graduates of this College, were the ones who made this course worthwhile. The nations did send their very best officers. Over the years you have established courses of action and basic principles which have proved to

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\* Richard J. Colbert, first Director of the Naval Command College (1956–1958), later President of the Naval War College (1968–1971, as a vice admiral), retired in November 1973 as Commander in Chief, Allied Forces Southern Europe; he died in December of that year.

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have value to yourselves, to your successors, and to your countries. You worked, you taught your associates, you exchanged views, and above all, you became friends with one another.

I am deeply grateful to you and to all graduates for what you did here, and for what you are doing now for the security of your own countries.

May you always enjoy your service in your navy—and may you always have fair winds and a calm sea.

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