

DECISIVE POINT

The USAWC Press Podcast Companion Series

Podcast Transcript

MG David C. Hill, Dr. David D. Dworak, and LTC Aaron Blair Wilcox “The Forward Edge of the Fifth US Army War College”

In this episode, Major General David C. Hill, Dr. David D. Dworak, and Lieutenant Colonel Aaron Blair Wilcox discuss their article, “[The Forward Edge of the Fifth US Army War College](#).” They address the evolution of the War College, focusing on curriculum adaptations in response to technological advancements and modern warfare challenges. They highlight the importance of personalized education and the value of multinational collaboration in fostering effective leadership and the necessity for continuous evolution in military education to prepare strategic leaders for future complexities. This episode sheds light on the transformative journey of the US Army War College and emphasizes the collaborative spirit necessary for effective leadership in a rapidly changing world.

Read the article here: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol54/iss3/3/>

E-mail usarmy.carlisle.awc.mbx.parameters@army.mil to give feedback on this podcast or the genesis article.

Keywords: Joint Force, professional military education, information age, human-machine teaming, war gaming

Episode Transcript

Stephanie Crider (Host)

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The views and opinions expressed in this podcast are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Department of the Army, the US Army War College, or any other agency of the US government.

Joining me in the studio today are Major General David C. Hill, Dr. David D. Dworak, and Lieutenant Colonel Aaron Blair Wilcox, authors of “The Forward Edge of the Fifth US Army War College,” which you can find in the [Autumn 2024](#) issue of *Parameters*.

Hill is the 53rd commandant of the US Army War College.

Dworak is the senior academic officer and provost at the US Army War College.

Wilcox is an assistant professor and deputy director in the Strategic Landpower and Futures Group at the US Army War College.

How did this project get started, and what is the fifth evolution of the US Army War College? What factors drive this evolution?

LTC Aaron Blair Wilcox

About a year ago, as I was PCSing to Carlisle Barracks, I was moving into my house, and my neighbor across the street sort of sauntered on over. You know, normal PCS pleasantries. He’s like, what are you doing here? Where are you working? And I told him I was working in the Center for Strategic Leadership at the Army War College. And he took a step back, and he’s like, “Well, I know a thing or two about CSL.”

Come to find out, he was the director, the first director in the early ’90s, a guy named Doug Campbell. And so, we were talking back and forth for a while and sort of learning about what CSL was and talking about now what I knew it to be in its current form. Then I did some quick research, and I came across a 1993 *Joint Forces Quarterly* article written by the commandant at the time, Major General Richard Chilcoat, commenting on the fourth college evolution coinciding with the genesis,

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the birth of CSL in the early '90s. Reading through that [article](#), General Chilcoat comments that there were two primary variables driving change in the strategic leader education at that time, one being technological and the other being geostrategic. So, the technological one obviously being the Internet and this thing that's going to transform how we apply Landpower, how we train strategic leaders. And that coincided with, I think, with CSL's mission as a strategic war-gaming center at the time at that echelon. And the other being, you know, geostrategic. The Soviet Union had fallen, and the United States is in this unipolar moment. And so how does that impact how the War College trains strategic leaders?

I found that interesting, talked to Doug about it, and took a step back and thought, well, I think the same thing might be happening now—30 years later. We're facing some technological shifts, the advent of AI, and some geostrategic shifts with peer / near-peer competitors, referencing back to the General Milley paper, “[Strategic Inflection Point](#),” where he talks about strategic loss in Afghanistan. And so, I wrote this concept of a fifth college evolution and gave it to General Hill and Dr. Dworak and was like, “If you think there's something here, I would love to support.” And it kind of blew up from there. So, I think there was.

MG David C. Hill

It's been a pleasure to partner with Blair and Dr. Dworak on this effort. And to his point, 30 years after the Chilcoat article in *Joint Forces Quarterly*, the 2023 article by General Milley that clearly, and almost explicitly, made reference to a framework that Harry Ball had advanced in his book about what drives change at an institution like ours, what were articulated in his article, specifically, changing character of war and changing global order. As we were reflecting on guidance from our Army senior leaders to strengthen our profession and transform continuously, all of the characteristics in his framework for analysis of the Army War College were sort of satisfied, and it really helped us think critically about the levers we're pulling here for change as we look to be relevant today and in the future.

Dr. David D. Dworak

One more element to the environment that's changed, I think, which is a little bit different from previous significant modifications we've made here at the college—the college has always done a pretty good job at making modifications. They're usually fairly modest year to year, just to keep up with the environment.

But, every once in a while, as General Milley noted, there's really a significant change in the environment. What we've seen in the last few years is significant change, as well, in the educational environment. The whole approach of how higher education is educating students is really shifted from what's taught versus now what is being learned. And that's taken us down a path of how do we really allow each student to get the most of their educational experience regardless of the length of time they're here? That really drove us to realize we are now in a time of really significant change here at the War College.

Host

How's the US Army War College adapting its curriculum to meet the demands of modern warfare? I'm really interested to hear about this in regards to human-machine teaming and artificial intelligence.

Hill

There's, I think, three big ideas in that regard that we're thinking about. One is AI as a strategic factor. As we think about the changing character of war, the skills required of a leader to effectively drive adaptation in their organizations and in institutions, we think AI is particularly relevant as a topic of study. We think there's great opportunity as we digitize the knowledge stores and tremendous archives resident here at the Army War College to explore how AI tools can enrich student and faculty research. We're also working hard to explore how machine learning and artificial intelligence can help us with decision support and strategic war gaming and planning as we center ourselves here on the national-strategic and theater-strategic echelon of warfare.

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Dworak

Technology has always been a part of warfare, modern or otherwise. It just comes across in different ways, depending on what area you're looking at. What's really different now, though, is the rate of change. Plus, the proliferation of technology, how it used to be for high tech, you had to be almost a nation-state where you can afford this. Now, that cost of entry is much, much lower. So, it's almost anybody can afford these different disruptive technologies that are there.

So, part of it that we have to, I think, just acknowledge and then adjust to at the War College is how do you deal with this rate of change that is so much faster than it has been previously? This is what leaders have to deal with now. Changing environments, changing conditions. Before, you might have had years to deal with something, months. Now, it's weeks or days. We're seeing it in Ukraine. So, how do you deal with that?

And, we also have to realize you can't prepare for every situation. So, it goes back to the knowledge, skills, and abilities of our students. We need people who are effective problem solvers but are also very agile. And, this is where things like AI and machine learning—those are where some of these real opportunities are. Not only do we see potential in here for good or for bad, but our adversaries see the same. And, if we don't take advantage of this now, we're going to be catching up, which is something we don't want to be doing in the future.

Wilcox

Coming from V Corps in my previous assignment, I had the privilege of working there before and after the February '22 invasion. Particularly after the invasion, I remember being sort of locked in a room with me and probably four other planners doing crisis action response planning for positioning combat-capable forces on NATO's Eastern flank. I remember being in that room and thinking to myself if I had the ability for accurate, curated, authoritative information right now, at the point of need, on the planning and the crisis action planning side, the ability to achieve decision dominance and to really equip subordinate commands for their tactical and operational planning would be something I would really, really want.

And then, getting here to the War College, I had an opportunity to partner and see how this artificial intelligence-enabled strategic advising is shaping and to see some of the technology in practice I would have killed to have then. And so, being able to partner with the researchers here and with, really, the experts at exploring how strategic-level advising works and how we can operationalize this and teach humans and machines to work together, groups with machines, and curating data, it's just extremely rewarding. And to pass that off to the corps and theater level would be something that I'm passionate about and really enjoying here.

Dworak

What's really exciting, this is almost like the 1990s, the early '90s, when the Internet was just coming out. We had access to it, but no one really knew its capabilities or where we would end up. We're in a similar situation right now with AI and machine learning. We see some of the potential, but we're on this journey.

Collectively, we don't really know what the capabilities are, but we're out there experimenting, trying to see what's in the realm of the possible.

Host

Tailorable education. Why is it an important part of the US Army War College strategy, and how does it address the diverse needs of students with different backgrounds and expertise?

Hill

You're pulling on, really, what our title for this paper was. We've described what we believe to be this leading edge of the fifth Army War College as an era of tailorable education and adaptive leadership. Here, we are supporting an arm of the Headquarters, Department of the Army as it's been on a multi-year journey to transform how it manages talent from an industrial model that was fixed around a limited number of variables that we understood about individuals to an assessment-driven

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mindset of growth. And how that applies to us here at the Army War College is we take our responsibility very seriously to allow each learner that comes here to develop as much as possible. We say, “move the needle as far as we can” for each student that studies here in a 10-month experience.

We have a strong core curriculum that is based around a professional body of knowledge, which is substantial and accounts for a majority of our contact hours here at the United States Army War College. And, while that, I don’t think, will change substantially, we are recognizing that with a battery of assessments that we expose our students to coming into the Army War College, they can understand themselves better, we can understand cohorts better, and we can make modifications on the margins and, perhaps, some more substantial ones in the years ahead—in the mindset of deliberate transformation here—that account for preference, closing gaps in particular students, the fact that they’ll all enter at different points around that strong core curriculum in terms of experience and understanding. And so, it’s just a rich environment for us here as we think about helping them to go back to organizations around this idea of adaptability.

There are scholars that have argued that leadership is the most important part in any framework for thinking about adaptation in organizations at the tactical edge and as institutions as large as the United States Army. And so, we’re thinking about that as an institution and then as we think about building skills and our students that will graduate here continuously and lead this Army out to a bright future.

Dworak

There’s probably always going to be a core block of instruction here at the Army War College that our senior leaders within the Army have told us there’s a need and desire for a generalist approach to our graduates, certain skill sets that everybody needs to be effective at, but we also realize that people have different interests and needs and desires. So, this is the balance of providing both the generalist outcomes, as well as opportunities, as the Commandant said, to move the needle for each individual student.

The challenge for moving the needle is from where to where? What are those assessment tools that allow us to accurately say, for this particular student, “You’re effective,” or maybe, “You have some areas of improvement in this area or that area.”? And, that’s the key is having an assessment tool that can measure that and provide objective measures then that not just the War College, but the Army can use.

This is also tied to bigger effort. There’s a lot of assessments being done in the Army right now, to include the different command assessment programs. So, part of what we need to do is not just develop our assessment tools here ourselves but also work with the larger Army enterprise and say, “Who else is doing it?” What are those key knowledge, skills, or behaviors that we see in leaders? And now, as we start tracking it through their different levels of their career, do we have access to it? Can we measure it? And do the students, the individuals, the officers know about them so they can work on them throughout their whole career, not just here at the Army War College?

Host

What roles do international collaboration and the integration of international officers play in the strategic vision at the War College in light of the increasing need for multinational operations?

Hill

Any future conflict that we engage in as a nation, our Army will fight as part of a combined and a Joint Force. It’s important for us to bring Joint Force perspectives from a US-centered aspect to this multinational coalition that comes together here every year in a student resident student body class—this year, 81 officers from 77 different nations studying together. And, you know, several years ago, the Chief of Staff of the Army wrote a white paper about the Army and competition, and they talked about things that the Army brings to the table as we look to deter future conflicts—not to promote war,

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but to preserve peace. And, he talked about adding credible deterrence options into the Joint and combined tool kit to demonstrating core competencies in operations and training, and then, importantly, to expanding Landpower networks. And, I think that's where professional military education and cooperation together in classrooms has great potential. And, we're excited to bring partners here that we know will go on to important levels of leadership in their own nations, and that speaks to great opportunity working together in the future.

Dworak

The international fellows in our classroom are so important because—we've seen it firsthand over the years—if we have just a US-centric student body and you give them a problem to solve, especially an operational problem, they tend to very quickly drive to a US-centric solution, usually heavy in the military application of power. And, it's interesting when we have a number of international fellows [IFs] in the room, especially a seminar that's mostly IF, they'll very often come up with a very different solution, which may be much, much more appropriate for that regional setting or for the global setting. That's the value of bringing these different perspectives into the seminar room.

We've been working with a number of international partners for a number of years, and we had some really great experiences. And, what we found is in those cases where there's a deliberate investment from both parties—each one sees the other as an equal partner—they're very, very effective. So, we're helping share best practices, institutional improvement, and faculty development and curriculum development and reviews, student assessment. There's lots of different areas we've been working with. It's really amazing how these partnerships have outcomes and benefits that no one ever thought of at the beginning, but we also found it takes a lot of time, it takes a lot of effort, and they're multi-year efforts, and it needs to be sustained over time as well. Initially, the thought was you go in for a few years, you have a program, and when it's done, you're done, and we've realized working with some partners, say like in Nigeria, that no, you're in there and you achieve your initial aims, but then if you want to continue that relationship to even a higher level, you got to keep it going. So what does that look like?

Wilcox

I know your line, sir, that, you know, IF presence here is like a superpower of the Army War College, I found to be persuading. I'm sitting in a seminar right now. There's an Iraqi officer and a Hungarian officer and a Serbian officer, and to see them collaborating with the American officers in the room and the interagency that are in the room, it's cool to see. As we tackle problems that are not unique to us. But then getting perspectives that are unique and help me think and see things in different ways from an international perspective is just, it's really rewarding.

Hill

Stephanie, if I could say one more thing on that. You know, Dave touched on partnership that results in capacity building and exchange of best practices across institutions in different countries. You know, my comments and Blair's were focused around what happens in our pacing program here, the traditional resident senior service college program. But what's been incredibly impressive to me is to see how—in tailored executive courses, in collaborative research projects at institutes like Center for Strategic Leadership and Strategic Studies Institute and elsewhere—how we're able to leverage the tremendous human capital that's resident here at Carlisle Barracks. And back to this idea of extending Landpower networks, it happens in many different ways beyond a traditional classroom experience that occurs here at Carlisle Barracks in an exchange program with a partnered institution in another country.

We're constantly looking for ways to add value for the Army and for our nation in how we strengthen these relationships through teaching, service, and scholarship.

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Dworak

And we've seen with initiatives, such as the International Fellow Continuing Education Program, there's a real desire from our alumni and from the regional partners to continue these relationships—periodic engagements, just catching up with each other and what's going on in the strategic environment is real value.

Host

Before we go, did we miss anything? Do you have any concluding thoughts?

Wilcox

This has been an extremely rewarding project for me—sort of spend one year here to focus on this, learn about the institution. I look forward to continuing that. So, I appreciate the opportunity. Thanks.

Dworak

When you look at the number of the thoughts or the initiatives, most of those aren't driven down from the top, either. Those are all things that have come up from the faculty and staff and realized that there's real opportunities to seize onto. And that's, I think, the real value of the War College is people out there who have an idea and a little bit of resourcing; it's just amazing what they can accomplish just with a little bit of time.

Hill

I'll come back to where we started, Stephanie. I think the idea is America's position in the global order, and the global order itself is changing. The character of war is changing. As professionals, we're constantly evaluating the role of the Army as an institution, the role of the military profession.

And so, we have a tremendous professional responsibility here at the United States Army War College to change as those forces of change externally to the college drive us to revising learning outcomes, modifying our approaches to teaching and learning here at the college, and continuing to be the nation's institution of choice for developing strategic leaders.

Host

What a great note to end on. Thank you all for joining me today.

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