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President's Notes

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President's Notes

Academic Freedom

The world and the international security environment in which we operate is changing at a pace unthinkable just a few years ago. These changes and those still to come are outdating many of our basic assumptions and the military doctrines, plans and programs based on those assumptions. More than at any other time in our recent history, we in the military need the new ideas and innovative thinking that can come only from an extraordinarily active intellectual exchange among ourselves and those interested in us. The senior service colleges, and the Naval War College in particular, should be in the forefront of this important activity, just as they have been during key periods of the past.

Coping with change requires that new concepts be encouraged, shared, debated, and subjected to professional scrutiny and refinement. We conduct this process mainly by use of the printed word. Inevitably, new ideas will be critical of current policies and will threaten the *status quo*. From its beginning, the Naval War College has been at the center of such helpful controversy, providing a forum for professional debate within the Navy on the issues of the day. This is a critical function, vital to the development of the naval service. It should be protected zealously. To preserve our advantage, naval and otherwise, we must insist that our bureaucratic structure permit itself to be challenged.

Admiral Kurth spent 19 years in and out of the Soviet Union, including tours as Naval Attaché (1975-1977) and Defense Attaché (1985-1987). He is fluent in Russian and holds a Ph.D. in government (Soviet Studies) from Harvard.

Department of Defense (DOD) prepublication review requirements, however, appear to dampen the fires of professional ferment. Papers intended for public release which address certain categories of information and are written by persons drawing a DOD paycheck require prepublication security and policy review in Washington. While there is a review process in position now, there is a new effort underway to reissue review requirements. Much informal information reaching us indicates that the effort has been sponsored by people who would tighten the requirements. Presently, for scholarly papers we rely on the professional judgment of the author and the editorial review process of such professional journals as the *Naval War College Review* (which includes senior officers with many decades of experience behind them). The DOD review process relies on opinions sought from military and technical experts within the Chief of Naval Operations staff, the naval systems commands, program managers and the Office of the Secretary of Defense and other DOD agencies. This process seeks to ascertain whether security is being compromised or policies misstated. The lengthy bureaucratic process involved in prepublication review can result in a form of censorship and discouragement that we can ill afford. It is ironic that as the Russians are discarding their stifling Soviet system, the DOD is proposing to restate its requirement for prepublication review and perhaps strengthen it, particularly with regard to the more troublesome issue of policy review.

The requirement for prepublication review is understandable. On the one hand, it is an effort to maintain the security of classified information in the midst of an information revolution. On the other hand, it is an effort to maintain necessary policy discipline within government, but that aspect of review carries with it the threat of stifling healthy discussion. While these two aspects of review may not be meant to stifle professional debate, such could be the result.

In my view, the forces supporting renewal of review requirements are focusing on the wrong target. In the minds and intellectual activity of the military officers now attending our senior service colleges are the solutions of the future. Our students and faculty must be allowed and encouraged to express and discuss openly the issues touching their profession. The security review and editorial procedures currently in place in our service colleges are sufficiently effective at meeting the requirements for both security and policy integrity.

There is a test which is sometimes given job-seekers to measure their talent to resolve issues. A simulated "in" box is set before the candidate with papers identifying problems from low-order to high-order of difficulty. The test apparently plays to the human tendency to empty the "in" box of the low-order problems first, perhaps never to get to the crucial issue. I believe it may be this human tendency at work in security and policy review.

Within the curiously titled category of “human intelligence,” the most damaging losses have occurred as a result of espionage and treason. Security and policy review is not a cure—it is not even relevant to the prevention of those crimes.

Perhaps our second most serious problem is the divulging of classified information to the news media.

At our media conference in March, Mr. Fred Francis of NBC Television was one of our most valuable and forthcoming panel members. Without a hint of arrogance, Mr. Francis told our students about the way he gets his job done. He told about his sources of information and said the following to the officers of all services who were attending the conference:

“Let me be very blunt. In the real world of reporting, especially in Washington, I don’t need you. I really don’t. I don’t need to talk to your commanders; I don’t need to talk to your branch of service. In the course of covering the military on a day-to-day basis, I do not need to talk to your leaders or your decision makers.

“It is just a simple fact of how it all works. Put another way, there is always someone—*always* someone—who is going to give me the information I need for my story.”

On another occasion, a print media friend of mine, who is the head of the Washington bureau for his newspaper, recounted to me how a presidential candidate, in return for exclusive coverage by this well-known reporter, had promised, if elected, to leak like a sieve.

Those examples are evidence of the high-order of difficulty in control of classified and policy information. We do not confront such practices with a review policy, apparently because we can’t. So, we concentrate on the low-order difficulty, with its low payoff. We do this with a massive and detailed review of the articles and speeches by uniformed officers and scholars who may write for the U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* or the *Naval War College Review* to prevent any inadvertent or unintentional revelation of classified information or deviation from policy. This is like the drunk who lost his keys in the dark, but sought them under a streetlight because there he could see better.

The services employ scholars to teach at their educational institutions. Those scholars may be experts on arms control or American government, or on many another subject. Currently, under a disclaimer that the thoughts that such a scholar expresses are his alone and in no way are connected to the federal department which pays his salary, he may present alternative views to policy on a given issue. But, if through renewal of review requirements the outcome would be to make them more restrictive, then this scholar may be prevented from bringing his useful expertise to bear. Perhaps he will become a Preston Tucker, stifled by the Detroit automobile moguls because there are costs to innovation—costs that come with the prominence or

acceptance of new ideas. More likely he will leave federal service and express his views unfettered by thought police.

There are costs to academic freedom. Bad old ideas tend to be overturned. Bad new ones die. Sometimes good ones are endangered and must be defended. While it makes sense that in public concert senior officials sing from the same sheet of music, it makes no sense to prevent individual musicians, properly identified as individual citizens who are not singing in the chorus, from testing variations of the score. We cannot turn falsehood or error into truth by failing to challenge them. They simply remain falsehood or error.

This does not mean that most accepted thought is false or in error. In fact, most is accurate and sensible. But unless challenged openly, the false and erroneous, masquerading as something better than they are, and the formerly but no longer true, gain power to hurt our country, our services and our causes. In contrast, the accurate and true have the strength to stand tall amidst the wreckage of the properly exposed false.

In an increasingly complex world, we need the ideas that can only come from an adherence to academic freedom. At Newport, intellectual growth is our *sine qua non*, and the free expression of this growth, in the form of new ideas and innovative thinking, is the foundation on which our contribution—present and future—will rest.

Now I am going to wave an American flag. As we are about to enter the 21st century, in our minds we should weave these words onto that flag: "Let us dare to read, think, speak, and write." Those words are a gift to us from John Adams, second President of the United States. They are sound guidance to all of us charged with the defense of our country under circumstances that are new, challenging, and immensely important.

I welcome letters of comment.



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