

Restoring America's Service Academies & War Colleges

A Plan for Institutional Reform



June 2026



Executive Summary

The primary purpose of the U.S. service academies and war colleges is to produce officers capable of winning the nation's wars. That purpose has been diluted by decades of institutional drift toward the norms, incentives, and ideological commitments of civilian academia. The result is a professional military education system that churns out credentialed strategists rather than warfighters, rewarding the habits of the seminar room over the demands of the battlefield.

This white paper proposes a comprehensive reform agenda organized around four pillars: admissions, curriculum, faculty, and governance. Each pillar is designed to restore a single animating principle to the center of military education: the relentless preparation of officers to close with and destroy the enemies of the United States. The proposals herein build on the reform momentum initiated by President Donald Trump's Executive Order 14173, titled "Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity," and Secretary of War Pete Hegseth's subsequent directives banning race- and sex-based considerations from academy admissions and ordering a task force to evaluate the senior service colleges.¹

Some commentators have cautioned against what they term the "cult of lethality," arguing that senior officers need strategic breadth, not more tactical training. The strategic failures of the past twenty-five years were not caused by officers who understood warfighting too well; they were caused by an officer corps trained to think like diplomats and contractors rather than warriors willing to deliver blunt counsel to their civilian leaders. The corrective is not more of the same education that produced those failures. It is a fundamental reorientation of every institution that shapes the American officer.²

I. The Problem: Strategic Drift and Institutional Capture

The U.S. military has not lost a tactical engagement of strategic significance since the fall of Saigon. It has, however, failed to translate tactical dominance into strategic victory across two decades of conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan. The architects of those strategies were, without exception, products of the same professional military education system that this paper seeks to reform.

The roots of this failure lie in an officer corps that was educated to prize credentialism over candor, consensus over confrontation, and the approval of civilian academic elites over fidelity to the warfighting mission. As one retired Army colonel and war college graduate observed, the curricula of the war colleges seem designed to produce military officers who think like politicians, State Department employees, and military contractors. The United States has enough of those. What it lacks are senior officers so thoroughly grounded in the art of war that they will tell their political masters hard truths, including that certain missions are ill-conceived and certain strategies will fail.³

Samuel Huntington's framework for civil-military relations, articulated in *The Soldier and the State*, remains the essential starting point for this analysis. Huntington argued that the health of civil-military relations depends on maintaining a clear distinction between the civilian and military spheres: civilians set policy objectives, and a professional military executes them with operational autonomy. The military profession is defined by its specialized expertise in the management of organized violence, its corporate identity, and its ethic of service to the state.⁴

Huntington could not have anticipated that the institutions responsible for cultivating military professionalism would themselves become vectors of the very civilianization he warned against. The war colleges and service academies have adopted the tenure structures, accreditation dependencies, and ideological fashions of civilian universities. The result is not Huntington's ideal of a professional military insulated from political interference, but a military education establishment thoroughly colonized by the priorities of an activist civilian academy.

Critics of reform, writing in forums such as *War on the Rocks*, have cautioned that removing civilian faculty and interagency students from war colleges would deprive officers of the strategic breadth they need. This argument rests on a false choice. No serious reformer proposes that senior officers should be ignorant of diplomacy, economics, or intelligence. The question is who controls the curriculum, what ideological assumptions undergird it, and whether the institution's primary loyalty is to warfighting or to the approval of regional accrediting bodies. On each of these questions, the status quo fails.⁵



II. Pillar One: Admissions — Restoration of Meritocracy

The Current System

Admission to the service academies currently operates under a “whole candidate” model that evaluates academic ability, physical fitness, leadership potential, and character. Candidates must secure a congressional or other authorized nomination, pass the Department of Defense Medical Examination Review Board (DoDMERB) physical, and complete the Candidate Fitness Assessment (CFA). Standardized test scores from the SAT, ACT, and (beginning in February 2026) the Classic Learning Test (CLT) are required.⁶ The average SAT composite at West Point is approximately 1,313, with the 75th percentile at 1,420.⁷

In 2023, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down race-conscious admissions in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, but Chief Justice Roberts carved out a specific exception for military academies, citing their “potentially distinct interests.” This exception created a legal anomaly in which the institutions most dependent on unit cohesion and colorblind meritocracy were the only ones in America still permitted to sort applicants by skin color.⁸

Secretary Hegseth's May 2025 memorandum ordering merit-based admissions at all service academies closed that anomaly as a matter of policy. The directive orders the academies to apply no consideration of race, ethnicity, or sex and to offer admission based exclusively on merit. This paper builds on that directive by offering structural recommendations to make the meritocratic principle permanent and resistant to future reversals.⁹

Recommendations

Codify colorblind, merit-based admissions in statute. Executive directives are reversible by future administrations. Congress should amend Title 10 to prohibit any service academy or war college from considering race, ethnicity, or sex as a factor in any admissions decision, eliminating the Supreme Court's carve-out through legislative action. The statutory language should define “merit” to include academic aptitude, physical fitness, leadership record, and demonstrated character—nothing else.

Abolish all quotas, targets, and benchmarks linked to demographic composition. No office within the Department of War should track, report on, or optimize for the racial, ethnic, or sex composition of any entering class or applicant pool. Existing datasets used for such purposes should be archived and discontinued.

Reweight the Candidate Fitness Assessment and standardized test scores as the primary determinants of admission. The current “whole candidate” score distributes weight across many factors, diluting the importance of the two metrics most predictive of performance as a combat officer: physical fitness and cognitive aptitude. The CFA and SAT/ACT/CLT composite should constitute no less than 60 percent of the total candidate score. The remaining 40 percent should be allocated to leadership record, including JROTC service, scouting, varsity athletics captaincies, and similar demonstrated leadership under pressure.¹⁰

Expand and weight prior enlisted service. Candidates with prior enlisted military service, particularly those with combat deployments, should receive a substantial admissions preference scored in the merit framework. These candidates bring maturity, discipline, and firsthand understanding of the institution they will one day lead. The preparatory school pipeline at each academy should be expanded to accommodate more prior-service candidates.

Restore the congressional nomination system to its original meritocratic function. Members of Congress should be directed, through the annual National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), to nominate candidates in rank order of merit within their nomination slates. The practice of providing unranked slates, which enables the academies to exercise discretion in selection among nominees, should be curtailed.



III. Pillar Two: Curriculum — Restoration of Lethality

Service Academies: Undergraduate Reform

The service academies grant bachelor's degrees and prepare cadets and midshipmen for commissioning as junior officers. At West Point, for example, the core curriculum comprises 27 required courses (including a three-course engineering sequence), 12 of which are in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields. All graduates receive a Bachelor of Science degree, regardless of major. Of the 36 academic majors available, 23 are in STEM fields.¹¹

This ratio needs to be flipped on its head. To ensure these institutions are laser-focused on their primary mission of training future warfighters, the core curriculum must enforce a strict 75/25 credit-hour ratio: at least 75% of all coursework must be directly geared toward tactical, operational, and strategic military competencies, including military science and military history, while the remaining 25% is reserved for rigorous STEM and other foundational disciplines.

Non-essential electives must be aggressively pruned in favor of warfighting readiness. The current weakness lies in the elective structure and in the encroachment of ideological content into courses that nominally serve the warfighting mission. The recommendations below expand the emphasis on warfighting and preserve STEM as a foundational discipline, while also eliminating ideological distractions.

Recommendations

Enforce a strict 75/25 curriculum split. The superintendent and academic dean of each service academy must restructure all degree programs to adhere to the 75/25 mandate. Three-quarters of all academic credits must have a direct, one-to-one correlation with winning wars. This includes military science, history of warfare, military strategy, tactical training, and leadership under stress. The remaining quarter of the curriculum will be dedicated to difficult, high-level technical fields (such as engineering and computer science) that contribute directly to technical competence in the field, entirely eliminating "basket-weaving" or soft-science filler courses.

Conduct a comprehensive course audit. In alignment with the 75/25 restructuring, the superintendent of each service academy, in consultation with the commandant and the military chain of command, should direct a line-by-line review of every course offered. The standard for retention should be a direct and demonstrable contribution to warfighting readiness, technical competence, or the intellectual foundations of military leadership. Courses that cannot meet this standard should be eliminated.

Eliminate non-relevant electives in the social sciences. Electives in gender studies, critical race theory, identity-based sociology, and similar disciplines rooted in ideological frameworks hostile to military cohesion should be permanently removed from every course

catalog. This is not a prohibition on intellectual inquiry; it is a recognition that a military installation has a specific mission, and courses that actively undermine unit cohesion by encouraging cadets to view their peers through lenses of racial or sexual grievance are incompatible with that mission.

Double down on warfighting domains within the 75/25 framework: The credit-hour allocation for engineering, computer science, cyber operations, military history, and strategy must be explicitly balanced to hit the new curriculum target. Every graduate of a service academy should possess working fluency in at least one emerging warfighting domain: autonomous systems, electronic warfare, cyber operations, or space operations. The foreign language requirement should prioritize languages of strategic competitors: Mandarin, Russian, Farsi, and Arabic.

Increase the credit-hour weight of tactical training and leadership under stress. To fulfill the 75% military competency requirement, the Departments of Military Instruction at each academy should have greater authority to integrate field training, live-fire exercises, and small-unit leadership scenarios into the academic calendar. Cadet summer training periods should expand, and the current Cadet Leader Development Training (CLDT) and Cadet Troop Leader Training (CTLT) programs should carry academic credit commensurate with their importance to officer development.

Eliminate participation in the Rhodes Scholarship Program. West Point and other service academies should cease nominating cadets for the Rhodes Scholarship. The program's own selection criteria disqualify it as an appropriate post-graduate track for American officers. The American Secretary of the Rhodes Trust states that a scholar must demonstrate "great ambition for social impact" and be "acutely conscious of inequities." The Trust describes the 2026 American cohort, which includes five service academy cadets, as focused on housing policy, health outcomes, sustainability, and prison re-entry. These are not the formative priorities of a combat officer. They are the priorities of an overseas academic establishment whose institutional incentives are increasingly hostile to the warfighting ethos and the constitutional order that ethos defends.

The consequence is a self-selecting pipeline in which the military's most academically capable junior officers spend two formative post-commissioning years absorbing the political commitments of Oxford's senior common rooms rather than leading platoons. Secretary Hegseth has already barred military officers from government-sponsored fellowships at Harvard and signaled that additional institutions will follow. The Rhodes Scholarship, the Marshall Scholarship, and comparable foreign academic fellowships warrant the same treatment. Service academies should redirect the institutional effort currently devoted to Rhodes candidacy toward branch qualification, tactical proficiency, and early operational command. The U.S. military does not need more scholars. It needs officers prepared to lead warriors in combat.¹²

War Colleges: Senior-Level Reform

The six senior service colleges—the National War College, the Eisenhower School, the Army War College, the Naval War College, the Air War College, and the Marine Corps War College—educate the senior officers who often go on to command at the strategic level. The curriculum at these institutions is where the tension between warfighting and credentialism is most acute.

Prussian reformer Gerhard von Scharnhorst established the *Kriegsakademie* as the world's first war college after Prussia's catastrophic defeat at Jena-Auerstedt in 1806. The institution that Scharnhorst built focused on strategic and critical thinking through a curriculum of military art, history, politics, and economics. It produced the Prussian General Staff, which enabled the victories that unified Germany. Every subsequent war college, including those in the United States, was modeled on the *Kriegsakademie*. The lesson is clear: the best war colleges in history taught their officers to think strategically about war, not to think like civilians who happen to wear uniforms.¹³

A retired colonel and war college graduate put it bluntly: These institutions seem more interested in mimicking the prestige of the Ivy League than in mastering the profession of arms.¹⁴ One war college sent a dozen students to China for two weeks to study climate change, accompanied by minders from the Chinese Communist Party. The trip had nothing to do with warfighting.¹⁵

Critics of this assessment argue that the war colleges rightly focus on the strategic level, where officers must understand diplomacy, economics, and the interagency process. One such critic, writing in *War on the Rocks*, contends that the “cult of lethality” approach, characterized by its focus on tactical warfighting at the expense of strategic study, will not produce senior leaders with the necessary skills for today’s complex environment.¹⁶

This objection conflates two distinct problems. The first is whether senior officers need to understand the instruments of national power beyond the military instrument—of course, they do. No serious reformer argues otherwise. The second, and far more consequential, question is whether the institutional structures of the war colleges have been captured by civilian academic norms that systematically orient officers away from warfighting and toward the preferences of the very policy establishment that produced two decades of strategic failure. On this question, the evidence is overwhelming.

U.S. national security doctrine recognizes the instruments of national power under the DIME-FIL framework: Diplomatic, Informational, Military, Economic, Financial, Intelligence, and Law Enforcement. The war colleges today devote disproportionate attention to the non-military instruments, assuming that senior officers have already mastered the military dimension. That assumption is false. The correct balance, as one reform advocate has proposed, is a roughly 75 percent focus on the military instrument, with the remaining 25 percent allocated to the other instruments insofar as they directly support warfighting.¹⁷

Recommendations

Purge all curricula that disguise ideological content as military necessity. Courses on climate change as a national security threat, bias in Army talent management, and similar topics that launder progressive policy preferences through the language of military readiness should be eliminated. The standard is simple: If the course content would be equally at home in a civilian university’s political science department, it does not belong in a war college.

Restructure around warfighting at the operational and strategic levels. The core curriculum should center on the study of military campaigns, strategic competition with peer adversaries, force design and modernization, joint and combined operations, and the integration of emerging technologies into warfighting doctrine. Case studies should draw from historical campaigns in which strategic and operational decisions determined outcomes, such as the Prussian campaigns of 1866 and 1870, the Pacific theater in World War II, the Korean War, the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, and the Gulf War.



IV. Pillar Three: Faculty — Restoration of Warfighters

The Civilian Faculty Problem

The civilian faculty at America’s war colleges and service academies represent the single most important vector of institutional capture. Career civilian professors bring the incentive structures, ideological commitments, and professional loyalties of the civilian academy into military institutions. Many view their positions as stepping stones to prestigious civilian university appointments, and they orient their research and curriculum accordingly.

The research they supervise with military students is geared toward appealing to future civilian employers rather than solving warfighting problems.

Defenders of the status quo argue that civilian faculty possess deep expertise in areas where military officers lack knowledge: artificial intelligence, nuclear proliferation, Russian foreign policy, Chinese domestic politics, and the intelligence community. This is true as far as it goes. But the solution is not a permanent civilian professoriate embedded in military institutions. It is a targeted use of civilian expertise through guest lectures, classified briefings, and short-term technical appointments that serve the military mission without importing the institutional culture of the civilian academy.¹⁸

Recommendations

Mandate that the overwhelming majority of faculty at both service academies and war colleges be active-duty or retired military officers. The military-to-civilian faculty ratio should be inverted from its current state. Civilian faculty should teach only technical disciplines in which military expertise is genuinely insufficient: engineering, medicine, law, advanced computer science, and select foreign language instruction. In all other areas, military officers who have demonstrated excellence in command should constitute the teaching faculty.

Give preferential treatment in faculty selection to combat veterans. Officers selected for faculty duty should, wherever possible, have recent combat command experience. An officer who has led soldiers in battle possesses credibility in the classroom that no academic credential can replicate. The war colleges, in particular, should be staffed by officers who have commanded at the battalion or brigade level and are on track for general officer selection.

Abolish tenure at all military educational institutions. Tenure is a mechanism designed to protect academic freedom within civilian universities. It has no place in a military institution. Military installations are not universities; they are instruments of national defense. Faculty who cannot accept that their continued employment depends on their contribution to the warfighting mission should seek employment elsewhere.

Establish mandatory faculty rotation. Active-duty faculty should serve teaching tours of no more than three years, with a mandatory return to operational assignments between teaching tours. This prevents the “wannabe Ivy” acculturation that occurs when military faculty spend extended periods in academic environments. Retired military faculty should be limited to defined terms, only extendable for operationally experienced veterans, with no possibility of permanent appointment.

Decouple from civilian institutional norms. Faculty handbooks at all military educational institutions should explicitly state that the institution is a military installation first and an educational institution second. Faculty speech or curricula that promote seditious ideologies, undermine unit cohesion, or advocate frameworks hostile to the constitutional order and the warfighting mission should be grounds for immediate contract termination. This is not a restriction on academic freedom. It is a recognition that military institutions exist to serve a specific national defense function, and the First Amendment does not entitle anyone to a government-funded platform from which to subvert that function.

Implement ideological neutrality vetting for new faculty. All prospective faculty, military and civilian alike, should undergo a review of past publications, public statements, and teaching philosophies as part of the hiring process. The purpose is not to impose a political litmus test but to ensure that incoming faculty do not advocate frameworks, such as critical race theory, gender ideology, or anti-American narratives, that are incompatible with the military’s mission and cohesion. The vetting process should be administered by the commandant’s office, not by the academic provost.



V. Pillar Four: Governance — Restoration of Accountability

Leadership

Reform begins at the top. Superintendents and commandants who presided over the ideological capture of their institutions should be relieved and replaced with officers who have demonstrated both combat excellence and a commitment to institutional reform. Secretary Hegseth's March 2026 directive establishing a task force under the Under Secretary of War for Personnel and Readiness to evaluate the senior service colleges is a welcome step. That task force should be empowered to recommend the immediate relief of any war college leader who has permitted or encouraged the infiltration of divisive ideologies into the curriculum.¹⁹

Accreditation

The dependency of military educational institutions on civilian accreditation bodies represents a structural vulnerability that must be addressed. Under current law, the degree-granting authority of the Army War College and similar institutions is contingent on accreditation by a civilian agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. Civilian accrediting bodies, such as the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, require institutions to demonstrate "similar characteristics to other higher education institutions." This requirement is the mechanism by which civilian academic norms are imported into military institutions.²⁰

The solution is twofold. First, Congress should investigate whether the accreditation requirements imposed on military educational institutions serve the national defense or merely the interests of the civilian academic establishment. Second, Congress should consider establishing a separate military accreditation body, operating under the authority of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that evaluates military educational institutions against warfighting readiness standards rather than civilian academic norms. The loss of civilian degree recognition is an acceptable cost. An advanced military degree should be valued within the military for what it represents: mastery of the art and science of war. It should not be a credential designed to make a colonel competitive for a post-retirement teaching position at Georgetown.²¹

DEI Elimination

All Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) offices, staff positions, and "chief diversity officer" roles at every service academy and war college should be immediately and permanently dissolved. This includes eliminating all DEI training modules, mandatory climate surveys focused on identity categories, and any administrative function whose purpose is to monitor or promote demographic outcomes rather than warfighting readiness. Secretary Hegseth's January 2025 directive banning DEI throughout the Department of War has initiated this process. The task now is to ensure that DEI does not reconstitute itself under alternative labels, as it has in civilian institutions where "belonging," "inclusive excellence," and "community engagement" serve as euphemisms for the same programs.²²

Boards of Visitors

The boards of visitors that oversee each service academy require fundamental restructuring. Congress should limit or eliminate congressional membership. Sitting members of Congress often treat these seats as ceremonial appointments, attend sporadically, and lack both the time

and the institutional incentive to impose genuine accountability on academy leadership. In their place should sit veterans and civilian appointees whose commitments to the warfighting mission are demonstrable and ideologically aligned with the restoration agenda. Statute should require members to certify annually, under a “Warfighting First” mandate, that the academy’s curriculum, faculty, and admissions practices conform to that standard, and should impose personal legal exposure for false certification. Each board should seat no more than two retired senior flag officers, preventing the board from degenerating into a protection racket for the institutional status quo its members helped create. Terms should run three years with no renewal, forcing continuous turnover and foreclosing the slow capture that produced the current drift. The purpose of a board of visitors is accountability, not prestige. The reform must reflect that purpose.

Commandant Over Provost

At every service academy and war college, the military chain of command must hold final authority over curriculum and faculty decisions. The current practice at many institutions, in which a civilian provost or academic dean exercises de facto control over the academic program, must be reversed. The commandant of cadets or the military commander of the war college should have unambiguous authority to approve, modify, or reject any course offering, faculty appointment, or curricular change. The provost may advise; the commander decides.

Cohesion and Readiness Audits

The identity-focused “climate surveys” currently administered at service academies and war colleges should be replaced with “Cohesion and Readiness Audits” designed to measure unit morale, small-unit effectiveness, and combat readiness. These audits should be designed and administered by operational commanders, not human resources professionals trained in civilian diversity frameworks. The metrics that matter are whether cadets and students trust their leaders, whether they are prepared to fight, and whether their education is making them more lethal. Demographics are irrelevant to each of these questions.

VI. Answering the Critics

The most sophisticated criticism of the reform agenda outlined in this paper comes from those who accept the need for institutional change but reject what they characterize as the “cult of lethality” approach. Their argument, articulated most fully in a March 2026 War on the Rocks essay²³ by Bradford T. Duplessis, a retired infantry officer and National War College graduate, can be summarized in three propositions:

- First, Duplessis argues that the United States’ strategic failures in Iraq and Afghanistan were caused not by too much strategic education but by too little. The military won every tactical engagement but failed to link tactical success to strategic objectives. Removing civilian expertise from the war colleges would only deepen this deficiency.
- Second, Duplessis contends that civilian faculty bring irreplaceable expertise in areas like artificial intelligence, nuclear policy, and regional geopolitics. Military officers rotating through one-year teaching tours cannot replicate this depth of knowledge.
- Third, Duplessis observes that interagency students from the State Department, the intelligence community, and other agencies provide war college students with perspectives that sharpen strategic thinking and build the interagency relationships that senior leaders will need.

Each of these propositions contains a grain of truth embedded in a larger error.

On the first point, the strategic failures of the past two decades were not failures of education. They were failures of an officer corps that had been socialized, through precisely the kind of education the critic defends, to defer to civilian policy preferences rather than deliver candid military counsel. When political leadership asked whether Afghanistan could be transformed into a liberal democracy, the correct military answer was no. That answer was not given, or was given too quietly, because the officers who should have delivered it had likely spent their formative professional education learning to think like the diplomats and policy analysts sitting across the seminar table. The problem is not that officers lack understanding of the interagency process. It is that they understand it too well and have internalized its risk-averse, consensus-driven culture at the expense of their own professional military judgment.

On the second point, civilian technical expertise is valuable but does not require a permanent civilian professoriate. The military regularly brings in outside experts for classified briefings, wargames, and advisory panels. A reformed war college can access the best minds in artificial intelligence or nuclear policy through visiting lecture series, red team exercises, and short-term consulting arrangements without ceding institutional control to career academics whose primary loyalty is to the civilian academy.

On the third point, interagency attendance at war colleges is a mechanism that, in practice, civilianizes military officers more than it militarizes civilian officials. The war colleges should maintain relationships with the interagency community through joint exercises, exchange programs, and liaison arrangements. But the core student body of a war college should be military officers, and the core purpose of their education should be warfighting at the strategic level.

VII. Conclusion: The Standard Is Victory

The institutions that educate U.S. military officers exist to serve one purpose: the production of leaders capable of winning the nation's wars. Every other function—the conferral of credentials, the pursuit of academic prestige, and the cultivation of interagency relationships—is subordinate to that purpose. When those secondary functions begin to compete with or displace the primary mission, the institution has lost its way.

That is the case concerning the U.S. service academies and war colleges. The reforms proposed in this paper—merit-based admissions, a curriculum rebuilt around lethality and strategic warfighting, a faculty dominated by combat-experienced military officers, and governance structures that place the warfighter in command—represent a comprehensive plan to restore these institutions to their founding purpose.

The 2026 National Defense Strategy identifies four priorities: defend the homeland, deter China, increase allied burden-sharing, and rebuild the defense industrial base. None of these objectives will be achieved by officers educated in the image of the civilian university. They will be achieved by officers who have been trained, educated, and forged in institutions that prize lethality above all else.²⁴

As Huntington understood, the health of civil-military relations depends on a military profession that is distinct from civilian society, not absorbed into it. The service academies and war colleges are the institutions where that professional identity is formed. If they are permitted to remain outposts of the civilian university system, the American military profession will continue its slow dissolution into the broader culture of credentialism, ideology, and institutional self-preservation that has already corrupted so much of American public life.²⁵

The standard is not accreditation. The standard is not academic prestige. The standard is not the approval of the faculty lounge. The standard is victory.

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