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## Presidents Notes

Ronald J. Kurth

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## President's Notes

**T**hese are times of change in our world as profound as those foreseen by Rear Admiral Stephen B. Luce when he founded the Naval War College in 1884. The Admiral founded the College to help the U.S. Navy meet the demands of change. He saw his navy entering a world which required new and better thought than had sufficed, developed by more intellectually prepared naval officers than could easily be found. We should recall his foresight now, for I think we are on a similar threshold.

Recently another flag officer and I discussed the intellectual growth of military professionals studying at the Naval War College. I commented on the desirable effect which will spring, I think, from the CNO's policy, sustained since 1983, of requiring about 65 of approximately 98 naval officers in our senior class to be post-command officers. I argued that these select officers had already demonstrated high leadership and professional competence during their experience at sea. (I also remarked that the officers of the other services studying here were of the same high calibre.) I lamented that I could not keep some of these officers for a second year so that they

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Admiral Kurth spent 17 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 has a Ph.D. from Harvard in government (Soviet Studies).

could experience even more growth than they had demonstrated during their first year. The "some" I spoke of were those who had exhibited exceptional talent, who soon would become the young strategists in command and on staffs, and who could grow to become our future senior strategists. I added that some communities in the navy are under-represented here. As a consequence, when later ordered to major commands and staffs, for lack of suitable mid-career education, many of their members would make less of a contribution than their individual potential would permit. I groused about the never-ending shortage of officers in the navy which extended these fine officers at sea to meet national commitments.

To my sudden but brief surprise, my partner in conversation passionately challenged the theory—which I had not advanced—that officers with higher degrees were smarter than those without such degrees. We had, alas, arrived at a time-worn point of conflict among naval professionals about enhanced study and operational experience.

Recently, I have been reading about the Naval War College's founder in the *Life and Letters of Rear Admiral Stephen B. Luce*, published in 1925 by Albert Gleaves. (Gleaves, himself, was a naval officer turned scholar after commanding the U.S. Asiatic Fleet.) When Luce was struggling to establish a graduate-level institution in Newport, he met determined opposition from colleagues who thought that naval officers ought not to spend time reading and studying when they might be at sea. The conflict that Admiral Luce faced within the Navy was extremely bitter. When he returned to sea in 1886, two years after founding the College, he was relieved as President by Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan. The College was then essentially disestablished by antagonists, and Mahan was ordered elsewhere. The one-building College on Coasters Harbor Island was consolidated with the Torpedo Station on Goat Island (both islands in Newport Harbor) with the commander of the latter in charge. The consolidation was an effort to subordinate the War College to technocrats. Fortunately, this plan was later reversed by College supporters and Mahan resumed the Presidency in June 1892. The fight over graduate education was renewed, however, and Commodore Francis M. Ramsey, Chief of the all-powerful Bureau of Navigation, led the opposition. Mahan's work had made him famous worldwide and his lectures and writing are credited by Gleaves with "the creation of the modern German Navy, the development of the Japanese Navy, and the rebuilding of the British Navy." Nevertheless, the Chief of the Bureau of Navigation argued that "as these books [of Mahan] can be read by any officer in the navy it seems very absurd to send officers there [to Newport] to have them [the books] read to them by Captain Mahan or anyone else."

Luce's tenacity in his struggle to develop graduate education is awesome.

The last attempt of his opponents to disestablish the College occurred in

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1899, fifteen years after its founding. Thereafter a new struggle began to move the College to Washington. It continued into the 20th century. For thirty years Luce fought each battle, from wherever he was, from before the College's founding in 1884 through the move-it-to-Washington effort, which was not abandoned until 1910.

**R**eturning now to my conversation regarding advanced education, I had had the benefit of reading Luce's views as well as my own experience, and I argued that basic intelligence is not the issue. Rather, an officer who has the opportunity of graduate education has the chance to become as much as he can be. The great weakness of making operational experience—or any other single criterion—the *only* criterion of development and promotion is no different now than when Luce had fought for more than that. It is a mistake to allow a single criterion to dominate our choices in this multi-criteria world. The single-criterion world is a comfort zone of clarity and simplicity and encourages a natural tendency toward its enshrinement. But when we choose a narrow route for developing officers of inherent intelligence, we neither uncover nor nourish their greater potential to contribute to the Service. We fail to allow our ablest officers to become all that they can be. Consequently, we have less conceptual flexibility, fewer innovators, and fewer officers seeking “virtue,” that is, thinking and developing positions of their own in pursuit of doing things right, a subject I discussed in last summer's issue of this journal. When outstanding, talented officers who have proven themselves at sea are denied the chance to grow intellectually, our Navy is also less than it can be. We rob not only them, but ourselves. As Winston Churchill said of a service over which he presided before and during the first part of World War I, the Royal Navy had many captains of ships but few captains of war.

I recently heard of a screening board some years ago which resolved the dilemma of selecting one of two apparently matched candidates by counting their days at sea. We probably reach a focus such as this through natural and understandable forces. For forty years we have rebuffed a threat to our values and way of life from a frightening Soviet imperialism of messianic ideology, backed by an immense military establishment. In carrying out its share of this great task, the U.S. Navy has been deployed worldwide, in a peacetime tempo the rough equivalent of any we had experienced in war. Our sea defense was based on superior tactical skill and constant readiness with platforms technologically superior to any potential foe's.

Into the seventies we still had officers of the older generation with broad experience upon whom we could draw for their breadth and scope of intellect. But then and since, had we fought, we might have fought without a true successor to Raymond Spruance, a distinguished officer at sea who,

through education, better prepared himself for command during World War II. Now the world, once again, is changing in rapid fashion.

Luce concluded that his navy had fought less well in the Civil War than it might have. Furthermore, his navy was transitioning from sail and wood to steam and steel. Campaigns that had taken years, Luce could see, might take only months. The United States, unified after the Civil War, was growing economically and emerging as a world power. It made sense to have a great "White Fleet" of such power, endurance and seaworthiness that it could circumnavigate the world and broadcast change for all to see. Germany and Italy had also unified, Japan was emerging, Russia was on the verge of revolutionary transition and Great Britain would soon no longer be able to protect its empire. Luce knew that in such a world his navy could no longer muddle through, and he fought to cope with the change. He fought for thirty years. After Luce came Mahan, and after him came officers like Sims who fathered innovation. After reaching four stars in World War I, Sims reverted in rank to two stars so that he could return to the Naval War College and continue in the tradition of Luce. Between the two World Wars, most front-running naval officers were required to study at the College. As a consequence, we entered World War II with the finest cohort of leadership we had ever known: King, Nimitz, Hewitt, Spruance, Conolly, Halsey, Richmond K. Turner, and many another. None was perfect; collectively they were splendid. Their generation of officers had not thought it all through at the Naval War College, but they had thought through a lot. Most importantly, they were prepared intellectually for the unforeseeable.

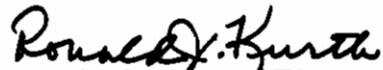
**N**ow, I assured my partner, as in Luce's day, major transformations may be afoot. I had heard Mr. Gorbachev at the United Nations, and I was not overly impressed with his proposed cut in Soviet arms, which still would leave the U.S.S.R. with twice Nato's force levels. But when Marshal Akhromeyev apparently developed diplomatic ill health and retired, *that* caught my attention. Akhromeyev most likely did not respond with retirement to a single reduction in force. More likely he responded to an entire course of events being led by Mr. Gorbachev. That is, there may yet be more changes to come in the Soviet military establishment, and they may affect our assessment of location, timing and force levels necessarily deployed forward. Certainly the Soviets are changing course to correct basic economic ills. Independently in the United States the nature of our military investment is coming under great pressure to change because of our own needs. But now that change may be linked to change in the U.S.S.R. Furthermore, Europe is pursuing economic union, Japan is growing stronger, and China is emerging from its tethers. The entire Pacific is changing and the Pacific is inevitably a maritime stage. At home we are looking anxiously

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to the south in our hemisphere, while also trying to work accommodation to the north of our border. The U.S. Navy will in a new way be used as a sea anchor for our country amidst this change, just as Luce thought it would be in his time.

The Marxist-Leninist state which became a threat to emerging and existing democracies after World War II may now be suffering failure and potential economic collapse. Should the Soviet Union regain its socioeconomic viability as a state, it may reappear in decades ahead as a classic threat in terms of balance of power. Until then, we may be entering a period in which we can change the pattern of forward deployed operations in favor of achieving better sustainment and newly responsive, irregular deployments answering regional needs. We may have the opportunity once again to let our finest officers be all that they can be. Then, should some vast, now unforeseen danger loom, these officers will be as well prepared as possible to cope with the hazards and crises of their time. We should determine to pursue that goal at the earliest possible opportunity.

As always, though I may not be able to respond, I welcome letters of comment.



RONALD J. KURTH

Rear Admiral, U.S. Navy

President, Naval War College