

Commandant's Reading Program sharpens critical thinking, writing

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Sep. 7, 2016 -- Reading is an interactive process between the words on the page and the thoughts in the reader's head. But,



how much more powerful is it if you can make that interaction more dynamic and more personal?

The USAWC students enrolled in the Commandant's Reading Program check their impressions with book authors in extensive, informal and candid evening engagements that are punctuated with 'operational' pauses for sharing ideas with

other students.

Student Lt. Col. Chris Lindner introduces Pulitzer author Rick Atkinson to his colleagues of the Commandant's Reading Program at an evening engagement at Quarters One, during academic 2016.

Themes, like a thread, weave through the books, the author engagements, and the students' papers.

These themes are teased out by the students themselves – not imposed by the program or its supporting faculty.

“For the Commandant's Reading Program, we purposefully choose books and authors who offer thoughtful perspectives not likely in line with what the majority of students believe to be true,” said **Maj. Gen. Bill Rapp**, USAWC Commandant. This creates some very beneficial cognitive dissonance among the students and great discussion when the author comes to talk with them about the book.”

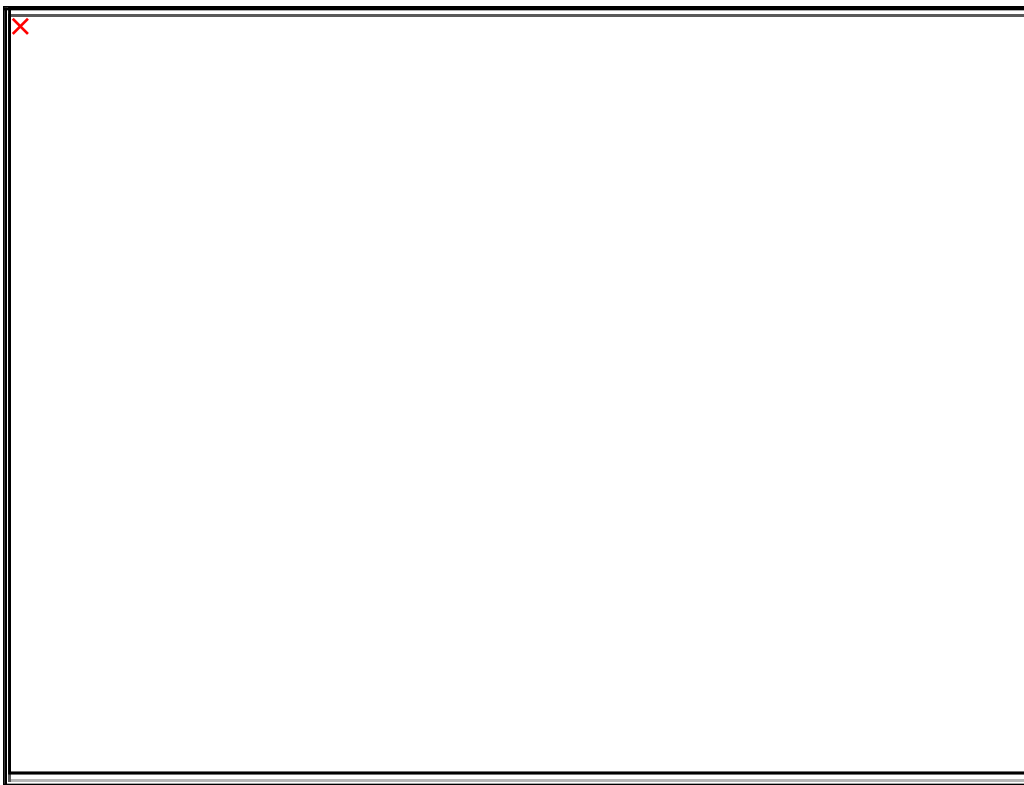
In academic 2016, students met with retired **Lt. Gen. Dan Bolger**, author of “*Why We Lost*,” who explored more deeply his premise that military leaders missed opportunities to advise civilian policy makers about Iraq. They asked Pulitzer Award-winning **Rick Atkinson** to use insights from his book, “*The Guns at Last Light*,” to talk about attributes of the leaders in the allied campaign in Western Europe of World War II.



The group met with **Rachel Maddow** in New York City in her '30 Rock' offices where one student found opportunity to ask how she decided to weight her focus on the Reagan Administration in her book, *Drift*. They shared an evening with retired **Gen. Stan McChrystal**, who further developed for them his beliefs about organizational dynamics, from his book, *Team of Teams*. And, at a dinner scheduled during the National Capitol Staff Ride, they and **Eliot Cohen** pushed ideas back and forth about strategic leadership in war years.

Retired Gen. Stan McChrystal gets a firm grip from British Fellow Col. Kevin Copey, who participated in the Commandant's Reading Program. The 30 students met with McChrystal at his offices in an evening session during the National Capital Region staff ride, May 2016.

“This year, the selected books and authors will enable the student to assess how we got to where we are in current operational theaters during the war on terror,” said **Prof. Chuck Allen**, who leads the FI team. “We’ll explore deliberations in national security strategy and policy. Once we digest those, then the students can examine how we are doing.” They’ll come to informed assessments of the implications of the past 15 years and lessons to be carried forward, he added, noting that CRP students find themselves adding perspective to core course studies and discussions.



Col. Nick Lancaster, right, exchanges ideas with author Rachel Maddow in NYC during the AY 2016 year.

As satisfying as it can be to question and trade ideas with prominent authors, the program is an academic pursuit with requirements to write a critical review s of the books.

“Failure, adaptation, and innovation ... are three key concepts

reinforced throughout ... [as McChrystal] presents a dramatically different architecture for military operations at the operational level, but putting them into action across the military poses difficult challenges to many organizations.” – AY 2016 student

“Based upon four masterfully developed case studies, [Cohen’s book] contends that great statesmen and leaders do not accept an artificial dividing line that separates the civilian and the military sphere in wartime.” – AY 2016 student

“Atkinson’s approach ... ably links the political tensions surrounding strategic decisions during the war and their impact on the inexperienced soldier, defeated enemy or innocent civilian.” – AY 2016 student

*“Coalition warfare is a crucial theme of today’s military operations, and a take-home point ... for those studying strategic leadership.” – AY 2016 student, about **The Guns at Last Light***

Students are joined by Dean Dr. Richard Lacquement and Commandant Maj. Gen. Bill Rapp for the evening engagement with author Eliot Cohen, May 2016.

Rapp summed up the CRP experience:

“Critical thinking, the challenging of assumptions, and the gaining of key insights from other perspectives is what makes the CRP so rich and rewarding.”

Another great lineup of authors, both new and returning, is scheduled for this academic year.



- ***The Unraveling*** by Emma Sky, reflects on ‘High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq’
- ***Mission Failure*** by Michael Mandelbaum, addresses ‘America and the World in the Post-Cold War Era’
- ***Just War Reconsidered***, by James Dubik, presents principle for ethical warfighting, to address a perceived gap in current just war theory
- ***America’s War for the Greater Middle East*** by Andrew J. Bacevich, confronts his assessment that U.S. military victory is unlikely
- ***Drift***, by Rachel Maddow, explores ‘The Unmooring of American Military Power’
- ***Supreme Command***, by Eliot A. Cohen, examines ‘Soldiers, Statesmen and Leadership in Wartime.’

As is true with other special programs, interested students apply to enroll in the Commandant’s Reading Program via OASIS online site, managed by the Registrar. It is a typical elective, despite an atypical schedule that begins in late September. Selection is on a first-come, first-served basis, with faculty advisor endorsement. Planned enrollment is 20 students, with some flexibility, limited by logistics.

The US Army War College Foundation is the financial benefactor for the CRP as a tribute to Dr. Sarah Morgan, former USAWC faculty member and CRP advisor.