

LAZARUS OBSERVATIONS: THE STRATEGIC STUDIES INSTITUTE CONFERENCE

The Strategic Studies Institute Conference held at the Army War College was an educational experience for us. Having never participated in a military conference nor had an opportunity to be at Carlisle Barracks, we had lots of data to ingest. Now that we have had some time to really think about and process the happenings at the conference and our experience of participating, we have a few observations to make. We hope that you will also share your observations of the conference with us. We believe that this sharing of thoughts and ideas will add to the body of knowledge needed to really bring about change and help the Army reach its goals of the Army In Transition.

The Participants

We met many interesting, informed, and creative people from around the world during the conference. We were consistently impressed with the intelligence and acceptance of those with whom we interacted and would like to have had more opportunity to discuss the issues at hand and share ideas. We especially enjoyed the small-group conversations that took place off-line in unstructured gatherings. Many were willing to talk openly with us about issues in the smaller-group forum but mostly remained silent during the large group sessions. There are many possible reasons that this was the case, and yet we did find it interesting and worth noting.

We had expected to find more non-military participants since bringing in ideas from people external, (and hopefully more objective), to the military was one of the goals expressed to us. However, a good number of former military personnel were in attendance who brought with them experience and ideas from the private sector. The current military personnel with whom we interacted also seemed to have a good understanding of current practice and some well-thought-out ideas about what needed to change.

We were unclear, however, about the purpose of this particular mix of participants — how and why they were chosen, and what they were to accomplish together given the Institute is a think-tank for the Army.

The Purpose and Goals of the Conference

Many differing understandings of the purpose and goals of the conference surfaced during our interactions with other participants. We came to the conference believing we would have opportunity (1) to share our field research and some of the concepts we were working on to help bring about culture change in the military; (2) to hear about the work and ideas of others; and (3) to receive information about progress currently being made in the military.

We found others who viewed the conference as an opportunity to be informed about what was currently being done to move the Army forward into the next phase of its life but who did not expect to participate. Still others seem to have had the understanding

that they would get information and then have opportunities to discuss the information, ask questions, and state concerns. Another group seemed to view the conference as something the Army does so that it can say it is being progressive and give itself a nice pat on the back and an enthusiastic “Atta Boy.” Finally, a smaller group didn’t seem to care about the purpose of the conference; the trip was a break from their regular jobs and a few days out of the office or off the post.

Though we learned a great deal from the experience, we are still unclear as to the purpose and goals of the conference and what the follow-up steps will or should be taken.

The Speakers and Panel Members

We were impressed with the quality, honesty, and variety of the speakers and panel members who participated. Though we did not agree with all the opinions expressed or feel comfortable with all the ideas and concepts presented, we did appreciate the freedom these presenters seemed to feel to “lay it on the line” so to speak. We learned a great deal about the military – its past, present and future, its difficulty defining itself, its current obstacles, its need for change, and its permeating culture.

We were disappointed that all speakers and presenters were either current or former military and that no external non-military professionals were invited to share their ideas and concepts and a more objective perspective generated apart from the military culture. We would also have liked more female panelists and at least one female speaker.

Opportunity for Questions, Idea Sharing, and Brain Storming

Since we had attended the conference with the understanding that it would be handled more as a “think-tank” to ask hard questions, generate ideas, and share our experiences and research, we were extremely disappointed that little opportunity for such exchanges existed. The only semblance of such an exchange was the question and answer period after each speaker or panel. However, this time was extremely limited. Given that this time was also used as airtime for personal agendas, the actual question time was even more limited. Better moderation would have helped; however, fifteen minutes to ask questions from the floor is hardly the same as a genuine exchange of ideas – even if all participants abided by stated conference norms.

Since much energetic exchange happened in the hallways and break room between conference sessions and at lunch, we believe that had more time and a supporting structure existed, the generation of workable ideas and creative concepts would have been phenomenal.

The Army Culture

Every organization has a global culture as well as lots of mini-cultures. The Army is no exception. The culture becomes a driving force within the organization – for the positive and/or the negative. Culture is always at work in any given situation which involves people. It exerts its power and unspoken norms over things like what is said, what is

not said, what is questioned, what is not; what is heard, what is discounted; for what/whom we make exception; what is considered a sacred cow and untouchable, etc. Unless the culture of the organization has been intentionally developed to nurture creativity, creative problem solving, out-of-the-box thinking, genuine idea exchange, continuous adaptation and change and to discourage turf building and “my kingdom” focus, getting these to happen within the bounds of the existing culture will be difficult if not impossible.

In other words, for the Army to get the “think-tank” kind of conference that is really needed and that it has expressed a desire for, it will have to get outside the norms of the existing culture. Our experience was that conference attendees seemed to assume the Army culture and seemed to function by Army norms and rules which – as several speakers and panel members noted – does not encourage risk taking, creativity, problem solving, or the expression of individuality outside the known paths.

Holding a conference that is intentionally structured to suppress the existing culture and create new norms under which ideas can flow freely from everyone involved would be an interesting and we think productive experiment.

Follow-up to the Conference

Our experience with conferences is that unless a structured follow-up is part of the conference process, little is done with the information that is shared. We are not certain how to follow-up on the conference. We are concerned that such a follow-up process does not exist other than completing a feedback form. Part of our desire from posting our observations is to get an exchange of ideas happening, hopefully in an environment that encourages the free flow of ideas and the safe exchange of opinions.

The “Real” Questions

During the conference, one of the staff members of the Army War College remarked that the “real” questions were not being asked. When we queried about what the real questions were, we were given a list quickly jotted on a piece of paper. Our immediate response was that we didn’t feel the opportunity existed for asking the “hard” questions – our term for issues that need to be put on the table but that doing so is frightening. We call this phenomenon the elephant sitting in the middle of the table that no one will acknowledge or address.

We have added to this list ourselves since attending the conference. However, we are certain that lots of you have questions that you believe were not asked or that are being avoided – the hard questions that take courage to ask and the elephants that mean taking risks to acknowledge.

What are the REAL Questions? What are the ELEPHANTS blocking our view? Let us hear from you.