Officer Education: What Lessons Does the French Defeat in 1871 Have for the US Army Today?

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Abstract

The Army’s Professional Military Education (PME) is broken. The current focus and methodology of PME does not adequately prepare our officers to think critically. Though the education provided is, generally speaking, of a good standard it is not focused on the development of critical thinkers, as required by Congress and demanded by the armed forces’ likely future missions. PME spends too much time indoctrinating officers rather than empowering them to think for themselves. This paper contends that the current system of PME is scarily similar to the French system of officer education prior to 1870 and that we risk a repeat of the French experience in their war with Prussia if we do not adequately tackle the problem.

The war with Prussia in 1870-71, was one for which France was ill prepared. The organization of the French army was poor, it lacked sufficient strength to fight Prussia, its mobilization for war was a shambles, the French failed to follow a coherent war-plan, the commanders-in-chief, Napoleon III and later Marshal Bazaine, were unfit for high command, and the pre-war problems with education in the military academies all led to the army’s failure. These factors combined with the efficiency and professionalism of the opposing Prussian army, the high quality of its leadership, particularly of Chief of the Prussian General Staff Helmuth von Moltke, as well as the Prussian army’s numerical superiority all combined to bring about the rapid French defeat. If the crushing defeat of the French Imperial armies, at the battles of Sedan and Metz, did not immediately end the war, it did render a French victory impossible.

However, it is not there but elsewhere that we should look for the root causes of French failure. As Richard Holmes pointed out “the war was lost not so much on the battlefields of Alsace, Lorraine, and Champagne in 1870 itself, as in the French cabinet and Ministry of War, in the regiments and military academies, in the years before 1870.”[1] It is the last of these ideas that is the focus of this article. As we emerge from more than a decade of conflict, and amid a great deal of criticism of US army officer education,[2] the army needs to make sure it does not end up like France in 1870-71. Rather we should aim to be more like Prussia. That is, Prussia when it had clear strategic guidance from its leaders (not the Prussia of 1917). I say this, as much of the above criticism could easily be applied to the US army and its prosecution of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, and much of this can reasonably be traced back to officer education. For it is there that the minds of our present and future strategic thinkers are molded and developed.

When addressing the educational needs of the armed forces, one of the key concerns of the U.S. House of
Representatives’ Committee on Armed Services report on professional military education was:

two recent studies have indicated that officers are serving in joint and service staff assignments without adequate educational preparation. These studies have pointed to specific deficiencies in areas such as critical thinking that can and should be addressed throughout an officer’s professional military education.

There are some clear parallels with the 1870-71 conflict. One of the reasons the French lost was their lack of effective leadership, and this was largely a product of the French officer education system. Indeed, Dallas Irvine, the archivist and historian identified this as the “primary cause of the French military collapse.” On the other side, the Prussians demonstrated excellent critical thinking and great adaptability, and this Irvine attributed greatly to their education system.

In order to see some of the consequences of such a disparity, it is worth briefly examining the strategies of France and Prussia as well as the course of the war itself. Simply put, French strategy at the start of the war was offensive. There were two main reasons for this. First, Napoleon III hoped to gain the help of Austria-Hungary (still smarting over its defeat by the Prussians, in 1866), and to keep the South German states from joining with Prussia, by a swift offensive into Prussian territory. Second, Prussia, given time, could put into the field vastly more men than France and an offensive would help to disrupt a Prussian mobilization and enable a possible link-up with Austria. On its face, the above ideas are reasonable. However, Napoleon III kept faith with this plan of action even though there was no hope of Austrian aid after the start of the war. In addition, when the planned offensive failed to materialize there was no effective alternate in place. The original plan also called for the deployment of the French army in three separate forces, for flexibility and ease of handling. Napoleon III overruled this and took over direct control of the entire force. The army was much too large for this, and it proved impossible for him to take all of the necessary decisions for the command of the army, let alone to control it. This meant that the French army went to war with a command structure inadequate for the purpose, with disastrous consequences.

The Prussian strategy was rather more realistic and flexible. It was created as much through the logistic nature of the Prussian preparations for war as through a purely “Grand Napoleonic” strategy, based upon turning the enemy’s flank and enveloping them. The Prussians initially expected to go on the defensive in the face of a French attack into Germany and planned accordingly. The Prussian army deployed into three smaller armies, which von Moltke distributed over the length of the frontier with France. Each of which was controlled by a commander acting (ideally) within the guidelines provided by von Moltke. The idea being that any one army could contain the expected French attack whilst the other two maneuvered to envelop the enemy. The Prussian plan was simple and von Moltke had realized that he could not control the whole of the army but could only direct it, something the French failed to grasp. The difference in command philosophy between the two armies came about as much by the need for a strong Napoleon-like figure to be in charge of French forces, as it did from the French military education system that was top down in its focus, highly directive, and rather rigid in its thinking. In contrast, the Prussian military education system emphasized individual initiative and the ability to think (eigeninitiative).

This latter piece is what is so important for us both today, and as we prepare our army for the future. Moving forward we face uncertain threats and many of the lessons of the last ten or so years, may or may not be helpful. Therefore, is it essential for our national security that our officers are educated to be flexible thinkers, able to adapt and deal with problems which might not be familiar to them. All of which will be crucial as the army increasingly emphasizes Mission Command (of which more later). However, largely, current Professional Military Education (PME) emphasizes indoctrination rather than the empowerment of officers to use their intellect when decision-making. In fact, the curriculum at the US
army Command and General Staff College, where I work, is dominated by indoctrination. During their entire time here, students receive very little time away from the classroom to think about what they are supposed to have learned. They go from one class to the next with nary a break. The type of indoctrination relates to the officers’ next job, and largely neglects the development of long-term skills for short-term gain. If an officer can recite the steps of the Military Decision Making Process (MDMP), he is good. Whether or not the officer understands how to use it, and more importantly, when not to, is irrelevant. To this end, exercises dominate the schedule: during which officers spend much of their time repeatedly going through a planning process. This might be practical, but it does not encourage officers to solve a problem themselves. As the process is the most important part of the exercise, creative planning is essentially, particularly for the opponent, not allowed. Too often, an effective “Red Team” commander is neutered so as not to interfere with the “learning objectives.” In addition, during the exercises many officers end up with a role where they do nothing more than their pre-CGSC job. Thus, they learn very little, and lose the opportunity to broaden their skill base.

All of this is not to say that indoctrination has no role, quite the opposite in fact. Arguably, it is essential to the mission of the school. It is central to the teaching of doctrine and logistics. For example, being able to recite Doctrine Organization Training Materiel Leadership Personnel Facilities (DOTMLPF) is useful as a reminder of the parts of logistical planning. However, we often confuse indoctrination with the education of officers and train a part of a process, rather than providing officers the necessary skills for the job. For example, it is not uncommon to find officers who have not written an operations order in their entire time at CGSC. Let alone thought the process through. This is troublesome as this is something they are likely to have to do if they work on a staff after leaving. So why not practice it, we certainly used to even quite recently, and educate the officers as to why this task is so important. Unfortunately, the poor connection between the curriculum and the skills the officers need has parallels with French officer education in the period leading up to 1870.

Typical of the French military schools’ attitude to curriculum in the 1860s was, according to the educationalist Henry Barnard, the principle “that is should be almost entirely confined to subjects which have a practical bearing on military duties.”[7] This attitude is still with us today. Indeed, the curriculum is largely devoted to those subjects that purport to indoctrinate officers for their next job, rather than to subjects that genuinely encourage officers to think and make decisions for the longer term. This division of the curriculum is no better now than it was in France in 1869. In the 2011-2012 academic year, 96 of 522 hours of instruction were devoted to classes that challenged their intellect, in the main part of the curriculum. During the electives period, which forms the last 192 hours of instruction, it might be none. It depends upon a student’s choices. Well, it used to. Now a student’s branch of service frequently requires them to register for specific elective classes; generally, this includes more of the same type of indoctrination the students have had all year. Thus in the whole year, students are guaranteed no more than a modicum of instruction in the more intellectually challenging parts of the curriculum. This might mean as little as 96 hours of instruction out of a total of 720 hours. If we take out all but history, it leaves 60 hours of instruction. Altogether, over the year, this equates to just over two hours per week, with just one-and-a-third hours of these being history. In 1869 at the French Staff School, they devoted one and a half hours per week to military art (which roughly equates to history), and did so for two years.[8] Admittedly, this is not an exact comparison though it does serve to indicate that we do not really do much more in terms of challenging our students’ intellects than did the French almost a century and a half ago!

The differences in approach to curriculum become starker when we look at Prussia. Over the three years of schooling, officers averaged about seven and two thirds hours per-week of classes which directly challenged their intellect. Specifically, this was four hours of history per week for the first two years, then eleven for the final year. In addition, they studied four hours of logic per week in their second year. It is
reasonable to argue that by itself the number of hours is not significant, if one does not take into account the type of teaching. Here too the Prussian system was superior.

Where the French tended to use lectures, and the recitation of verbal formulas, much like memorizing MDMP or DOTMLPF, the Prussians made wide use of the case method of teaching, which today is often better known as the Harvard Business Method. Indeed, some of the top business schools in the country still use it, though its use is not widespread in the military education system. This teaching method was described by Irvine as “the only method by which it is possible to develop intellectual skill of a very high order.” Now that might be overblown, but it is a very effective method for getting students to think about what, how, and why they are doing something. All of which is excellent preparation for the future. However, though many of the courses at CGSC officially use this method of teaching (or something like it), in practice most classes bear no resemblance to it. Lecturing is quite common, along with the use of Socratic questioning albeit, all too frequently, with specific answers being required of the students (even where the lesson plans do not call for this). Thus, even the Socratic method can resemble an exercise in indoctrination. The rigor of examination is extremely patchy, with entire teaching teams never failing even the poorest of students. The reason all this is of concern, is not just the use of taxpayer dollars for something that is not fully effective, but because the lessons of 1870-71 show the French did not lose just because their education system was poor. Rather, they lost because of the cumulative effect of the poor education system upon their critical reasoning skills and their consequent inability to identify and adapt to the flaws in their own doctrine and planning.

In the 1860s the French based large parts of their doctrine on the lessons of the conflicts in Algeria, and the ongoing changes in technology. The increase in firepower available to the infantry, with the introduction of breech-loading rifles, the needle-gun and the Chassepot, had altered the tactics that could be employed. This increase in firepower persuaded the Prussians to change their infantry regulations in 1868 to take this into account. According to Holmes “these placed great emphasis on attacks in company columns, the ability to assault the enemy’s flank and echelon formations.” The Prussians believed that the way to defeat a traditional French attack, relying on its troops’ élan and the use of the bayonet, was with firepower before the attack came too close. The French largely derided this attitude. Belief in the primacy of the bayonet charge, in spite of the breech-loader, continued to remain the keystone of French tactical doctrine into the First World War. There were, however, French officers who drew a more balanced conclusion. They believed that French tactical doctrine needed to change to meet the exigencies of the new military situation. This did not happen; though these observations were published, they were not adopted. These conflicting ideas only served to confuse French tactical doctrine on the battlefield.

The legacy of Algeria also played a role in French tactics, for both cavalry and infantry. In Algeria, the troops were used to bivouacking in the open. This led them to carry vastly more equipment than the Prussians and to close up the columns at night for security reasons, which was a time consuming business. The Prussians relied on billeting troops in the houses of the local population, which meant they had to carry vastly less than did their French counterparts. Billeting was also better for the reservists and conscripts, who were likely to be unused to living in the field. “Billeting required, as du Barail pointed out, good organisation and detailed reconnaissance, but was a thousand times preferable to bivouacking, except perhaps on the eve of battle when concentration was essential.” Indeed, tactical problems based upon experience seem particularly to have affected the French cavalry.

The use of cavalry by the Prussians was markedly superior to that of the French. On the battlefield, the cavalry was still seen by many, on both sides, as a shock weapon. Indeed this was still true (within limitations) right up to the First World War, as a read of the Felddienst Ordnung of 1908 can attest. As with infantry, many chose to ignore the lessons of previous wars and hoped to keep the cavalry’s role...
unchanged even in the face of increased firepower. The difference in use of cavalry, between the two armies, came with its use as a scouting force. The Prussians used their cavalry aggressively; they patrolled in small numbers many miles from the main body of their army. The French cavalry, because of their experience in Algeria, did not reconnoiter in less than squadron strength. This meant they were less flexible and mobile than their Prussian counterparts. “It is impossible to deny that the brilliant success of the Prussian cavalry was partially due to the manner in which the French troops were handled.”[16]

As the US army moves forward, and out of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, we must think about how to deal with the future problems that we might have to face. We also face a similar problem to the French in the 1860s. How do we take the experience of the last years and convert it into lessons for the future? Normally the answer to this is we need to think about the experiences we have had, in order to come up with doctrine so that we can more effectively use our immense combat power. However, what happens if those lessons do not apply to the next conflict? This is where the comparison with France is apt. France took lessons from its experience, and based its doctrine upon them. The problem was the experience came from colonial wars that did not happen to match the scale or intensity of what the French army faced in 1870-71. Thus, the French were left with ideas and doctrine that were woefully inadequate for the task. Why was this immense flaw not noticed? French General Alexandre Percin argued that part of the answer lay in the dismissive attitude of French officers to their Prussian counterparts, prior to 1870.[17] It is reasonable to assume that the poor quality of officer education in their military schools was partly to blame for this. After all, as the main French focus was on indoctrination it is no wonder that they did not properly interpret ideas relating to modern combat. The Prussians did not have the benefit of as much combat experience as the French, certainly not prior to 1866, yet they got most things right. One of the key differences between the two armies was the way in which their officers were educated. Now, this is not a complete explanation. There is, admittedly, a gap between cause and effect. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to assume this did play a significant role. Prussian officers were routinely encouraged to think and to take initiative both in their military education and in their everyday roles. Thus, it is not too much of a stretch to think that they might well have thought about the implications of the French experience, before rejecting the French argument and course of action. Perhaps, then, it was not so much their ability more effectively to think during the war that provided them with victory, rather it was their ability to think before the war which was crucial. The Prussians were better equipped to identify what they needed to know than were the French. They out thought the French prior to the start of the war, and once it had begun they out thought and out fought them. The Prussians were far better able to bring superior combat power to the fight on a regular basis. Individual French units fought tremendously bravely and at the low levels, tactically, very well. Indoctrination had worked to a point. However, it did not matter. They lost the operational and strategic fight.

At CGSC today, during the exercises, quite regularly one can see something frighteningly similar going on. Battle plans often resemble a “rolling tripwire,” to quote more than one officer, designed to trigger an enemy response allowing the air force to wipe out whatever obstruction is on the ground. More than once an enterprising enemy has shot down large numbers of US aircraft only to be told it would not happen, and that the situation needs to be reset. The problem with this is it has happened, and as recently as 2003.[18] Thus, it is not as though this was forgotten due to the lapse of time. The plans I have witnessed for other tactical decision exercises all too frequently display the same problems too. Typically, the plan is simple (usually a good thing) but often simplistic (not a good thing). The forces are often all thrown into contact very quickly, as U.S. firepower normally overpowers an enemy very swiftly. That is, it did in Iraq and it does in Afghanistan. However, the army might not be fighting a third class enemy in a low intensity fight. It might have to fight a first rate enemy in a modern industrial one. That is the essence of the problem. Based upon what is happening, we are learning the wrong lessons, and making the same
mistakes as the French in the 1860s. If we keep fighting the right sort of enemy, we’ll be fine. Of course if we do not, are we going to look like the French in 1871?

The final point relates to the high command of the two armies. Napoleon III had neither experience nor training needed to play the role of commander-in-chief of the French armed forces in wartime. Indeed, few of his subordinates would have been better. The Napoleonic tradition, in France, of strong military leadership severely restricted a subordinate’s initiative and, therefore, army flexibility. Contrast this to the Prussian experience, where von Moltke issued directives to his subordinates, empowering them to think and make decision for themselves, confident in the knowledge that they would carry out the overall plan without having to give them orders that would limit their flexibility. This, and the Prussian General Staff, enabled great flexibility in Prussian operations, something effectively denied to the French. The General Staff enabled von Moltke to think of nothing but the important decisions relating to the campaign. He was relieved of the burden of the everyday running of the army during the war, by his staff, an advantage over the French commander who had to burden himself with the minutiae of command as well as the important decisions. This gave the Prussian high command a freedom denied to the French, something they put to good use. We might think we are better off than the French. However, effective modern communications mean that officers regularly complain about frequent interference from higher-up, and many admit that they interfere in the missions of their subordinates. The reasons given range from “I don’t feel I can trust them” to “it’s my neck if they get it wrong.” This evidence is anecdotal, but I have heard it too often for it to be a mere accident. In mitigation, the army is trying to move to a system of orders that more closely resemble those given by Prussian commanders: that is Mission Command. However, if our officers have an 1860s French military education system to support their intellectual development, can we expect an 1870 Prussian product? The introduction of Mission Command could mean lots of lower-level initiative combined with a poorly educated officer corps. That would be the worst of all worlds.

Is it all bad, and what can we do about it? Well, it is not all bad. Many things occur in PME which are effective. On the whole, PME does a fairly good job at teaching the tactical level of war fighting, as well as doing an reasonable job preparing officers for some of the bureaucratic functions they will need to accomplish in their future careers. Of course, we have not really faced a real test of what we do since Vietnam, in terms of the scale and intensity of conflict, but that is no bad thing. The introduction of joint education, involving all of the services was a good thing. However, telling an officer that a C130 can lift x amount of stuff does not do much to educate him about joint operations. Joint education with the other services is mandated by congress, which is both good and bad. It is correct that the armed forces must work, train, and be educated together. However, as this is compulsory there is the tendency (as with many things one must do) to become complacent.

Reform is needed, not just of what is taught but also how. For example, would it not make more sense to have serving sister service officers explain to students how their branch works, and how it projects power? Most officers do not really need to know the nuts and bolts of shipping technology, or what are the specifications of planes. Officers need to know how the U.S. Air Force, and U.S. Navy works with them, and how they can help in various situations. It is the how, not what, which is so important in empowering officers to do their jobs. It is also something we fail adequately to teach. That brings us back to the start, do we want to indoctrinate or encourage officers to think more effectively. Are we imparting specific knowledge, to be regurgitated at a later date, or are we empowering our officers to think about and solve the problems the country will ask them to, just as it has over the last two-hundred or so years.

Certainly, as a historian I would like to see more history. But that would not solve the problem. The officers are overburdened with classes, with very little time to think about what they are learning. It would be far better to re-evaluate exactly what we want from our educational system and to strip away the non-
essential. If we want to create the strategic thinkers of the future, we should focus our efforts towards it. That might mean getting rid of many classes. However, that clashes with a military culture which questions blank-space on the calendar as though the officers will be somehow wasting time. Academic rigor too, is essential. We have to accept that some officers are not capable of graduating from higher-level education, and that they perhaps should not be there in the first place. We need to be more rigorous across the board when we assess the officers: for we do them and the people they will command in the future no favors by not holding them to account. Finally, we need to make sure we challenge them to think. And not in the knee-jerk, “let’s throw in a two-hour class on critical thinking” way, but more fundamentally. The officers need to take classes across the spectrum of disciplines, which genuinely challenge their intellect. These classes need to be assessed through writing, which also should be conducted across the curriculum. Where indoctrination is essential, it should continue. But let’s treat the army’s graduate schooling as such. Good quality graduate schools do not normally have their students spend more than a dozen or so hours per-week in the classroom. Neither should we. Hopefully, we can reform how we educate our officers so as to be more like Prussia, and less like the French Army in 1870 that we are increasingly in danger of becoming. We need to do this because the consequences of getting it wrong could easily be catastrophic.


[2] See, in no particular order: George Reed, What’s Wrong and What’s Right with the War Colleges (DefensePolicy.org); Daniel Hughes, “Professors in a Colonel’s World” in Military Culture and Education, ed. Douglas Higbee (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2010); Joan Johnson-Freese, “Teach Tough, Think Tough: Why Military Education Must Change” (AOL Defense); and some of the blogs by Thomas Ricks at ForeignPolicy.com


[5] Ibid.

[6] I use these terms rather than the more conventional Training vs Education ones as they better capture how CGSC in particular goes about educating its officers.


[8] Ibid. 253.
Some people use this. Dr. Bruce Gudmundsson of the Marines Corps University has taught the case method to others, and prepared a number of cases for use in PME. Dr. Gregory Hospodor and the author also use this method to teach operational and tactical decision making at CGSC.


Holmes, The Road to Sedan, 210. [12]

Ibid. 211. [13]

Ibid. 216. [14]

Felddienst Ordnung, 1908, Translated by the General Staff, War Office, Republished as Field Service Regulations of the German army (London: HMSO, 1909), 177-178. [15]

Sisson Cooper Pratt, A Précis of Modern Tactics (London: Harrison & Sons, 1896) 81. [16]

Percin, Souvenirs Militaires, 24-27. [17]


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