

My Journey with the Defense and Strategic Studies Program

by

John P. Rose

On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the arrival of Missouri State University's Defense and Strategic Studies Program (a.k.a. DSS) in the Washington, D.C., area, it is a pleasure to offer the readers of our new journal some reflections on my own journey with the program – which stretches from its early years at the University of Southern California (USC) in the 1970s to our thriving reality of the present here in Arlington, Virginia, just a proverbial stone's throw from the Pentagon.

The Past

I was a Captain in the U.S. Army in the early 1970s, having served for a year in Vietnam and done a further three-year tour in Germany. Those were challenging years for the U.S. Army, with our withdrawal from the Vietnam War and the collapse of our South Vietnamese ally underway, and with fierce anti-war protest wracking American society. Army leadership was well aware of the overwhelming negative feelings toward our military at that time, however, and it initiated a program to send officers into graduate education as a measure designed not only to improve the education of U.S. servicemembers, but also to help change the thinking of the American public toward the men and women who in the armed forces.

Because my commanding officer in Germany had worked with DSS' founder, Dr. William Van Cleave, on the U.S. delegation to the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, he urged me to apply to the program. Professor Van Cleave – a former Marine very proud of his service – was dedicated to advancing studies in defense and security matters at a critical time during the Cold War, and he was known in the Defense Department as a scholar who took national security very seriously. After his own service, Van Cleave had returned to the University of Southern California, thereafter becoming director of USC's Defense and Strategic Studies graduate program.

I had been an accounting major in college, had had never written a research paper in my life, but I was fascinated by my worldwide experiences in the Army and wanted to understand the American and global security situation. Taking a chance, I applied to the Van Cleave program, and much to my surprise, I was accepted. To imagine that I would ever be Director of the School of Defense and Strategic Studies at Missouri State University (MSU), however – the successor to the DSS program that Van Cleave had started at USC – was something I never envisioned even in my wildest dreams.

Coming Back to DSS

After a full career in the military, a short time with a defense contracting firm, and eight years as the Director of the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies – a German-American partnership program in Garmisch, Germany – I was contacted by my former USC classmate and Director of the DSS Graduate Program, Dr. Keith Payne. A friend, mentor, and world class strategist, Dr. Payne had become the successor to Professor Van Cleave at DSS, a program which had followed Van Cleave to what is now Missouri State University (MSU) when he had relocated there from California. Payne asked me to join his team to teach students on a variety of security topics. Having taught for three years at the United States Military Academy at West Point, I felt comfortable doing so.

At the end of May 2019, Payne retired from his duties as the director of the DSS program but continued to teach as an emeritus

professor. I applied for the position he vacated, and was offered the job. I assumed the duties as the head of the department on January 6, 2020.

Growth and Expansion

Building on Dr. Van Cleave's vision and the fantastic work that Dr. Payne did in setting DSS up in the Washington area, we've been fortunate to see the program continue to grow. Dr. Payne started DSS with roughly 35 students when the program was relocated here in 2005, and it has now grown to over 300 students today, participating from all over the world.

Nor is DSS just MSU's "Department" of Defense and Strategic Studies anymore. As a result of a reorganization at Missouri State University, the DSS program was elevated to be the *School* of Defense and Strategic Studies on July 1, 2023, and became part of the [Reynolds College of Arts, Social Sciences, and Humanities](#) (RCASH).

DSS' programming has also expanded, in addition to its scale. It was Dr. Van Cleave's vision when he moved his program to Missouri to establish a professional doctoral program for men and women interested in public service and dedicated to the defense and security of the United States. It was Dr. Payne that brought that vision to life. His lengthy, determined, and extraordinary effort led to a proposal for a professional doctoral program that was fully approved by the authorities at MSU, the associated Missouri Department of Higher Education, and ultimately by the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV). It is today the largest professional doctoral program in defense and strategic studies in the United States.

Our professional Doctorate in Defense and Strategic Studies (DDSS) began enrolling students in fall 2020. Anticipating interest for roughly 8-10 students a year, the demand for the doctorate program turned out to far exceed the expectation. To date, more than 187 doctoral candidates have been accepted into the program after vetting by a board of eight faculty members, 13 students have earned doctorates, and several of their capstone research projects have already

been published. (These authors include [Rebecca Heinrichs](#), [Jennifer Bradley](#), and [Kathleen Ellis](#), all impressively established as experts in the field.)

Students who pursue the DSS doctorate are largely mid-career professionals – frequently active-duty members of the U.S. armed services – often with families and working full time in the security arena. They work in defense, diplomacy, intelligence, homeland security, legal positions, on combat command staffs, on Capitol Hill, with civilian defense contractor companies, and in nuclear enterprise positions around the world. They are valuable assets to their organizations. The DSS degree is a practice-focused program designed to prepare them for strategic leadership roles and to better understand the complexity and challenges of today’s complex, dangerous, and challenging global security environment.

A key element to our success at DSS is our per-course faculty of over 30 experienced and dedicated professionals. All but two of our professors teach on a per-course basis, and none of us are career academics. All bring deep “real world” experience to the job, for practice and policy engagement is deep in our DNA at DSS. Each faculty member is selected based on his or her background and experience in national security affairs, and all of them have notable experience not merely as thinkers *about* their field but as seasoned practitioners *in* it. Our faculty members, in other words, have been where the men and women of our student body want to go – in the military, in diplomacy, in intelligence, in the law, and in various aspects of the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) business. Making all this work behind the scenes, moreover, is our fantastically dedicated part-time staff team of Caron Tolton, Julie Jeffrey, Kathy Fedorchak, and Darci Nelson.

Beyond the doctorate program, our Master’s degree program has expanded as well. Currently, we have agreements with the U.S. Army’s [Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear \(CBRN\) School](#) at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri – as well as pending agreements with the Engineer School and the Military Police School – whereby Army officers are able to advance their professional skills by

attending our program as their Captains Career Course. To date, we have 157 U.S. Army Chemical Corps officers accepted into the program. Fifty-nine of them have completed their degree, while ten have so far been accepted into the doctoral program and four have earned that degree.

In addition, in the Fall of 2017, the [United States Air Force Institute of Technology](#) (USAFIT) – located at Wright Patterson Air Force Base outside of Dayton, Ohio – entered into an agreement with us to bring USAFIT missileers, pilots, and others with associated skills (especially from the nuclear weapons enterprise) into our program. DSS’ collaborative efforts, therefore, continue to flourish and grow. Nor are these partnerships limited to the United States. In fact, we also have an agreement in place to accept officers from their Australian Army’s Engineer Branch into the DSS Master’s program.

An Unparalleled Program

In July of 2025, the DSS office and in-person classrooms moved from Fairfax, Virginia, to fantastic new facilities in Arlington, Virginia, located just across the street from the Court House Metro station. This location brings the DSS program near the heart of U.S. national security affairs in Washington, D.C., allowing easy access for potential students from the Department of Defense, the U.S. Intelligence Community, the Department of State, other government agencies, Congress, and major Washington think tanks who are interested in attending DSS in-resident programs and events and accessing our library.

Though our new offices are extraordinarily convenient for D.C.-area national security professionals, however, one need not actually *be* in Washington to take advantage of DSS classes each evening. Far from it. Especially since Covid pandemic, our use of Zoom technology has exploded, providing us the ability to offer students the chance to attend attending our classes from anywhere in the world.

Today, in fact, *most* of our many students attend via the Internet. As an illustration, a recent “Emerging Strategic Challenges” seminar

of 12 students – taught from 6:00 to 9:00 p.m. Eastern time once a week, which is a typical class profile for our program – had three students actually in our classroom, but also one student participating via Zoom from Tokyo (an 11 hour time difference from the DSS offices), a U.S. Air Force officer at Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany (a six hour time difference); a U.S. Army Chemical officer participating from Romania (a seven hour time difference), a student in Canada, a student in Alaska, and others from other locations in the United States.

There is nothing unusual about such a sprawling geographic profile: we are, in effect, a global organization. Even more flexibly, asynchronous online classes are also available for students who are deployed and unable to participate in our typical evening seminar on U.S. Eastern time. (Roughly half of our courses are offered online.)

The DSS student community also extends beyond those in our doctoral and Master's programs, for our graduate certificate programs have also expanded in recent years. In 2025, in fact, we gained approval and began offerings multiple new certificate programs. As a result, the DSS program now offers certificates (1) Defense and Strategic Studies; (2) Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction; (3) Arms Control and Non-Proliferation; (4) Great Power Competition; and (5) National Security Strategy. (A Certificate in Cyber Security Policy is also currently pending approval.) These certificates expand opportunities for students to hone their knowledge and skills in critical security areas without requiring the time commitment and expense of our longer programs. Should a student receiving such a certificate wish to continue into the Master's or doctoral programs, however, all completed courses can be transferred to the final degree.

Over the past several years, new classes have been offered to keep pace with the new threats and challenges that have emerged in the security environment. They include seminars on: Advanced National Security Strategy; Arctic Security Challenges; Cybersecurity Risk; Adapting Deterrence Strategy to Two Nuclear Peers; Great Power Competition; Wargaming; Advanced Chemical and Biological Warfare; and Building Partner Capacity in Defense and Foreign Policy.

MSU also partners with [Masaryk University](#) in the Czech Republic to offer our students an opportunity to participate in international exchanges addressing energy security and global international affairs. Under a student exchange program agreement, our students can participate in a semester studying at Masaryk and Masaryk students can participate in DSS programs. This program has existed for over ten years and continues to grow. In our most recent exchange program, for instance, we had ten students attend Energy Security and International Security seminars there.

What's more, at a time in which America's higher education system has become all but synonymous with staggering costs and student debt, DSS is able to offer our high-caliber Washington-based national security educational programming not just in such flexible formats, but at Missouri public university rates. It is truly a unique resource for rising national security professionals.

Conclusion

Looking to the future, we anticipate a further expansion of our course offerings related to emerging security issues, as well as to leverage our new location as a venue for conferences specializing in complex and challenging security issues, evening lectures and panel events by world-class experts, and hybrid course offerings covering a weekend or two. We expect our Arlington offices and classrooms to become an attractive learning center where national security professionals of all ranks and specialties can learn, express their views, challenge their own (and each other's) perspectives, and collaborate in identifying new approaches to help address the most serious, complex, and global security threats – and seize the most important national security opportunities – this country faces.

We aim to teach our students to think strategically, critically, and with a long-term perspective that will let them make seminal contributions in their fields, advise senior leaders, and develop into high-level decision-makers able to operate effectively across the many complexities of the national security arena. We want them to be consummate national security policy professionals comfortable with

the full range of current threats and opportunities – including in strategic deterrence, defense and security requirements, WMD threats, cyber strategy, great power competition, modern warfare and strategy, pandemic threats, energy security challenges, the changing global climate, hybrid warfare challenges and continued terrorist threats.

Our graduates face a complex and dangerous global environment, but they should not be discouraged by the challenges that lie ahead. They are talented and motivated, and we at DSS are dedicated to helping them grow and mature as national security professionals able to rise to the challenges of our times. It's been an honor to be part of this program.

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About the Author

John P. Rose is Director of the School of Defense and Strategic Studies, and has been a faculty member there since 2011. From 2002 until 2010, Dr. Rose served as Director of the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany. Before that, he was the U.S. Army's Director for Requirements at the Pentagon (1995-98), director of the Requirements and International Programs Branch at NATO's Supreme Headquarters, Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) in Mons, Belgium (1992-95), and a professor at the U.S Military Academy (1979-81). Dr. Rose received his PhD in International Relations from the University of Southern California in 1978 under Professor William Van Cleave.

The views expressed herein are entirely the author's own, and do not necessarily represent those of anyone else.