

Defending the School Solution

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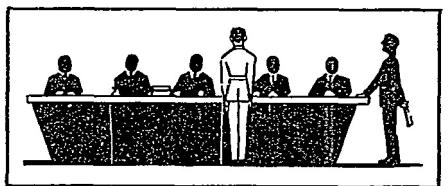
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Education

Defending the School Solution

by Maj Robert B. Neller



As I walked into the courtroom, I immediately noticed the composition of the jury that would decide my fate. It didn't look good at all. Not one field grade officer among the bunch. This would definitely be tough. I took my seat as the bailiff entered the room and announced the arrival of the judge.

"All rise for his honor, 2dLt Jones, Chief Justice of the Training Crimes Court."

The judge entered the room with an air of confidence and self-assuredness. He looked directly at me as we all took our seats.

"Read the charges against the accused," he demanded.

The bailiff centered himself in front of the bench and began to read. "The accused is charged with the commission of the following crimes against those students he has instructed in tactics over the last two years. First, an insensitive and archaic use of school solutions to tactics problems, resulting in the permanent destruction of their imagination and initiative."

My defense counsel, a lieutenant colonel, leaped to his feet.

"I object, your Honor. The way

these charges are worded draws an unfair conclusion on the part of the court. You're finding him guilty before any evidence is even presented."

"Overruled," bellowed the judge. "Continue."

The next charge was read. "Second, through his failure to remove such solutions from his program of instruction, he has irreparably damaged not only the minds of his students, but the future fabric of our Marine Corps leadership."

A hush fell over the room. The judge spoke. "Do you understand the nature and gravity of the charges against you?"

"Not really," I stammered. "I had no intention of those things happening to the students. I truly believe school solutions can be very helpful, if they are kept in perspective and used properly. In my opinion these charges, and this whole procedure, is unfounded and unjust."

"Silence!" screamed the judge. "Such outbursts and expressions of opinion will not be tolerated."

As I slumped back into my chair, I couldn't help but notice the ill-concealed grins on the faces of the jurors.

Obviously, they agreed with the charges, or at least enjoyed seeing me squirm at their presentation. Regardless, my plight before this particular court did not look too promising.

As the judge gave instructions to the jury on deliberative procedures, my mind drifted back to the charges that had been leveled against me. Did professional fighting men really perceive that these were the effects of using school solutions in teaching? How could that be possible? Maybe I really did make a serious mistake. I could feel the drops of sweat begin to form on my face as I wrestled with my conclusions and how I would respond on the witness stand.

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It has become fashionable to criticize the practices of our Marine Corps schools. Though some complaints are well founded, many are only subjective individual opinion. One of the favorite targets of these critics is the use of the school solution as a teaching tool. It is claimed by these "progressive reformers" that the use of a school solution standardizes thinking, limits initiative and imagination, and forces students to adopt a limited number of inflexible ways to solve new and complex problems. The introduction of this article presents some rather extreme thoughts anyone who has served as a student or an instructor may have had about the use of school solutions. Like any tool that is effective, school solutions can be abused and misused. Properly used, they are an important and effective teaching tool that must not be discarded.

When a Marine goes to a formal school it is ideally to learn new skills or to refine and sharpen those already possessed. All of us have been students at one time or another and can reflect back on those days when we were exposed to entirely new and foreign subject matter. After a lecture period covering the fundamentals and guidelines of the subject, a period of



Teaching the "school solution."

practical exercise was performed in order to reinforce the points and allow students to apply them. Various student solutions were then presented and discussed, with the positive and negative aspects of each brought out by both the instructor and the students themselves.

Finally, as a means of comparing their work to something else, a school solution may be handed out. This solution, prepared by the instructional staff of the school, should be well thought out, and correctly apply all of those points brought out in the lecture. It may be conservative in its approach, but only to support the key points of the overall lesson. Most importantly, it must be presented to the students only as another solution, not as the only solution. Subject matter, such as tactics and leadership, are an art, not a science, and consequently there are many different ways to accomplish the same mission. This point must never be lost on instructors and students alike. Anyone who presents or perceives a school solution in any other light is missing the point entirely.

I believe most students appreciate

receiving a school solution. It gives them immediate feedback on their performance and provides them with a case study or example from which they can learn. It doesn't tell them that their solutions were right or wrong, but it provides a frame of reference or comparison. It also gives them a ready reference to go back to whenever they encounter the same type of problem again. Those who are truly interested can compare each detail of their solutions with the school solution and discuss points of difference with the instructor. This is where real learning and understanding take place. People learn from examples.

My message is simply that school solutions have a place in our schools. They are valuable tools in the learning process. They can be misused. They are not something to be slavishly followed; but employed properly, they offer the student a foundation upon which he can build a solid understanding of any subject. To view them as representative of dogmatic and inflexible thought is false. They are not sacred, nor are they infallible. The art of war allows its practitioners a great

deal of latitude in how they get the job done. Let's ensure we teach the basics, know how to apply them, and get on with business.

* * * * *

The jury reentered the courtroom. The president of the jury stood with a piece of paper, obviously the verdict, in his hand.

"Have you come to a decision?" snapped the judge.

"Yes, your Honor, we have," said the president. "Based on the testimony presented here, and the clarification presented by the defendant, we find him not guilty."

My defense counsel reached across to shake my hand, as the judge pounded his gavel and announced, "You are free to go."

"Thank you, your Honor," I sighed wearily. "I understand why these charges were brought, but I was confident that once you heard me out the truth would be obvious." It usually is. USMC

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"Contribute your ideas. Be a player in the Corps."

- Gen A.M. Gray



Entries for the MajGen Harold W. Chase prize Essay Contest must be postmarked no later than 31 December. See MCG, Sep 88, p. 49, for details.