

Defense and Strategic Studies: A Brief History

by

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The Defense and Strategic Studies (DSS) program started at the University of Southern California (USC) in Los Angeles. The exact year of its initiation is not entirely clear. I have seen 1969, 1971, and 1976 as the starting point from three different individuals close to the program. They may all be correct, each describing something a bit different in the development of DSS. I tend to accept the 1971 date as the beginning point; DSS was thriving, with several advanced Ph.D. students, by the time I arrived as a first-year graduate student in August 1976.

It is important to focus on the origins of DSS and its founder, Professor William R. Van Cleave, to understand the program's uniqueness then, and now. Prof. Van Cleave entered USC as a young professor in 1967, founded DSS there, and led it until his retirement in 2005. His portrait, as a young Marine, hangs prominently in the DSS offices for those students who have wondered, "who is that?" Millions of people have used one of the ancestry services to find out about their family roots. I would like to provide an overview of DSS roots that continue to shape its curriculum and educational goals after more than five decades.

DSS Origins

At USC, DSS was not a separate academic department, but rather a selected concentration of courses within the university's School of International Relations (SIR). It was an anomaly within the SIR for multiple reasons. For example, if Professor Van Cleave was to serve as the chair of a student's Ph.D. committee, the student had to take several specific courses offered by Prof. Van Cleave (or "VC" as we students referred to him amongst ourselves), and additional courses in three other related concentrations, *e.g.*, Russian, Chinese, and/or European studies, theory, political economy, *inter alia*.¹ The SIR required only *three* fields of concentration for the PhD; Prof. Van Cleave required *four*. That additional concentration requirement may seem minimal. But when doctoral comprehensive exams loomed, having to take an exam in four areas of concentration vice three loomed large. In addition, the comprehensive PhD exam given by Professor Van Cleave was known to be particularly challenging – a one-week take-home exam that, in my case, demanded a 55-page response.

These requirements for earning a doctorate under Prof. Van Cleave tended to limit the number of students eager to do so. Still, he was regularly voted favorite professor on campus and generally had as many PhD students taking his classes and his course concentration on national security affairs as did the rest of the SIR faculty combined. This may have bred some resentment among some other members of the faculty – which typically generated only a smile and a joke from Professor Van Cleave.

The DSS Curriculum Under Professor Van Cleave

Professor Van Cleave's main course, International Relations (IR) 474, was notoriously challenging, but also a student favorite because he focused on "real world" issues in ways not typically found in academia. Professor Van Cleave did not bury an inherently dynamic and fascinating subject with a narrow focus, dreary academic jargon, excessive nuance, or diplomatic pretense – all of which tend to obscure rather than promote understanding. Instead, he focused on the "real

world” histories of relations among countries, and the realities of their hostility, including (as appropriate at the height of the Cold War) between the United States and the Soviet Union, and the armaments that followed from that hostility. Students learned about the vast differences in the U.S. and Soviet approaches to their respective foreign and defense policies without varnish or academic niceties. Professor Van Cleave explained the harsh realities that often attend international relations clearly, sugar-coating nothing with academic or diplomatic language. He did not ignore theory, but he made sure that students understood the connection between theory and the actual practice of international relations.

Professor Van Cleave also brought guest speakers to his class that students would otherwise not experience. One of the most memorable guest speakers he brought to IR 474 was a fighter/survivor (code-named “Bear”) who participated in, and almost perished in, the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto uprising against the horrific German occupation. Students walked away from such exposures and Professor Van Cleave’s classes with a new interest in, and greater understanding of, international relations. His focus, lectures and guest speakers were eye-opening – even fascinating – which often is not the case in IR courses.

This unique character of Professor Van Cleave’s entire curriculum was not an accident. He had served as a delegate to the original Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) with the Soviet Union and was intent on creating a graduate curriculum that prepared students for the harsh realities of international security affairs and for professional service in national security. His vision was to create a graduate program that combined solid scholarly credentials with a sober appreciation of how government policy is made and how governments often interact – neither of which is pretty. This “real world” focus was unique at the time and remains rare in academia.

Why this focus? When called on to testify before the U.S. Senate on the SALT agreements on which he had labored, Professor Van Cleave ultimately opposed the agreements and attributed at least some of the U.S. failings at SALT to the lack of realism with which senior

U.S. officials approached international relations in general, and in relations with the Soviet Union in particular. Indeed, in a display of personal courage, he was the *only* person to testify *in opposition to the* SALT agreements, which were roundly celebrated in Washington as a monumental success. Professor Van Cleave's Senate testimony against SALT, which we now know was entirely prescient regarding its ultimate consequences, is available and remains essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the subject; it reflects his motivation for developing the unique DSS curriculum for graduate students.²

In 2007, *Bloomberg News* carried an article on DSS. In it, the late Prof. Robert Jervis from Columbia University, one of the world's most prominent international relations academics, commented on the DSS program. He said that DSS was somewhat outside the academic mainstream but within the U.S. policy mainstream.³ Both parts of that description were/are true. Indeed, DSS graduates had contributed mightily to the creation of that U.S. policy mainstream. Whether Prof. Jervis meant that comment for good or ill, it was the greatest compliment he could have made regarding DSS. He captured what Prof. Van Cleave had sought to create and his underlying basic conclusion: a graduate program has to be somewhat outside the academic mainstream to prepare graduate students for the real world of international security affairs.

Professor Van Cleave's Legacy With DSS

To say that Professor Van Cleave was successful in realizing his vision of a graduate program that combines solid scholarship with realism is an understatement. He was the most influential academic of the twentieth century in the field of U.S. national security policy. The measure of merit for this assessment is not official titles held nor prominent books written, although Professor Van Cleave served in significant positions and authored several excellent texts. Other twentieth century academics were more prominent by those measures, including Henry Kissinger and Kenneth Waltz.

However, the measure of merit here is Professor Van Cleave's direct and indirect effect on U.S. national security policy and practice.

His unparalleled contribution was not only through his own work, but, perhaps more importantly, through the work of the many hundreds of DSS graduates he mentored who have pursued careers in government, industry, the military, and academia. No other professor or program I know of has had such an impact for so many years – an impact that will continue for decades to come.

A former Director of the SIR at USC, Professor Robert English, had previously worked in the Pentagon and, while there, had become familiar with many of Professor Van Cleave's students also working there. While not always agreeing with Professor Van Cleave, Professor English aptly described Professor Van Cleave's students and his corresponding impact on U.S. national security policy:

I have to say that Van Cleave's proteges were among the best informed, hardest working and most dedicated to the national interest that I knew in nearly a decade of policy analysis Looking back over the years ... his impact on foreign policy debates and decision-making was such that few academics in *any* area had more direct influence on U.S. policy than he did.⁴

That is a lasting legacy of Professor Van Cleave and the DSS program he founded.

Many hundreds of DSS graduates have occupied and continue to move into senior civilian and military national security positions. Commentaries on DSS understandably often focus on several of Professor Van Cleave's most prominent graduates, but his contribution to national security policy and practice follows much more from the many hundreds of DSS students who have pursued life-long careers in national security – with solid scholarly credentials and a realistic understanding of international relations.

Prof. Van Cleave did not care what students looked like, where they came from, or their political affiliations. He welcomed students from all backgrounds into this endeavor – he demanded only that his students be ready to think and work hard – he had little patience for

those who would not. His students reflected considerable diversity before that became a slogan.

An illustrative example of the dedicated students who moved from Professor Van Cleave's program at USC to the Washington professional community is his first PhD graduate, Dr. Mark Schneider (PhD, 1974). Dr. Schneider started at the Atomic Energy Commission, moved to the staff of the Senate Intelligence Committee, then to the State Department's Policy Planning Staff. He then transitioned to the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) where, for the next two decades, he advanced to increasingly responsible positions in the Senior Executive Service dealing with nuclear forces and arms control policies. Prior to retirement from government service in 2004, Dr. Schneider served as Principal Director for Forces Policy – and he continues to be an influential writer in the field. This career path is extraordinary and, when multiplied many times over, reflects the impact of Professor Van Cleave and DSS.

To say that Dr. Schneider personally contributed to U.S. nuclear and arms control policies is an understatement. His DSS academic background that focused, by Dr. Van Cleave's design, on the realistic application of theory to international security affairs informed his approach to understanding and addressing the "real world" problems he confronted professionally on a daily basis.

Dr. Van Cleave's vision for DSS, which continues to this day to be the *modus operandi* for DSS, has literally launched more than two generations of graduates into their professional careers. The DSS motto, "from the classroom to the field" is not just a jolly slogan; it captures the heart of Prof. Van Cleave's vision realized in DSS.

DSS Moves to Southwest Missouri State University

The DSS goals, focus, curriculum and academic approach established by Professor Van Cleave did not always comport easily within USC's SIR or with other faculty members there. There was nearly unremitting drama as the SIR increasingly sought to capture and restructure Professor Van Cleave's curriculum to make it conform

to more typical academic patterns – the very patterns against which he rebelled. Professor Van Cleave and his PhD students resisted these efforts for years.

However, finally tiring of the energy and attention demanded by the ongoing drama, in 1987 Professor Van Cleave moved the entire DSS program to Southwest Missouri State University (SMSU), in Springfield, Missouri, where it became a separate department. The host university changed, but the curriculum remained focused on a professionally oriented, “real world” understanding of international security affairs. At SMSU, Professor Van Cleave also was able to bring in several excellent younger colleagues to help teach in the SMSU DSS program, which enrolled 50-60 students every semester.

The main academic downside attending the move from USC to SMSU was that the latter was not allowed to offer a doctoral degree program – folks at SMSU informed me that the option was well guarded by the University of Missouri, and its supporters in the Missouri state legislature. Consequently, the highest DSS degree awarded by SMSU was a Master of Science (M.S.). At SMSU, Prof. Van Cleave had no doctoral students.

Nevertheless, he maintained a highly demanding curriculum at SMSU, with requirements that competed with a PhD program by his design. DSS graduates from SMSU continued to move successfully into professional careers in the field, primarily in Washington, D.C. They seamlessly and easily joined the ranks of earlier graduates from USC and the combined network continued to move into the Pentagon, the State Department, Capitol Hill, the National Security Council Staff, defense industry and Washington-area “think tanks.” DSS graduates from USC and SMSU often were referred to, in a friendly way, as “the Van Cleave mafia.” This was a reflection of the on-going cohesion and camaraderie of many DSS graduates working in Washington—whether from USC or SMSU. An [article in *Inside Higher Ed*](#) rightly captured the advantageous relationship between USC and MSU alumni and new DSS graduates,

The program's rich network of alumni, spanning the USC and Missouri years, has also helped graduates find jobs in the defense industry, policy circles and the government⁵

This was, and remains, a community that welcomes new DSS graduates into the field.

DSS Moves to the Washington Metropolitan Area

DSS flourished at SMSU in Springfield. However, in late 2003 – after over three decades leading DSS, first at USC and then at SMSU – Professor Van Cleave decided to begin the process of retiring and finding a successor for DSS. It was at this point that he first inquired of my interest in joining DSS as the new department head at SMSU. My response was that the position was interesting, but moving from the Washington, D.C., area to Springfield, Missouri was not an option for me. Professor Van Cleave responded that his plan for DSS had always, ultimately, included relocation of DSS to the Washington, D.C. area for all of the obvious advantages that such a move would provide DSS students. Consequently, his resignation, my departure from teaching at Georgetown University (after 21 years) and acceptance of the position as his successor at DSS, and the department's move to Washington all came together in July 2005. At the same time, fortunately, the state of Missouri shortened the name Southwest Missouri State University to the more elegant Missouri State University (MSU).

The DSS move to Washington, with classes beginning in August 2005, was not without serious challenges. Financial difficulties followed almost immediately; fewer than 40 students made the move to the Washington area – largely because of the much higher living costs. This low initial enrollment, in combination with very limited financial support for DSS from MSU in Springfield, presented an immediate challenge that appeared terminal for the program.

DSS had moved from Springfield, where it was the only such program within hundreds of miles, to the Washington, D.C., area,

where several prestigious universities offered curricula oriented around national security, notably Georgetown University's graduate National Security Studies Program. DSS had been geared for success in Springfield, not in the very different academic environment of Washington, D.C. The anecdotal stories of how MSU was ill-prepared to compete for excellent graduate students in this new market are legion – some humorous, others not.

Nevertheless, financial support, primarily from foundations that understood and appreciated Professor Van Cleave's academic vision, provided the needed immediate relief. This, eventually, was followed by consistently outstanding support from the Springfield campus by the new MSU Dean with authority over DSS, Dr. Victor Matthews – who is now retired, but should be recognized as a hero of DSS at MSU. The number of enrolled DSS students also grew steadily. The combination of increasingly generous foundation grants, consistent university support from the Dean, and increasing enrollment eventually put DSS on a firm footing. Each part of that formula was, and remains, necessary.

With consistent support from foundations and Dean Matthews at MSU, and increasing enrollment, DSS was able to hire several office administrators and dozens of adjunct faculty with excellent academic credentials and “hands-on, real world” professional experience from the Departments of Defense and State, the White House, Capitol Hill and the intelligence community. The DSS transition from being a single professor, specialized curriculum at USC, to a small department at MSU in Springfield, Missouri, to a much larger enterprise in the Washington, D.C., area, was complete. Indeed, one member of the new DSS adjunct faculty subsequently served as the U.S. Secretary of Defense – a claim few schools can make. The explosive increase in DSS faculty and course offerings was necessary to keep up with increasing student enrollment.

With the DSS relocation to the Washington, D.C. area, new opportunities for the program and students expanded. Students now had enviable internship opportunities, some of which were paid very well. (In one case, DSS professors half-jokingly said they would like

to apply for the internship). The resources and contacts in the area for students in the field of national security affairs are unparalleled; they cannot be duplicated anywhere outside of Washington.

The relocation also opened new opportunities for the DSS program. For example, DSS was soon invited to offer courses at the Army Management and Staff College, located at Fort Belvoir, Virginia. Foreign graduate students began showing increasing interest in attending DSS, and DSS established a successful exchange program with Masaryk University in the Czech Republic. DSS also bid on, and won, a contract with the Defense Department to co-host a graduate degree program with the National Defense University. As a result, roughly 20 highly-qualified, mid-career students from DoD enrolled each year in what became an extremely successful, decade-long DSS program.

The success of the DSS cooperative program with the National Defense University became widely known within military education circles, and led to two additional important new opportunities for DSS. First was a request from leaders at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri for DSS to bid on a contract to offer courses to students there – a contract that DSS again was awarded. The second new opportunity was an initiative by the Air Force Institute of Technology (AFIT) to enroll select students in DSS. The result of these developments was the inflow into DSS of several new streams of highly-qualified, mid-career students, mostly U.S. Army or Air Force officers.

Perhaps the single most significant development among many following the relocation to the Washington, D.C., area was the establishment of a DSS professional doctorate degree. In 2018, the senior leadership at MSU invited me to draft a proposal for such a DSS degree after the Missouri state legislature decided to allow MSU the option. This was MSU's first effort to take advantage of the new opportunity granted by the state legislature. I wrote that proposal purposefully to encourage the many earlier DSS graduates with M.S. degrees to further their graduate education by enrolling for a DSS professional doctorate degree (DDSS). Numerous DSS graduates over

the years had mentioned that they hoped DSS would offer a doctorate degree.

The Missouri state legislature had approved the option for a DSS professional doctorate degree, not a PhD. This option, in fact, fit well with most DSS students' educational and professional goals, and the overall DSS leitmotif envisioned by Professor Van Cleave decades ago. The proposal for this new degree program required a year to write, and its acceptance by all the necessary governing authorities required another year. Nevertheless, in the fall semester of 2020, DSS enrolled the initial pilot class into its new DDSS program. DSS had, at last, recovered from the main downside of its relocation to SMSU. The DDSS program has been even more successful than expected, now enrolling approximately 140 doctoral students – likely making it the largest such program in the country.

Following my retirement from DSS in 2019, Dr. John Rose (BG, U.S. Army, Ret.) became the new DSS head. He led the unparalleled expansions of the DDSS program and the cooperative venture with the U.S. Army at Fort Leonard Wood. These are the results of his remarkable and untiring efforts and leadership. In addition, under Dr. Rose's effective guidance, DSS became the *School* of Defense and Strategic Studies vice the *Department* of Defense and Strategic Studies, another positive transition. DSS advancements under his leadership have come as no surprise to anyone familiar with him. Dr. Rose earned his PhD under Professor Van Cleave's earlier DSS program at USC. Following graduation, he went on to a remarkable career in the U.S. Army, served as an award-winning professor at West Point Military Academy, and subsequently headed the U.S. Army's prestigious George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies located in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany – enrolling over 1,000 students from over 100 participating countries. Dr. Rose's outstanding educational and professional background, many talents, and amazing work ethic fit perfectly with the unending demands of the position at DSS.

DSS: Where to Now?

After two decades located in Fairfax, Virginia, just outside the famous “beltway” surrounding Washington, D.C., DSS has recently moved to new facilities in Arlington, Virginia, closer to the Capital. Successfully completing such a relocation is no small task. How DSS will fare in the future and in its new location will depend on numerous enduring factors – particularly continuing dedicated leadership that devotes enormous time and energy to the task, just as Dr. Rose has done, and as Professor Van Cleave and I did earlier. In addition, as noted above, three keys to continued DSS success are: support from MSU In Springfield; foundation support; and graduate student enthusiasm. None of these can be taken for granted, but DSS has established an enviable history and reputation that should facilitate continued success. In particular, the formula originally conceived by Professor Van Cleave and sustained by Dr. Rose and myself – the rigorous and realistic study of international security affairs unburdened by deadening academic fashion and jargon, or diplomatic pretense – virtually ensures that the subject will be both of unquestioned import and fascinating for students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the international security environment has only grown more complex and challenging since Professor Van Cleave established DSS five decades ago. The old Soviet threat and bipolar world have been replaced by a much more complex and dangerous international threat context. As President William Clinton’s CIA Director, R. James Woolsey, observed early in the post-Cold War era:

We have slain a large dragon. But we live now in a jungle filled with a bewildering variety of poisonous snakes. And in many ways, the dragon was easier to keep track of.⁶

DSS is a national treasure. If sustained properly, its graduates will continue to contribute enormously as the United States seeks to address the many looming, “bewildering” security challenges of the contemporary international security context.

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About the Author

Dr. Keith B. Payne is a co-founder of the National Institute for Public Policy, Professor Emeritus and former Department Head at the Graduate School of Defense and Strategic Studies, Missouri State University, a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, and former Senior Advisor to the Office of the Secretary of Defense. He is the author of over 200 published articles and 45 books and monographs on international security issues.

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Notes

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- ¹ At the time, many of Professor Van Cleave's Ph.D. students also studied a foreign language on the side, usually Russian.
 - ² See, "From the Archive: Dr. William R. Van Cleave, School of Politics and International Relations, University of Southern California, Testimony before the U.S. Senate, Committee on Armed Services, July 25, 1972," *Journal of Policy & Strategy*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2022, <https://nipp.org/journals/volume-2-2022/>.
 - ³ See Judy Mathewson, "College Parlays Bush Ties to Build a Name in National Security," *Bloomberg.com*, June 8, 2007, <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20670001&refer=home&sid=aB8Q8UJowDkw>.
 - ⁴ Quoted in, Pamela Johnson, "In Memoriam: William Van Cleave, 77," *USCDornsife*, March 21, 2013, <https://dornsife.usc.edu/news/stories/in-memoriam-william-van-cleave-77/>.
 - ⁵ Quoted in, Andy Guess, "Mixing Theory and Practice on Defense Policy," *Inside Higher Ed*, August 8, 2007, <http://insidehighered.com/news/2007/08/08defense>.
 - ⁶ R. James Woolsey, *Statement Before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence*, February 2, 1993 (mimeographed prepared statement), 2.
 - ⁷ **Editor's Note:** *Some alterations to the formatting of this essay have been made in reprinting it here, but the text has not been altered.*