

Testimony of Joan Johnson-Freese
House Armed Services Military Personnel Subcommittee
“Professional Military Education and National Defense Strategy”
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2118 Rayburn Office Building

Representative Speier, Representative Gallagher & Members of the Subcommittee,

It is an honor and pleasure to have the opportunity to speak with you today about Professional Military Education (PME), a field I have worked in since 1993. The focus of my remarks is on degree-granting PME institutions, specifically Command & Staff and War Colleges, as that is where my experience lies. And while I am currently a faculty member at the Naval War College, the views I am expressing today are strictly my own personal views.

A decade ago, national security journalist and author Tom Ricks suggested closing the War Colleges and simply sending military officers to civilian schools. I argued against that as I believed then and believe now that educating America’s military through PME institutions is critical to America’s national security. These institutions are best suited – in terms of curricular focus, understanding the strengths, limitations and backgrounds of the students, accommodating military career schedules and having the capacity to deal with the numbers of students we are talking about, and facilities - to prepare military leaders for the challenges of the future. But I have also always felt that these institutions could do better, and that it is the duty of PME administrators and faculty to strive for improvement for the benefit of the officers that attend and the nation.

Make no mistake, America’s competitive edge in warfighting has narrowed. Therefore, it is imperative that the United States maintain and develop its advantages to the fullest. PME plays a critical role in that regard by educating officers to anticipate emerging threats and how to effectively develop and employ tip-to-tail ready and combat lethal forces.

I am especially glad to be here because it affirms that PME has taken a big step forward over the past 11 years in simply accepting that open discussion regarding potential improvement is in fact healthy. When I first published an article suggesting that PME needed improvement in 2011, my observations were considered heresy by some of my colleagues. Military institutions like to handle their dissent in private; in public, the mantra is: “everything’s fine.” Previously, critique was offered only by retired faculty, when their careers could no longer be threatened. Now, publications such as *Joint Force Quarterly* regularly publish articles generating useful debate on PME curricula and instruction.

There is much that has improved in PME during my nearly thirty-year career. Adherence to the principles of academic freedom – the foundation for quality teaching and recruiting top teachers – is now embedded in most PME programs. Additionally, PME institutions have recognized the need and benefits of affiliating with other institutions, to expand both their

breadth of expertise and reap the benefits of collaboration. It is also through these external relationships that top faculty establish, grow and have their expertise recognized by their peers. Therefore, external relationships ought always to be encouraged, not thought of as taking away from the mission.

There has also been a slow but steadily growing recognition that it is not the purpose of either the intermediate or senior level JPME/PME courses to better prepare each individual attendee for their next billet – a mistake that long dominated PME but is impossible when class members range across all military specializations, from pilots, to ship drivers, to infantry, veterinarians, lawyers, etc, and come from all branches of the military as well. All of these national security professionals need to be educated for the arc of the rest of their careers rather than a next assignment that might last only a few years. The now-standard inclusion of international students and interagency representatives adds considerably to the educational parameters of PME as well; even more would be better.

Another improvement is that we now see fewer moments when senior officers take to the stage to welcome students to PME with statements like “it’s only a lot of reading if you do it” and “I’ve spent a lot of time sleeping in those very chairs you’re now in.” Nevertheless, it is certainly still the case that some services and some military branches encourage, respect and appreciate education more than others.

The hybrid nature of PME institutions creates 3 general types of stresses and challenges that remain particularly problematic: (1) establishing clarity on the goal of the academic program (2) defining the institution’s expectations of the students and what those individual students should expect to get out of the program, and (3) needing the most effective mix of civilian academics, active-duty and retired military professionals, and national security practitioners to best to implement the academic program.

For PME institutions to be better learning institutions, and therefore more effective in preparing military officers for a challenging future with America’s security at stake, I suggest beginning with consideration of three recommendations.

1) Make it clear that Congress’ goal for intermediate and senior JPME/PME is *education*, and not *training*. PME should produce military leaders who are intellectually agile, questioning, critical and strategic thinkers who can broadly anticipate future challenges and consequently most effectively employ US forces for maximum effect and lethality when needed. To cite from the recently published DOD Instruction 1322.35, Volume 1 section on Standards, military education programs should: “emphasize intellectual leadership (e.g. strategic and critical thinking), military professionalism, and independence in action in the art and science of warfighting, in order to develop the intellectual agility required for success within the profession of arms.” American military officers today are highly *trained* in their specialized jobs as warfighters. With increased rank, however, comes increased complexity in knowing how, where and when to apply the lethality that they learn in training, important both on the battlefield and when they are called upon to advise civilian policy-makers.

2) In terms of student expectations and what institutions can expect from students, I recommend institutionalizing a two-track PME pathway for students: one for students who seek only to complete JPME and one for those who want to pursue a graduate degree. This is important because we have found that most students do in fact want to complete a Master's-level program. Indeed, this was a main driver for accrediting PME to give those degrees in the first place. But some students chafe at getting a degree or degree program requirements, and that minority should be allowed to pursue a smaller and more circumscribed program to satisfy JPME requirements.

3) Regarding the most effective mix of civilian, active-duty and retired military and national security practitioners, I recommend addressing issues consistently identified as problems on command climate surveys. In my experience, these problems include transparency in decision-making; whether hiring, awards and promotions are based on qualifications and merit; narrow bands of communication among administrators and faculty within institutions; and longstanding problems of inclusion and diversity. To that end, DoD/OSD should collect data on faculty and administration toward increased diversity through demographics, backgrounds and expertise. Research consistently shows that until minorities reach a 30% level in organizations their voices go unheard or neglected. Increased administrative diversity and diversity on hiring committees is especially important. Statistics on faculty and administrative composition along the four categories I have identified are often closely held within institutions, but I would estimate that PME administration – which has grown significantly in past years - is overwhelmingly composed of retired military, perhaps as high as 8 or 9 out of every 10 positions. This lopsidedness persists because of inertia in hiring practices. As one of my students pointed out when noticing the predominance of retired military in PME: ducks pick ducks.

Few or none of this group of administrators have experience in academic life or higher education before coming to PME. Clear and granular data on which groups are hired more often, have been hired at higher or lower pay (and whether those hired at lower pay are still lagging), and are promoted more often and to more senior appointments (as a percentage of the faculty) would go a long way toward getting a more accurate picture of administrative and faculty balance or imbalance inside PME institutions. Clarity here would help to dispel faculty perceptions of unfairness if such perceptions are erroneous. If such perceptions are accurate, however – and I suspect many of them are – more data would allow for more accurate course corrections and institutional improvement.

Allow me to discuss each of these areas in turn.

First, regarding the goals of PME academic programs, there are Congressional studies and consequent directives on JPME and PME. DOD/OSD Instructions then attempt to translate those directives into practice. CJCS policies and OPMEP directions also further distill and operationalize Congressional intent, with the perception that those can lean toward accommodating the status quo and default to training, vice education, practices. Individual PME

institutions then turn all of this direction into curriculum, some with more external “help” from their services than others, and increasingly more internal administrative “help.” In my department at the Naval War College, desired outcomes have always driven curriculum, not the other way around, but that is not always the case.

Being able to anticipate future threats and understanding the parameters of addressing them – through strategic and critical thinking, full situational awareness and understanding, and understanding both joint and interagency operations – is very different from making officers better at their individual jobs. They are already very good at those jobs. Learning critical thinking is education; getting better at a particular skill is largely training. The military is much more comfortable with training, because training is easier to “measure” and produces more concrete metrics (with metrics a staple of demonstrating performance in the military) than education. Consequently, there is a tendency to default in that direction.

Let me offer a somewhat unusual example of the difference. Some years ago, parts of the book *World War Z* were included in the Naval War College curriculum to generate discussion regarding the need to understand that different challenges require different capabilities. In that case, a baseball bat was more effective in fighting the enemy (zombies) than was a fighter jet or an aircraft carrier. The soldiers in *World War Z* did not know how to change their assumptions and approach against a new enemy and subsequently they wasted time trying to figure out how to use Stealth bombers against an already mostly-dead enemy.

While not as dramatic as fighting zombies, there are other clear indications that security and security challenges are rapidly changing and in ways that are not always initially recognized. Remember how the inability to understand the implications of the Sunni-Shia religious conflict hindered US strategy in Iraq. Or how not understanding the role of gender was an issue in gathering intelligence and providing security in both Iraq and Afghanistan until women soldiers were attached to US special forces teams. The technological leaps of other countries can be underestimated until something like the 2013 Chinese “space science mission” that nearly reached what the US has considered a sanctuary orbit for high-value satellites results in a quiet panic in Washington. Russia’s unprecedented use of information warfare to influence US elections and its earlier use of grey-zone tactics in Crimea and Georgia as a rehearsal for the present-day war in Ukraine has suddenly made Russian studies relevant again.

In a similar vein, five years ago, it was difficult to get my students to think of climate change as a security issue. Many considered it a hoax. Only three years ago trying to generate a discussion on a pandemic as a security challenge was near impossible and considered a waste of time. But as we have seen, the world is increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous, and our leaders must be prepared to operate in that world. Leaders with the most and most accurate situational awareness and understanding of their environment, can get inside decision-making loops, and have prepared for contingencies will succeed. They will be the gamechangers. We may not be facing zombies, but we will face enemies and threats whose nature is still unknown to us.

Second, elaborating on why PME rather than civilian schools, and thinking about what students should get out of a PME program and what institutions can expect from students, it is important to remember a few important facts at the outset.

- There are no academic admission requirements for students entering JPME1 or JPME2 programs, nor should there necessarily be since the idea is to educate the military at large.
- Also, students enter PME with college degrees, some even graduate degrees, but not necessarily relevant to the PME mission as they are overwhelmingly technical or engineering degrees. Military students are not well prepared for civilian academic programs other than in STEM fields.

These two facts mean that many students enter these accelerated 10-month PME degree-granting programs with little prior educational breadth and little or no writing skills.

This lack of preparedness means that while PME schools have long recognized the preference and benefits of active learning methods for adults, it is difficult to jump into a Socratic discussion on the pros and cons of alliances for the US when the students have no knowledge, for example, about why NATO was founded or how the organization has evolved since the ending of the Cold War. This matters because if PME does not make military officers more adept and conversant in the basics and lexicon of national security, they will later be left behind in critical discussions with civilian counterparts because they don't understand the premises of realism, liberal internationalism, deterrence, nuclear strategy, global economics and globalization, and other concepts that require a clear understanding to be useful in making policy.

Students also need to be able to clarify their thoughts on these topics and effectively convey them to others. While writing papers is the most effective method for practicing this, most PME students struggle with writing, some mightily.

Whether deficiency in writing should matter to students' military careers and, given this deficiency, what is an acceptable graduate level paper or exam are questions then often left unanswered and grade inflation becomes a problem. PME institutions, given their unique student body, stress that they do not have a grading curve, but the reality is that these institutions have improbably higher graduation rates and rates of graduate degrees granted than many top schools whose students have already been vetted with highly selective admission standards.

And yet, positive student and administrative praise for PME abounds. Students, for their part, hear that it is hard to get an "A" at War College, but harder still to get a "C" at War College. Many are happy with that; some feel that adage means their degree is worth less than others, but others – who have been told that PME is a time to "take a rest and reconnect with their families" are fine with lowered grading requirements. PME administrators, meanwhile, and many faculty are quick to employ overused but undefined terms to describe PME programs in

glowing terms, to the point where PME faculty have long passed them around as a PME meeting Bingo card: synergy, “World Class,” result-driven, rigor, fast track, client-focused, core business, and proactive among them.

The goal of PME should not be to compete with Harvard or Yale or profess that war colleges are “peer institutions” to those academic centers. But neither can they continue to say that they exist in so specialized a space that they are world-class but cannot be compared to anyone else in that same world. The goal should be to focus on identifying how to maintain and expand America’s military edge, who best to educate for that purpose, and how best to achieve it using the unique advantages of the PME environment, including security clearances, shared military experiences, and faculty with deep security backgrounds.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, we must improve the quality and balance of faculty who administer and teach. Until this is done, inertia and the status quo will prevail. Developing intellectually capable and flexible military leaders requires capable, flexible and deeply educated PME faculty who are themselves involved in life-long learning and professional engagement. These administrators and faculty should have subject-matter expertise beyond PowerPoint slides prepared by someone else. This is not to say that all faculty should look alike. PME faculties are hybrid organizations composed of (1) active-duty military members (2) career academics (3) practitioners from the interagency and think tanks and (4) retired military. All play an important role and each have strengths and liabilities.

Active-duty military bring currency and credibility to the classrooms and connect well with the students, though often have limited backgrounds in classrooms or the subject matter they teach. Academics bring subject matter expertise, educational experience and perhaps most importantly, a vastly different cultural outlook that focuses on challenging students, but they sometimes initially have difficulty conveying their subject matter expertise so that it is relevant to PME students. The academic culture also expects hiring and promotion to be on clearly defined, merit-based criteria. Practitioners also bring subject matter expertise, especially regarding the interagency process and specialized fields, and are perhaps more adept at making curricular material relevant to students than academics. They are in some ways the true hybrid members of the faculty. Retired military faculty bring field experience, a strong connection with the students - who they often see as younger versions of themselves - and an appreciation of the military culture’s expectation of not raising questions or voicing problems regarding mission execution. But the subject-matter currency of retired officers can fade relatively quickly, and many – not all - have little interest in expanding their subject-matter horizons. Few have any experience with teaching or research beyond PME. They often see themselves and their work as so unique that merit-based criteria for hiring and promotion can only be “soft” at best. The dominance of retired military faculty and administrators in PME is a problem. Gathering data to support or refute that dominance and related perceptions is a key step to any meaningful PME reform.

There are, of course, former practitioners and civilian academics who lose the essential currency in their field that makes them valuable to PME. Part of what fostered this problem is

that faculty at PME institutions are government employees and as professionals they join knowing and understanding that they are therefore subject to federal rules and policies. But what the “rules” and procedures are *within* institutions was for many years opaque and it was therefore difficult to hire or keep academics. Most faculty were on short term contracts, a practice that breeds cautiousness and timidity, and leads to excessive concern with student ratings. When I first arrived at the Naval War College it was standard practice to have students see their grades *before* evaluating their instructors. Little surprise that most faculty and administrators adopted a “safety first” mentality centered on high student ratings and successful throughput rates.

The good news is that faculty-related policies have changed over the years. Many PME institutions, for example, now have policies for faculty academic rank, hiring, retention and promotion. The bad news is that there is still reason for cautiousness and timidity among faculty. The 2019 Naval War College Faculty Handbook, for example, is a daunting 345 pages of policies, memos, and acronyms. It has only been out for less than three years and it is already in the process of a rewrite, despite the reality that faculty could barely keep up with the 2019 version. This churn in guidelines for faculty promotes the perception – not entirely undeserved – that those rules are applied selectively, some remain deliberately ambiguous, and that certain categories of faculty are favored in terms of hiring, retention, awards, promotion and having a voice within institutional decision-making. These perceptions undermine building an effective faculty team, with some people feeling they are not truly welcome or trusted enough to really be on the team, despite being told repeatedly that being considered a good team player is among the primary criteria for a successful PME career.

The three problems outlined create a great deal of inertia. By way of example, in 2017, Congress passed the bipartisan Women, Peace & Security Act. DOD was designated as one of four governmental department primarily responsible for implementation of this act in the 2019 US National Strategy on Women, Peace and Security.

But you can’t implement what you don’t know about, and data has consistently shown low rates within DOD of knowledge about, or even awareness of, the Women, Peace & Security framework – that it is a *security* framework - and the strategic advantages it brings to the US domestically and in all corners of the world, including in this era of strategic competition. That will likely remain the case until it is integrated into PME core curriculum. DoD issued a WPS Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan in 2020. In the case of the Navy, the Secretary of Navy issued a memo calling for mainstreaming WPS across PME in February 2022, and the USNWC Strategic Plan for 2022-2027 calls for the integration of WPS across all programs by 2024.

WPS was incrementally and narrowly integrated in the Naval War College core curriculum in 2021-22 for the first time. Full integration, however, will hinge on how willing and able all faculty are to become conversant in the subject matter. As far as I know, however, the Naval War College is the only PME institution to include WPS in its core curricula at all. So, while I

proudly say that the Naval War College is leading the way in WPS implementation, there is still a long way to go.

There is of course the legitimate argument that putting something into an academic program, especially one already abbreviated and tailored to accommodate military manpower considerations, requires taking something out. But finding the right balance between traditionally-taught material – doctrine, past battles and wars, planning processes - versus new or potentially underrepresented areas – artificial intelligence, information warfare, nuclear strategy, chemical and biological warfare, demographics, space security, global economics, climate change, pandemics, cyber security – and all the manpower and operational issues associated with each, must be considered. And all faculty must be broadly educated and/or willing and able to continue to broaden their personal expertise throughout their careers to accommodate a changing environment.

I am retiring from PME in July 2022. I am grateful for the professional experiences, friendships, academic freedom and classroom opportunities that have enjoyed. I have worked with students through the Post-Cold War “peace dividend,” 9/11, the War on Terror and the return to Great Power Competition. Each was challenging, but the future will be even more so. The imperative for effective PME only continues to grow.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my views.