What Exactly Is Jointness?

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The last thirteen of my thirty-plus years as a military officer have been spent in joint duty assignments. For six years I have actually taught the essentials of jointness at the intermediate and senior levels of professional military education (PME), an experience which has provided many opportunities to discuss the nature of jointness with students. What has come out of those discussions is that jointness is *understanding* broadly what your fellow soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines bring to the battle and *trusting* them to do it right and well—and their feeling the same way about you. All frills and lobbying aside, the essence of jointness is understanding and trust.

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As General Colin Powell stated in the first edition of Joint Pub 1, "joint warfare is team warfare." But what about *seamlessness, synergy, joint doctrine, interoperability*, and all the other buzzwords? Let's examine some of the more prevalent ones.

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Jointness is not seamless. It will have as many seams as the fallibility of human nature and technology impose. Indeed, to regard seamlessness as an achievable attribute of military operations is arrogant and dangerous. It is the sort of attitude that commits assets to the wrong purpose, gets people killed needlessly, loses wars, and devastates peace operations.

When it is achieved jointness is not greater than the sum of its parts—it is at best *the* sum of its parts. In fact the sum is most often reduced by that inevitable human element which does not understand or trust and therefore functions imperfectly if at all, and the mechanical parts that seem to achieve a 60 percent success rate on a good day. And there will always be such factors, human and mechanical, to contend with.

Jointness is not created by doctrine, joint or otherwise. It is brought about by people, good and bad. Like most things in life, it is created more successfully by a higher proportion of good people well trained in their service capabilities and how to employ them. Words printed on paper, no matter how attractive, are largely meaningless in the greater scheme of things. Common tactics, techniques, and procedures are vital to training. Just as critical to success in battle are people who while operating in accordance with their training can do *exceptional* things. Such acts, both large and small, are what bring order to confusion and win conflicts. One of the strangest paradoxes of human behavior is that people accustomed to studied routine must be capable of quick and decisive departure from that mind set

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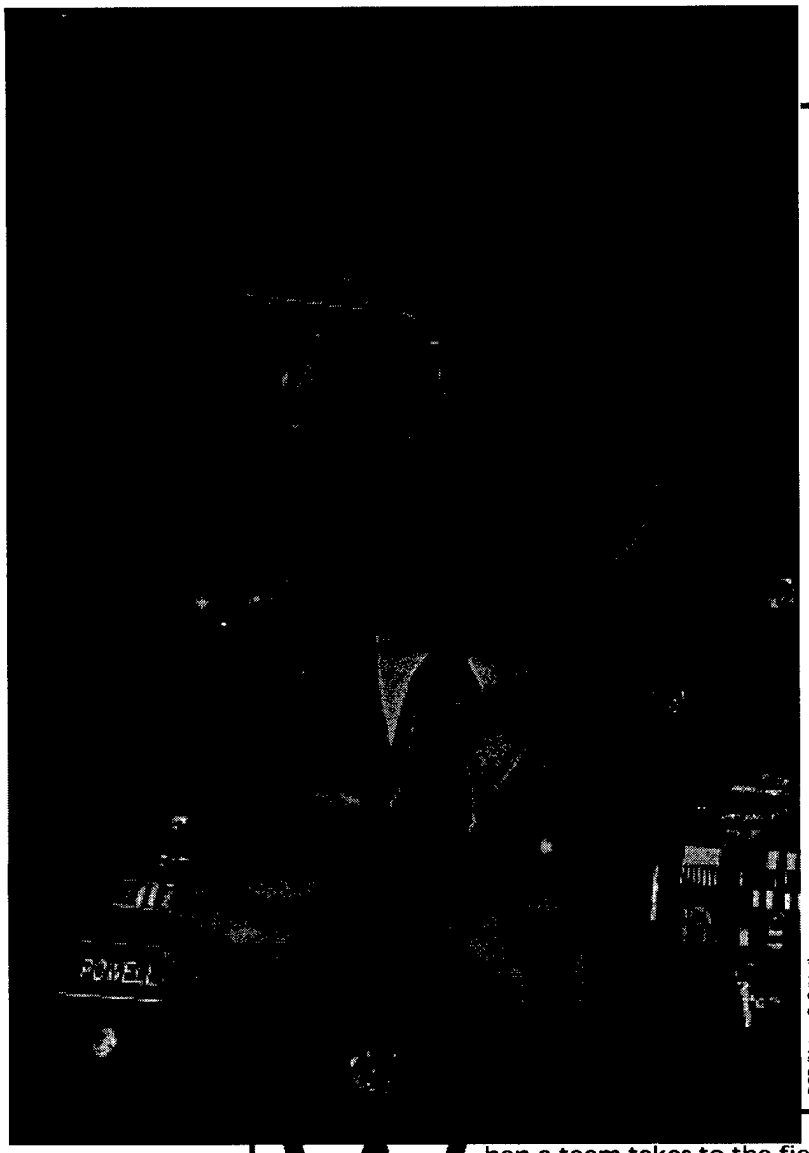

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to be repeatedly successful. Order must tend to chaos—indeed, teeter next to it with an exquisite sense of balance—in order to intuitively adapt, triumph, and endure.

Jointness is not produced by the ability of systems to share information, ammunition, fuel, or a host of other things, though this capacity—*interoperability*—is a vital technical aspect of deepening trust. Faith in a buddy's ability to help in a pinch is difficult to muster if one cannot even communicate. Of all the misunderstood and misdefined components of jointness, interoperability is the most important. It is the technical side of trust. Without it trust evaporates quickly in the heat of combat.

True jointness is not imparted by fiat. It is created the same way as the bonds of combat: in the cauldron of shared dangers, decisions, and death. Henry V did not stroll around the campfires on the eve of Agincourt to instill doctrine in the hearts and minds of his men. "A little touch of Harry in the night" was far more complex than any directive or written instruction. It was also far more integral to the stunning victory gained by the English over the French on the following day.

How does one teach jointness? Specifically, how do war and staff colleges—for the latter institutions are where jointness as described above truly fits into our PME system—best develop understanding and trust in students?

For an answer I reviewed the seminars that my former students consistently rated highest. They turned out to be the sessions in which the students had to use their own expertise to sort out a complex political-military problem, then give an appreciation of it as well as the solution. In some cases they had to execute that solution. This ranged from contemporary case studies of Urgent Fury (Grenada), Earnest Will (reflagged Kuwaiti tankers), Eagle Claw (Iranian hostage rescue), UNISOM II (Somalia) to full-fledged crisis wargames that lasted several days, the most successful of which dealt with the complex deployment of U.S. forces to the West Bank to provide humanitarian relief following massive refugee flows into that sector. All sessions were highly rated in each pedagogical category including learning jointness.

As I read and re-read the student critiques, the connection became apparent: that short of the cauldron of combat, the seminar can be as searing and instructive in its own way, given the right context.

When a team takes to the field, individual specialists come together to achieve a team win. All players try to do their very best because every other player, the team, and the home town are counting on them to win. So it is when the Armed Forces of the United States go to war. We must win every time. Every soldier must take the battlefield believing his or her unit is the best in the world. Every pilot must take off believing there is no one better in the sky. Every sailor standing watch must believe there is no better ship at sea. Every marine must hit the beach believing that there are no better infantrymen in the world. But they all must also believe that they are part of a team, a joint team, that fights together to win. This is our history, this is our tradition, this is our future.

—Colin L. Powell, "Message from the Chairman," in Joint Publication 1, *Joint Warfare of the U.S. Armed Forces* (November 11, 1991)

That was a demanding situation confronted by a team possessing diverse service capabilities in which every member was well trained. An observation by a former Commander in Chief Pacific, Admiral William J. Crowe, drives this point home. In 1985, before becoming the Chairman, he remarked: "I want people for my staff who are thoroughly proficient in their own service's capabilities. Everything else will follow." Proficiency in one's own service capabilities is the *sine qua non* of jointness. Without it there can be no trust or understanding. The "everything else will follow" depends first on the individual and second on the frequency and quality of his exposure to combat and the seminar room, the latter being all that is available in peacetime.

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Trust and understanding are derived from service competence. That is the *only* foundation on which genuine jointness can be built. Threaten that and you threaten jointness. That is why the increasing power of the Joint Staff is so troublesome—not now or over the next year but for the future. Thus far that growing power has not impinged upon the flourishing of separate service cultures or the healthy competitiveness which they naturally engender, but given its current direction it will.

Even in apparently insignificant areas signs of the increasing power of the Joint Staff and the potential for abuse can be found. The proposed introduction of PME learning objectives for force protection and risk management is a case in point. The Joint Staff maintained that military education policy should be changed to reflect specific PME learning objectives for these subject areas; others held that such a sudden change contradicts good education policy. These opponents argue there is a more satisfactory way of evolving an area of educational focus, namely the subject area of emphasis method. Quality education is best served by gradual change that is carefully evaluated rather than by rapid-fire, knee-jerk change that often is rooted in political expediency (which is the atmosphere that influences decisions by the Joint Staff). In this instance the education community won the argument; however, the trend seems to be moving in the other direction. The momentum is on the side of the Joint Staff.

This is not necessarily bad. After all, one objective of the Goldwater-Nichols Act was to improve the Joint Staff—something that has been done remarkably well. Indeed, the Joint Staff is the finest, most efficient staff in the Armed Forces—perhaps in the world. As the classic Greek dramatists warned, however, such excellence can contain the seeds of its own destruction.

The criticism offered here is not related to the inordinate and largely American fear of the dreaded general staff. Most people who harbor such concerns today do not understand the very concept they protest. My argument is more closely related to what Douglas Southall Freeman called "the odds." In short, there are only so many truly excellent people in any enterprise and to concentrate them at a single point in an organization may well create an imbalance of skill which endangers the health of the entire organization. The efficiency and quality of the Joint Staff have to an extent been achieved at the expense of service staffs and—while few admit it—to the great consternation of the civilian staff serving the Secretary of Defense who, by the very nature of their appointed status, cannot match the energy and level of expertise of the Joint Staff.

The Secretary's effort to create a schoolhouse for civilians under the Defense Leadership and Management Program is aimed in part at redressing this situation. The lead paragraph of the directive issued on the program in April 1997 reveals much: "This directive...establishes a DOD-wide framework for developing future civilian leaders with a DOD-wide capability in an environment that nurtures a shared understanding and sense of mission among civilian employees and military personnel."

The growing power of the Joint Staff at the expense of service staffs may be nothing to worry about. The primary concern is that with the declining quality of service staffs, the nurturing of service competence, which is the foundation of jointness, will fall off. Therefore, keeping a wary eye to that possibility might be wise. *Power corrupts, and absolute power*—but you know how the old aphorism goes.

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