

Developing senior leaders: inside the beltway

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Developing senior leaders: hands-on learning inside the beltway



USAWC students discuss the national security policy with Barry Pavel, senior director of defense policy at the National Security Council during the three-day visit to the nation's capital. Photo by Kelly Schloesser

May 14, 2009 – After nine months of strategic studies curriculum in the Army War College's seminar rooms, the senior leaders were able to put their knowledge and skills to the test inside the beltway.

"We have spent much of the year studying national security policy and how that gives rise to military strategy. We have looked at formulating it, constructing it, and implementing it," said Col. Kenneth Tatum, student. "On this trip to Washington we are taking what we learned in the classroom, strengthening it through our visits, and seeing how we would apply it."

During the college's annual National Capital Region Trip from May 11-13, more than 300 USAWC students traveled to Washington D.C. to talk with members of Congress, directors within the State Department, military leaders, and representatives of key government agencies and non-governmental organizations.

"This trip is about education. We are learning to be senior leaders. There is no way to replicate the experiences we have had all year at the college or here in Washington," said Col. John Leaphart, student.

The visit to the capital helps students gain a broader perspective on National Security Policy and National Military Strategy by providing them with face-to-face interaction with those who influence, create, and implement policy, said David Bennett, faculty coordinator for the trip.

The academic mission of the Army War College is to prepare our military, civilian, and international students to take on positions of strategic leadership. The seminar room gives them the foundation and opportunities like the Washington trip allow the students to validate that, he said.

Group visits broaden understanding of policy and strategy

While at the war college, the students are immersed in a joint, interagency, and international environment, learning not just from their faculty instructor but from each other.

"What the war college has done is really broadened how we learn. Anytime you can get diverse people together, you begin to eliminate preconceptions and expand critical thinking," said Col. Hugh Van Roosen, student, after visiting the Progressive Policy Institute on Pennsylvania Avenue.



"That visit to PPI did just that. I think many of us would have been closed-off to hearing what they had to say a year ago. Today, we had a great discussion with a think-tank that influences policy and have a better understanding how they go about it," he continued.

General Odierno, Commanding General, Multinational Force-Iraq, updated students on operations in Iraq and shared insight on the importance of using all elements of national power to successfully complete the mission. Photo by Kelly Schloesser

Eleven students gained a better perspective on creating policy and strategy on their visit to National Security Council, just steps away from the White House.

"This was a great time to visit the NSC since they are currently working on the new administration's National Security Strategy," said Col. Bobby Mundell, student.

While at the NSC, the students were briefed by civilian directors and military liaisons.

"Talking with both the military officers and civilians working the day-to-day issues was incredibly rewarding," said Mundell.

"You saw the people who actually do the work and I think saw the kind of work you could actually be doing in that type of position," said faculty escort Rich Yarger, Ph.D, to the students after the visit.

Discussions ranged from the Obama administration's policy changes to the development of military strategy in Afghanistan and Iraq.

"It was great to see that what we learned in the seminar room, the same debates and discussions we had, are the same ones

the NSC is having," Navy Cmdr. Jim Gerlach, student.

While visiting the Department of State and USAID, the students discussed the importance of a three-way approach to National Security Strategy, defense, diplomacy, and development.

"These visits provided insights on how we can approach international problems differently. That we do not always have to look for a military solution but one that has a complete solution set to include defense, state, and development organizations," said Navy Cmdr. Tim Daniels, student.

At the State Department, Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg reinforced the important ties between state and defense. The deputy answered several student questions to include the possible expansion of the State Department's role at the combatant commands and new priorities abroad set by the Obama administration.

"I think our military, diplomatic, and development agencies are making progress in working together in many regions around the world. But, I think we all agree that we can still improve our coordination and really bridge the gaps," said Lt. Col. Michael Castellanos, student.

Building relationships with the policy makers

Learning goals for the Washington trip aimed additionally to enhance students' understanding of the legislative process and to further the relationship between the military and Congress.



While visiting the hill, students had the opportunity to sit down and talk with both senators and house representatives.

"Talking with our congressman really gave us first hand insight to current policy and appropriations that impact our national security both domestically and internationally," said Col Timothy Starke, student.

Students discuss the defense budget and appropriations process with Oregon Senator Jeff Merkley. "Talking with our congressman really gave us first hand insight to current policy and appropriations that impact our national security both domestically and internationally," said Col Timothy Starke. Photo by Kelly Schloesser

Several students remarked on the candor of the representatives and their willingness to discuss the appropriations process regarding the defense budget.

"It was a great discussion to have, to understand how the process works, and also provided the opportunity to expand our

relationship with congress," said Col. Ashton Naylor, student.

For many students, the three-day trip to the nation's capital was the perfect conclusion to their year at the Army War College.

"After arriving at the college, I realized all that I did not know. Ten months later, I have learned from my incredibly experienced and thoughtful colleagues," said Col. Donald Buldoc, student.

"I have learned to appreciate diverse perspectives and how to apply that to critical thinking. And this trip to Washington, visiting and appreciating the perspectives of everyone from congressmen to security strategists, has really validated how far all of us have grown this year and developed into the leaders we want to be," he said.

The Army War College class visits Washington, DC each year to provide students a broader perspective of domestic organizations that effect national security policy and military strategy. USAWC students find learning opportunities in small-group visits to Capitol Hill and several national agencies, to include: Department of State, Department of Commerce, Defense Intelligence Agency, Department of Transportation, National Security Agency, Central Intelligence Agency, Middle East Institute, Department Health & Human Services, National Security Council, FBI, Department of Justice, Security & Exchange Commission, Department of Treasury, Department of Homeland Security, Department of Veterans' Affairs, Congressional Budget Office, Brookings Institute.

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