

# Defense and Strategic Studies at MSU: Security Sensibility and Strategic DNA

by

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Welcome to the first issue of the second volume of *Defense & Strategic Studies Online* (DASSO). As we begin our second year in publication, DASSO has decided to take a temporary break from publishing interesting and thought-provoking contributions to contemporary defense, international relations, and security policy debates in order to do a bit of celebrating.

As a new publication, DASSO is happy to be celebrating our own one-year anniversary, of course. But the big news here is that Missouri State University's School of Defense and Strategic Studies – a.k.a. “DSS” – is this year celebrating the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its arrival in the Washington, D.C., area in 2005. This issue of DASSO is thus dedicated to the DSS program, to let our readers know a bit more about us, giving them a feel for the unique creature we are and acquainting them with our history and what might be said to be our “spirit.”

In the pages that follow this introductory essay, you'll hear from three luminaries who have each played important roles in our history. Unfortunately, our founder, Professor William Robert Van Cleave (1935-2013), is no longer available to offer his insights. In the first of the essays that follow, however, our school's current director, former U.S. Army Brigadier General [John P. Rose](#), will recount his own history with DSS – a story arc that begins back in the program's early days at the University of Southern California (USC) under Professor Van Cleave, while yet also bringing us up to the present day.

After Dr. Rose's essay, we reproduce a recent article by DSS' second director, [Dr. Keith B. Payne](#). It is Payne who represents perhaps the strongest connective tissue between the School today and the Van Cleave legacy, and it is Payne whose accomplishment we celebrate with this issue, for he is the man who brought our program to Washington, D.C., upon Van Cleave's retirement. In his article, Payne tells this story and gives his perspective on DSS across its long history since the early 1970s.

After Dr. Payne's essay, we also reproduce an essay by J.D. Crouch – a former student of Professor Van Cleave and a longtime professor with DSS in Springfield, Missouri, who went on to very senior roles at the U.S. Department of Defense, the National Security Council, and the United Service Organization (USO). Prepared for a [festschrift volume honoring Professor Van Cleave](#) that was published by the [National Institute for Public Policy](#) (NIPP) in 2007, Crouch's essay provides yet another look across the program's history from an eminent scholar-practitioner.

To close out this celebratory "20 Years in DC!" issue of *DASSO* with compilation that we hope help illustrate one of the ways in which DSS has positioned itself so well to provide superb value for its many students: the remarkable breadth and depth of its faculty members' real-world national security policy experience. Those pages provide a list of the many influential positions that DSS faculty have held in the past, and upon the lessons from which DSS is thus able to draw in educating the students in our doctoral, Master's, and Graduate Certificate programs.

Bear in mind when you read that list, moreover, that this is an account *only* of the high-level backgrounds of DSS faculty *who were on the roster as of August 2025* when we moved to our new office location in Arlington, Virginia. A list of similar positions held over the lifetime of the DSS program would be far longer and more impressive still.

## A School about Strategy and as Strategy

My own perspective upon DSS began to take shape even before I knew that the program existed. In early 2003, I moved from the staff of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence to the State Department as a political appointee, taking up the position of Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in the bureau charged with overseeing U.S. policy related to the verification of compliance with arms control, nonproliferation, and disarmament agreements and commitments. My boss there, Assistant Secretary Paula DeSutter, had gotten a Master's degree in International Relations at USC in 1981, when Professor Van Cleave taught there, and it did not take me long to realize that his students formed a wide and very influential network in the U.S. national security policy community.

In government at the time, I recall frequently encountering interactions within the government that ran more or less along lines similar to the following: "Oh, you're a Van Cleave person? Great! I'm a Van Cleave person, too!" (Those involved would then commonly trade information about years, anecdotes, and mutual acquaintances.) At first this all seemed pretty mysterious to me, as I initially had no idea what a "Van Cleave person" actually was. Nevertheless, whatever these "Van Cleave People" were, they were obviously an influential lot: the administration of President George W. Bush, in which we served, seemed to be chock full of them.

In fact, two of the other Van Cleave alumni who served with me in government at the time were J.D. Crouch and Keith Payne. These were clearly serious players. Crouch former was Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy when I first joined the State Department, and would later go on to serve as Deputy National Security Advisor. Payne, in turn, was Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Forces Policy, having already played a seminal role in drafting the [U.S. Nuclear Posture Review](#) in 2001; he would soon also be the man who brought DSS to Washington, D.C. You will hear from both of them later in this issue!

But it didn't take me long to figure out what was going on. The "Van Cleave People" were, of course, alumni, and that period in government was a marvelous illustration of just what a fantastic job Professor Van Cleave had done in building a network of national security professionals well trained and eager to contribute to U.S. national security policy in any time of need. In those first years of what was then termed the "Global War on Terrorism," that network was active and deeply engaged in protecting and advancing our country's interests in a challenging world of security threats, and I had the good fortune to be able to work with and among them.

I am thus *not* myself an "O.G." Defense and Strategic Studies guy, for I came into the national security business by another path and through other institutions. And, alas, I never knew or had the chance to learn from Professor Van Cleave. But ever since those first days at State, I have been keenly aware of just what an interesting – even unique – program DSS is, and have had a growing feel for and appreciation of his legacy. In the pages that follow, I thus offer some thoughts as such an "outsider" about the important role DSS has played in contributing to this nation's security in challenging times.

As Dr. Payne's essay notes, there is some ambiguity in the records about precisely when Professor Van Cleave founded the program. The general consensus at DSS seems to be that the right year is 1971, however, and while the specific date is perhaps not important at this point, I do think that timing suggests a broader point about just what it was that Professor Van Cleave was doing in setting this program in motion.

The year 1971, after all, was an important and challenging one, both in the United States and for it. In the global security environment, major changes were underway. U.S. and Soviet negotiators, for instance, continued formal talks they had begun in 1969 on strategic arms control, with a particular focus on strategic nuclear delivery systems and ballistic missile defenses – talks that would result the very next year in the signing of the [Anti-Ballistic Missile \(ABM\) Treaty](#) and the [Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty Interim Agreement](#) (a.k.a. SALT I). Tensions between the two Cold War rivals and nuclear weapons

superpowers remained high, but they had begun to ease somewhat, and “détente” seemed to be in the air.

The year 1971 also marked the beginning of the United States’ historic opening to the People’s Republic of China (PRC): U.S. President Richard Nixon ended America’s more than two-decade-old blockade of trade with the People’s Republic of China (PRC), National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger secretly flew to Beijing for meetings with Zhou Enlai, and President Nixon announced that he himself would travel to China to meet with Mao Zedong. Thus began an enormous strategic shift that would have momentous consequences, both during the Cold War and – especially – thereafter.

But even for U.S. leaders who regarded these developments as welcome ones, 1971 was not a happy time. The national misery of the Vietnam War continued, and though the number of U.S. troops in Vietnam was already being greatly reduced – falling under 200,000 for the first time since the mid-1960s – the war had grievously divided and traumatized America and Americans. The tide of domestic opinion had turned sharply against the conflict, and currents of deep hostility toward U.S. national security policy had come to flow strongly in U.S. politics.

Remarkably, in fact, the year 1971 was also one in which a group of anti-war clergymen and nuns were indicted for conspiring to kidnap Kissinger and bomb several federal office buildings – and indeed leftist radicals of the Weather Underground set off a bomb in the U.S. Capitol building. More broadly, the nation was convulsed by anti-war protests, with half a million people demonstrating in Washington, D.C., in April and vast crowds descending upon the city the next month in an attempt to shut down the government entirely.

It was also a time of economic woes, for America’s economic problems at the beginning of the 1970s included large current account deficits, rising unemployment, and an acceleration of the 20-year phenomenon of what came later to be known as the “Great Inflation.” A 1971 a run on the U.S. dollar, moreover, precipitated the collapse of the Bretton Woods international monetary system, with President

[Nixon devaluing the dollar](#), ending the gold standard, and decreeing both a freeze on wage and price controls, and broad import surcharges.

It was in that period of dramatic domestic tensions – the traumas of which [we might do well to remember today for a sense of proportion](#) as we bemoan the poisonous polarization and economic problems of our current political environment – that the young Professor Van Cleave decided to establish a new Defense and Strategic Studies (DSS) program at USC’s School of International Relations (SIR). In hindsight, it seems quite clear that in setting up this program, Van Cleave had an expansive vision in mind: he wasn’t just establishing a program *about* national security policy and strategy, he was setting up one that would *contribute* to policy and strategy in ways he felt our country badly needed. And our program *was* part of *his* strategy.

### **Education and Scholarship for Real-World Practice**

Then 36 years old, Van Cleave had already had a career in the U.S. Marine Corps, having enlisted at the age of 17 and served as part of the U.S. occupation of Europe after the end of the Second World War. His doctoral dissertation of 1967 from the Claremont Graduate School (now [Claremont Graduate University](#)) had focused on the interaction of technology and international politics through the prism of nuclear weapons proliferation – coming out, serendipitously, just before the completion of the [Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons](#) in 1968 – and Van Cleave was deeply interested in strategic policy, nuclear deterrence, arms control, and the theory and practical politics of national security strategy.

Van Cleave’s new DSS program reflected these interests, and made the study of such issues its trademark right from the beginning, as it provided graduate-level education and training for students planning careers in national and international security affairs and policymaking, as well as in teaching at the university level. As Van Cleave [explained it to a journalist years later, in 2007](#),

Particularly after service in the Defense Department, and having experienced the highly abstract and theoretical pedagogical approaches that prevailed academically at the time, I was determined to make DSS a policy oriented field.

It was his ambition to *avoid* “ivory-tower”-type scholarship and focus instead upon practical application, educating true practitioners. In Van Cleave’s words, he wanted to build a program based upon insights from the “real world and not models of what the world should be.” He wanted its foundation to be “real threat analysis” – including “the realities of arms control as distinct from the wishful thinking of arms control” – and for the program to remain resolutely grounded in a sober appreciation of security challenges and the need to meet them.

The distinctly steel-eyed and security-focused flavor of this approach did not necessarily always endear Van Cleave to his academic peers in the California of 1970s America, but it proved a strong foundation for the DSS program, which thrived. He ran DSS at USC until 1987, at which point he and DSS relocated to Southwest Missouri State University (SMSU).

The move seems to have been, in part, a move by Van Cleave to ensure the program’s ability to preserve its distinctive, no-nonsense practitioner’s focus upon real-world security challenges. As Van Cleave later put it,

Without being political, one can see ... that fellow academics would regard both the very topic and the way I taught it as politically “conservative” and “hard line” ....

He stressed that “it was not a partisan political program,” and that “[w]hen research and analysis led to criticism, even severe, of national security policies and actions, there was no distinction” made between the policies of the two U.S. political parties. Nevertheless, in Van Cleave’s recollection, the SIR faculty at USC

steadily became homogeneous politically and pedagogically, and nearly uniformly hostile [to the

program]. A faculty of some 18 could not tolerate a single “conservative” national security program ....

Van Cleave remained devoted to ensuring DSS’ ability to continue to pursue its distinctive approach to practitioner-focused national security education. [According to one former USC administrator](#), however, challenges began to arise in connection with “curricular changes” and questions about DSS’ “autonomy” in response to “constraints that were being imposed [on the program] by the department and also by the university.” Van Cleave’s commitment to the DSS’ approach thereafter led him – a native of Kansas City, Missouri – to take the program with him back to his home state.

Whatever the details of his parting from USC, the move to Missouri was a success. By that point, Southwest Missouri State was already the second-largest public university in the state. At SMSU, DSS became a full-fledged academic “center” in 1987, and thereafter a full department by 1990, offering a Master of Science degree in Defense and Strategic Studies. SMSU became [Missouri State University](#) (MSU) in 2005, and DSS is now a full-fledged “School” at MSU, a component of the [Reynolds College of Arts, Social Sciences, and Humanities](#) (RCASH).

As you’ll learn about more from Drs. Rose and Payne later in this issue, 20 years ago, in 2005 – just as Southwest Missouri State was transforming itself into Missouri State University – DSS moved again. It retained its productive relationship with the home campus in Springfield, Missouri, but it now relocated its offices and classrooms to the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area in order to be closer to the primary locus of national (and indeed global) power and national security activity. Van Cleave himself retired that year, and he was succeeded in the program directorship by Dr. Payne, who had known and worked with Van Cleave for years after receiving his PhD at USC in 1981.

And, as recounted further later in this issue, DSS has indeed thrived since its relocation to the Washington area. Most recently, of course, this has included gaining accreditation in 2020 from the

national [Higher Learning Commission](#)\* for a professional doctorate program, expanding its range of Graduate Certificates, launching [the journal you are now reading](#), and moving to our new location in Arlington, Virginia, within sight of the Washington Monument and close to the Pentagon, the White House, and the Department of State.

As Van Cleave intended, however, these successes have done nothing to attenuate DSS' distinctive emphasis upon giving hard-nosed attention to real-world security challenges as – [in the words of one journalist](#) – the program “caters to students who want to break into Beltway defense circles with a public university price tag and the advantages of a more practical approach.” As should hardly be surprising for a program founded by a scholarly ex-Marine who had advised the Nixon Administration on the SALT I negotiations, was part of the “[Team B” outside expert assessment of U.S. intelligence on the Soviet Union](#), and served as chief defense advisor to candidate Ronald Reagan during the 1980 presidential campaign – later also running President-elect Reagan's Defense Department transition team – the DSS program has always been unabashedly committed to understanding and promoting deterrence (including nuclear deterrence) and issues related to the protection and advancement of U.S. national security interests.

The program takes no institutional position on any specific political or policy issue, of course, and the DSS faculty contains scholar-experts of various political stripes. As Dr. Payne [has himself noted](#),

No one should want to train students just from one particular perspective [anyway] .... The intention is to provide a range of approaches and consciously to do so, because the students need to know that and have that as they go into positions.

Nevertheless, as Van Cleave's description of his move to Missouri attests, the program's generally security-focused and “realistic” flavor has been unmistakable from the outset. This emphasis – and the fact that [so many of its faculty have played roles in](#)

[Republican presidential administrations](#) – has sometimes [irritated those on the dovish political Left](#), but DSS has never felt any need to apologize for its commitment to educating students to become wise and resolute stewards and guardians of this nation's security interests in a challenging world in which robust deterrence remains (alas) as necessary as ever.

At a time in which American higher education seems to be in rather a crisis, moreover – with enrollments generally stagnant or falling, and with its most prominent institutions caught between those who fear it has been hijacked by political and cultural values alien to the American mainstream and those who fear for its independence from government control – DSS feels to some of us like of an oasis of sanity. We are a program solidly rooted in Middle American sensibilities through our umbilical cord back to the home campus in Springfield, Missouri, yet we are at the same time deeply embedded and influential in the world of national security professionals centered on the Pentagon, the White House, the Department of State, and Capitol Hill. We remain true to the approach charted for us by our founder more than 40 years ago, our program is growing, we're delighted with our new offices, and we feel ourselves to have a very bright future.

DSS has thus already had a remarkable career. With its new offices near the Pentagon, with the professional doctoral program continuing to increase its enrollment, and with recent [legislative changes in the State of Missouri that will allow MSU to offer PhD research degrees for the first time](#), DSS feels like it is continuing to accelerate. We hope and believe that Professor Van Cleave would be proud of what his program has become, and of the role DSS continues to play in educating the national security practitioners this nation needs in confronting the challenges it faces in a dangerous world.

We hope you enjoy this commemorative issue celebrating our 20 years in the Washington, D.C., area – and we look forward to many more successful years to come!

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## About the Author

**Christopher Ford** is DASSO's Editor in Chief and a professor with the School of Defense and Strategic Studies. In prior government service, Dr. Ford was U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Nonproliferation in 2018-21, for the last 15 months of that period also performing the duties of the Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security. Prior to that, he served as Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for WMD and Counterproliferation at the National Security Council. A Rhodes Scholar with degrees from Harvard, Oxford, and Yale, Dr. Ford has also been U.S. Special Representative for Nuclear Nonproliferation, a Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, a staffer on five different U.S. Senate committees, a think tank scholar with Hudson Institute and the Hoover Institution, and a U.S. Navy intelligence officer. He is the author of the books *China Looks at the West: Identity, Global Ambitions, and the Future of Sino-American Relations* (2015), *The Mind of Empire: China's History and Modern Foreign Relations* (2010), and *The Admirals' Advantage: U.S. Navy Operational Intelligence in World War II and the Cold War* (2005).

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

## Notes

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- \* DSS is also certified by the [State Council of Higher Education for Virginia](#) (SCHEV).