

The Homeland Security Review

A Journal of the Institute
for Law & Public Policy

CALIFORNIA UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

VOLUME 3, NO. 3, FALL 2009

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The Homeland Security Review (ISSN 1554-3234) is published three times a year, in the winter, summer and fall for the Institute for Law & Public Policy at California University of PA, California University of PA Press, 135 Technology Drive, Canonsburg, PA 15317, (724) 597-7401. Opinions published here are those of the writers and not those of *The Homeland Security Review*, its editors or staff. Publications of the Institute for Law and Public Policy of California University of PA Press do not in any way constitute official California University of PA content. Views and opinions expressed in CUPP/ILPP publications are strictly those of the authors and comments on the contents of those pieces should be directed to those authors.

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Business communications, permissions, subscription orders and change-of-address requests are to be sent to *Homeland Security Review*, Editor, Homeland Security Review, Institute for Law and Public Policy, California University of Pennsylvania, Southpointe Center, 135 Technology Drive, Canonsburg, PA 15317. POST-MASTER: If this publication is un-deliverable, please send notice to: Editor, Homeland Security Review, Institute for Law and Public Policy, California University of Pennsylvania, Southpointe Center, 135 Technology Drive, Canonsburg, PA 15317.

Subscription Rates: \$149/1 year

Please cite this issue as 3.3 Homeland Sec. Rev. __ (2009).

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Adaptive Leader Methodology: An Alternative for Better Outcomes

BY LIEUTENANT FRED LELAND¹ &
MAJOR DON VANDERGRIF (US ARMY RET.)²

Adaptive Leader Methodology (ALM) offers the first responder a better alternative to the traditional “input-based” or “competency theory” philosophy that currently governs their training programs at all levels.³ ALM is perhaps best described as “developmental training,” i.e., the development of the individual within the training of a first responder’s or leader’s task. It emphasizes teaching the “why” behind actions through an emphasis on the fundamental principles that should guide future actions and decisions. ALM is best suited to nurture innovation and adaptability, the characteristics that are absolutely essential on today’s complex streets and in handling crisis situations. The recurring question, however, is this: how does one teach in an ALM environment? What are the “how to” aspects of implementing the theory behind ALM? Perhaps most importantly, how does a trainer approach leader development using this philosophy?

This last question is of particular importance to homeland security (law enforcement, emergency medical, fire and security) in entry-level, advanced and continuing education and training programs. It is easy to proclaim the need to build adaptive leaders during a PowerPoint briefing, but it is quite another matter to achieve the desired outcome. The Adaptive Leader Methodology provides a “how to” guide for leader development and instruction within today’s environment.⁴ This methodology emphasizes nurturing, effective decision-making and adaptability through experiential learning. In keeping with an outcomes-based approach to training, ALM focuses on the fundamental principles of the exercise and encourages experimentation and innovation when exploring solutions. Aspiring leaders are allowed to try, and sometimes fail, as they struggle to solve increasingly complex tactical problems. Each individual’s strength of character is tested through a crucible of decision-making exercises and communication drills that require the

students to brief and then defend their decisions against focused criticism from their peers and instructors.

As a Lieutenant in the Walpole Police Department and the founder of a law enforcement consulting firm (LESC, Inc.), I have been part of a determined collective effort to improve how we develop law enforcement professionals. I have implemented this approach within our department, and as a central aspect of the training courses I offer through LESC, Inc. With ALM serving as the guiding philosophy, retired Army Major Don Vandergriff has implemented instruction based on the ALM model within the Army, and is now starting to spread it outside the Army to law enforcement, businesses and academic organizations.⁵ It was clear to us that the old briefing and lecture-based methods of teaching—called the “competency model”⁶—were falling well short of where the Army wanted to be given the complex environments its leaders and soldiers are facing; a change was necessary. ALM was their guide as courses redesigned their curriculums to grow the individual while achieving task proficiency. Beginning in 2007, several courses, including the West Point Department of Military Instruction (DMI), captain, lieutenant and non-commissioned officer courses throughout the Army put ALM into practice, learning some valuable lessons along the way.⁷ The effort continues, and changes continue to be implemented based on the feedback from the initial term. As we write this article, several programs are enjoying unprecedented success and receiving enthusiastic feedback from our students. The purpose of this article is to outline the Army’s efforts to implement ALM within the framework of a homeland security and first responder environment, and to communicate their lessons-learned from this exciting period of execution.

Teaching with ALM

As stated above, ALM emphasizes nurturing effective decision making and adaptability through experiential learning. Experimentation comes first through the execution of Tactical Decision-Making Exercises (TDEs)⁸ followed by student briefings of their decisions, plans or orders. After the student explains himself and responds to criticism from his peers and instructor, the group executes an intense instructor-facilitated After-Action Review (AARs)⁹. The instruction is accomplished through AARs as the students discover for themselves the concepts and principles included in that lesson’s learning objectives. Only after this has occurred, is the theory or doctrine involved formally introduced by the instructor. The students generally find themselves saying: “Wow! That’s what you call it!” There are no preparatory reading assignments or lectures prior to the execution of the TDE. Instead, the readings follow the exercises, allowing the students to more effectively absorb the

information within the context that they already established during their experimentation in the classroom.¹⁰

The Tactical Decision-Making Exercise (TDE) is the basic tool that is used in ALM based classes regardless of the focus. If it is a decision making scenario where an individual or a team must solve a problem, then each TDE consists of a scenario summary and a map with graphics. The instructor has the option to either hand out a printed copy of the scenario or to issue it verbally to his students, requiring them to listen closely and take notes. The TDEs in ALM based classes are generally of two types: (1) immediate decision exercises that give the students a range of time, usually from 30 seconds to a few minutes, to make a decision and (2) planning exercises that are longer in duration and culminate in the briefing of orders.¹¹ In either case, the students are given both limited time and limited information to make their decisions and complete their plans. This induces stress and allows them to discover for themselves that delaying decisions until one has “perfect intelligence” is both unrealistic and ineffective.¹² As in combat, or dealing with crises ever-changing situations are the norm as instructors issue fragmentary orders (FRAGOs)¹³ or changes that require the students to make new decisions.¹⁴ In this way, TDEs nurture adaptability and flexibility as chaos becomes commonplace.

A specific area of emphasis for instructors is the examination of how students use the information at their disposal. Can they distinguish between information that is pertinent in making decisions and that which is insignificant? Can they do so quickly? Are they then able to translate why that information is important and determine how they should use it?¹⁵ This is the essence of the Boyd Cycle, a 4-step theory of decision-making that was first articulated by Col. John R. Boyd following his study of fighter pilots in combat during the Korean War.¹⁶ Commonly known as “OODA” (observation, orientation, decision, action), the Boyd Cycle is a useful framework for the assessment of students throughout any course using ALM. In ALM based courses and our workshops we focus on the critical step of “orientation” because this is where the students attempt to make sense out of the information at hand. The decision that the student makes is important, but how they arrived at that decision is equally significant. Although some might be tempted to draw parallels between OODA and the methodical, process-oriented focus of the Army’s Military Decision-Making Process (MDMP)¹⁷ or known as the “analytical approach” in business and first responder circles, these two concepts are extremely different. The MDMP is “a linear and analytical decision-making approach”¹⁸ while OODA is a guide for how to think that allows for creative thought and innovation without the restrictions of a rigid step-by-step procedure.¹⁹

It is also important to understand that ALM instructors do not “teach” the Boyd Cycle. There is no block of instruction or reading assignment devoted to the academic aspects of the OODA Loop. Instead, the Boyd Cycle is an intellectual framework for ALM instructors as they guide the execution of TDEs. Students in an ALM based course exercise their OODA Loops without knowing that they are doing so.

This practical, hands on approach to teaching often inspires anxiety in the minds of those who have grown comfortable with traditional methods of instruction. The most common complaint is “the basics should be taught first!” After all, the critics argue, how can we teach any student how to plan a tactical operation before we teach them the organization and technical aspects of their respective organization? What these critics fail to understand is that students learn much more effectively by experimenting and making mistakes than by having the “answers” spoon-fed to them beforehand.²⁰ With ALM, students learn through immersion in a scenario. For example in an Army course using ALM, by executing a TDE that requires them to employ an air assault infantry platoon with the mission of conducting an ambush, a student will learn not only the principles behind planning an ambush, but they also learn about the assets at their disposal. Such is the same for law enforcement: executing a TDE that requires a response to an active shooter in the workplace, shopping mall or school. Again the student will learn to plan and execute a tactical response and approach to stopping the ongoing deadly action and rescue the injured, while also developing an understanding of what resources they have available to assist in such a dynamic response. Without a single PowerPoint slide or lecture, students learn several complex tactical concepts. Vandergriff and I, as well as many Army instructors, have seen that the immersion scenario keeps students mentally engaged in the class, and invariably results in higher levels of enthusiasm for the training and better results when applied in real life scenarios.

The Theory of Maneuver Warfare: A Unifying Framework

Diversity is important in ALM-based courses. Army focused tactical scenarios involve many different types of units as well as a wide variety of operating environments. Homeland security professionals including police, fire, EMS, and others can apply the same approach. Students solve problems within the context of high-intensity combat, peace-keeping operations, and counter-insurgency (COIN). This diversity is well suited to the intent of a course as it makes students adapt to the tactical situation of the moment. With each lesson, future leaders’—regardless of specialty—“comfort zones” grow ever larger. While this diversity is absolutely essential, it remains important to keep everyone

(instructors as well as students) moving in the same direction. In order to achieve this, the course requires a “conceptual azimuth” to guide our efforts. William S. Lind’s theory of Maneuver Warfare²¹ offers a unifying framework that binds our lessons together through a common set of themes, and we have discovered this also applies to any organization that relies on each of its members to demonstrate adaptability as it operates in a high intense and ever-changing environment.

First, students learn to approach their analysis of the terrain (or tactical environment) and the opponent (man-made or natural crisis) with the objective of identifying that which they can use to their advantage. With respect to the enemy (criminal, terrorist element or Mother Nature), we teach our students to identify enemy strengths (which they must avoid) and weaknesses (which they must exploit).²² Rather than strictly focusing on producing a product such as an enemy course of action sketch, the cadets seek to gain an understanding of the enemy that is useful for future decision-making. This approach is applicable in any type of operating environment but especially so when facing the complex problems of counter-insurgency or dealing with today’s transnational crime or terrorist action.²³ With counter-insurgency, it is often more difficult to identify the weaknesses of today’s criminals, criminal gangs and terrorists, and a greater challenge to find ways to exploit them. However, the reality of our current conflicts shows that finding creative ways to defeat an asymmetrical threat is essential for our tactical leaders.²⁴

Secondly, it is vital that students understand the long term consequences of their immediate actions. This requires the ability to operate within the framework of their higher headquarters “Commander’s Intent.”²⁵ In order to reinforce this concept, students see orders as “contracts” between senior and subordinate. The higher commander assigns a mission (the short term contract) with the understanding that the subordinate leader will be allowed maximum latitude in figuring out exactly how he will accomplish that mission. The only stipulation is that the subordinate leader’s “solution” must not violate the Commander’s Intent. This intent constitutes the long term contract between senior and subordinate.²⁶ Ethical conduct and adherence to the Rules of Engagement (ROE)²⁷ are always part of the Commander’s Intent, and this serves to emphasize the often strategic-level consequences of actions at the lowest levels. We have found the U.S. Army lessons from their current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan apply to everyday problems that law enforcement encounters.²⁸ Thus, the way ALM is used by the Army also has applications in developing first responder’s to deal with the conventional and unconventional threats they face. The final unifying theme in ALM-based courses is that they focus on the way that

“tactics” are defined. In ALM based courses, instructors describe tactics as unique “solutions” to specific problems, not tasks or drills that must be executed through doctrinal formulas or set procedures.²⁹ Following fixed rules not only results in unpredictability, it quickly becomes an excuse for not thinking. Since courses using ALM focus on “how to think” about tactical problem-solving, while developing an individual’s competence and confidence, anything that discourages creative thought has no place in its curriculum.

Assessments and Grading

Developing an effective plan for assessing students is the most difficult challenge for courses applying ALM as part of their Program of Instruction (POI). The reason for this is the tendency to seek easily quantifiable methods of assessment. In most course environments so much depends on a student’s class rank and the number of people a course graduates that there is often a burning desire to remove judgment from instructors in favor of a rigid, mathematical grading rubric. In short, there is a natural fear of subjectivity and a longing for the safety and presumed reliability of numbers and checklists. However, is it “safe” to quantify the intangibles of leadership and adaptability? How can one assign a number to creativity and initiative? Despite these questions, one thing is certain: fill-in-the-blank and multiple choice tests are woefully inadequate for measuring our effectiveness in achieving the desired outcomes for our military science program. Since the ability to memorize information is not a good indicator of one’s decision-making skills while in conflict, there is no reason to use this criterion as a basis for testing.³⁰ Instead, an ALM based examination focuses on things that are much more difficult to quantify, placing a great deal of the responsibility and trust in the individual instructor.

Some ALM based tests are of the short-answer variety. These examinations place students in a specific tactical scenario and require them to make decisions. They must then explain the reasons behind their decision in writing. For example, a student might be told that he is the commander for a convoy of vehicles that must travel to an assigned destination within the next several hours. After being presented with information about the composition of the convoy, a map, the nature of the enemy threat, and the specifics of the mission and Commander’s Intent, the student would have to determine which route he will take and then explain why that route was selected. The instructor then assigns a grade on the approach used to solve the problem using the information at hand and how well the reasoning was communicated. This gets to the point of examining “how” the student is thinking, but not “what” he is thinking.

Another and more common, assessment technique that ALM instructors use is a “graded TDE.” Just like the short-answer tests, these are scenario-based and require students to make decisions on the fly. This technique is virtually identical to a standard in-class TDE with the exception that students are required to write out or brief their solutions to their instructors who, in turn, grade those solutions. In many cases, these examinations require students to produce a concept sketch with short hand-written notes concerning exact guidance for individuals, their teams, the sequence of events, and most importantly the purpose behind various actions.

Regardless of the technique or format of the assessment, the tactical scenario must allow for multiple correct ways to solve the problem. For the assessment to be truly effective, students must have the freedom to actually make a decision on their own and formulate a plan rather than being forced to regurgitate a pre-determined template. If tests fail to allow room for creativity, students become focused on identifying the approved solution rather than thinking for themselves. In order to permit freedom of thought, scenarios must have a significant amount of ambiguity. The situation must be such that one could reasonably interpret the available information in multiple ways. Of course, this does not preclude the existence of wrong answers. Violations of the Commander’s Intent, unethical conduct, poor communication, or an unrealistic course of action all constitute an automatic failure. Additionally, if the student is unable to make a decision within the time and information constraints of the test, the student is assigned a failing grade. These automatic failure criteria are absolutely essential in communicating to students that they cannot achieve success in the class by going through the motions of employing a template or checklist to the problem.

The intentional ambiguity in the scenarios necessitates other efforts to keep everyone on the same path when it comes to grading. It is vital to ensure consistency across the board in this area without imposing an overly-restrictive grading scheme that would hinder freedom of judgment from the instructors. In order to effectively calibrate the grading criteria, all instructors must participate in a free exchange of ideas regarding the key concepts that are the focus of the upcoming assessment. In ALM-based courses, these group discussions are referred to as Faculty Development (FD) sessions.³¹ Not all FD sessions focus on grading, but those that do begin with the instructors actually taking the test followed by an open discussion regarding the content of the exam and how to approach grading. At the end of this exchange, the Course Director compiles the applicable notes from the session into a short set of general guidelines. Because these guidelines are the product of a collective effort, they keep grading consistent among all instructors.

Conclusion

One of the essential principles of outcomes based training is the requirement to treat the trainee like an adult. This encourages them to take ownership of their development and training. Not surprisingly, students at all levels from entry level to senior executives respond accordingly. If the expectation is that they cannot be trusted to do anything without micro-management, then students will fail without extensive guidance. However, if from the very beginning the expectation is that they must think on their own and take responsibility for their own training, they will almost always conduct themselves responsibly.

We have applied this principle in our workshop “Deciding Under Pressure and Fast”³² workshop over the past three years, which inspired a surge in enthusiasm from students from several Army courses. What they seem to enjoy most is the fact that they are actually allowed to make decisions and figure things out on their own. Rather than being asked to regurgitate lists of information, they are required to think creatively under pressure. Many of students took the time to voice their opinions either through the automated end of course survey and via personal emails to us after our workshop or the courses were completed. Their comments on the method of instruction (ALM) were almost uniformly positive with statements, including the following:

The previous classes seemed to be merely checking the box. ‘Okay here is a situation and here is how it was resolved. Study it and know it.’ I didn’t like that approach very much. I enjoy the way we did it this in your workshop because it was really my plan or decision that failed or succeeded.

...

Courses in the past have been monotonous and boring. The approach this new course required us to take an interest, make a call, and put ourselves in the shoes of a real leader on the street.”

...

I think the class discussions were the best part of the course. We went over alternate solutions for TDEs, and we had to defend ourselves against criticism. This made me more confident in myself, but it also showed me other perspectives and made me work on dealing with criticism.³³

Putting ALM into practice in our homeland security disciplines will take a large amount of time and work on the part of many instructors. It will be a collective effort executed within the overarching framework of an outcomes-based training environment. Although there are always improvements to make, it is clear that Army instructors using

ALM in coursework results in resounding success, and students and instructors alike enjoy the experience. Most importantly, the level of performance in the classroom has increased from previous courses. The results speak from themselves: ALM is an effective tool for teaching and developing adaptability regardless of the environment. It is here to stay in the Army, and hopefully take hold in protecting the homeland.

ENDNOTES

¹ Fred is an active Lieutenant, with the Walpole PD and a former United States Marine. He is an accomplished and accredited trainer with more than 25 years of experience teaching Law Enforcement and Security. He is a graduate of the FBI National Academy Class 216, where he specialized in terrorism related topics, leadership and management. Fred is a student of the late modern day Strategist COL John Boyd and the Ancient Strategist Sun Tzu. He founded Law Enforcement and Security Consulting, Inc (LESC) in 2006 with the focus of bringing these principles to law enforcement and security.

² In the United States and all over the world, Vandergriff has served in numerous troop, staff and education assignments, retiring in 2005 after 24 years of active duty as an enlisted Marine and Army officer. In 2003, he was named ROTC Instructor of the year, and in 2004 he was runner up for the same title. He teaches at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. and continues to certify Army instructors in Adaptive Leader Methodology, which is a leader development model he created based on the concepts of Colonel John Boyd.

³ See WILLIAM HAYES, *THE FUTURE OF PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION* (2008); W. ROBERT HOUSTON, *EXPLORING COMPETENCY BASED EDUCATION* (1974).

⁴ The Adaptive Leader Methodology (ALM) is the product of the efforts of MAJ (ret.) Don Vandergriff, a well-known and influential thinker in the area of leader development, is also a contractor in support of Army Capabilities Integration Center Forward (ARCIC Forward). Initially, this instructional method was known as the "Adaptive Leader Course" (ALC). However, because of the confusion generated by the many questions regarding the location of "that adaptive leader," the name was changed to more clearly reflect that this is an approach/methodology rather than an actual course of instruction at a schoolhouse.

⁵ See Major Vandergriff's website at <http://www.donvandergriff.com/index.html>.

⁶ See NORTHWEST REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL LABORATORY, *COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION: BEYOND MINIMUM COMPTENCY TESTING*, (eds. Ruth Nicksee, Larry McClure, 1981).

⁷ ALM lessons learned include: Improving one's ability to make decisions quickly and effectively; making sense of new situations, seeing patterns, and spotting opportunities and options that were not visible before; becoming more comfortable in a variety of situations; developing more advanced and ambitious tactics; becoming more familiar with weapons and equipment capabilities, employment techniques, and other technical details.

⁸ See MCO 1500.55, *MILITARY THINKING AND DECISION MAKING EXERCISES* (Dept. of the Navy, 1997); BEN J. M. ALE, *RISK: AN INTRODUCTION: THE CONCEPTS OF RISK, DANGER AND CHANCE* (2009).

⁹ See *A LEADER'S GUIDE TO AFTER-ACTION REVIEWS: TRAINING CIRCULAR 25-20* (Dept. of the Army, 1993).

¹⁰ DONALD E. VANDERGRIFF, *RAISING THE BAR: CREATING AND NURTURING ADAPTABILITY TO DEAL WITH THE CHANGING FACE OF WAR* 77-111 (2006). Chapter 3 of this book outlines the Program of Instruction (POI) for a course that employs ALM-based instructional methods. Vandergriff's approach is also supported by the latest learning theory of Dr. Robert Bjork of UCLA.

¹¹ See VANDERGRIFF, *supra* note 8.

¹² Jeffrey B. Hukill, *Maligned and Misunderstood*, ARMED FORCES J., Mar. 2009, available at www.armedforcesjournal.com/2009/03/3873827.

¹³ See CIRCULAR 25-20, *supra* note 9.

¹⁴ Wayne Barefoot, *Keys to S2 success at JRTC*, MILITARY INTELLIGENCE PROF. BUL., Jan. 1, 1998, at 48.

¹⁵ Gary Klein, Ph.D, in his book *INTUITION AT WORK* (2003) discusses his experiments and study on how first responders make decisions under pressure and utilize the Recognition-Primed Decision Making Process.

¹⁶ John R. Boyd, *Patterns of Conflict* (Dec. 1986).

¹⁷ ARMY PLANNING AND ORDERS PRODUCTION: FIELD MANUAL 5-0 (Dept. of the Army, 2005).

¹⁸ *Id.* at 47-49.

¹⁹ See Boyd, *supra* note 16; see also Aaron A. Bazin, *Boyd's O-O-D-A Loop And The Infantry Company Commander*, INFANTRY MAG., Jan./Feb. 2005.

²⁰ See WILLIAM HAYES, *THE FUTURE OF PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION* (2008); W. ROBERT HOUSTON, *EXPLORING COMPETENCY BASED EDUCATION* (1974).

²¹ WILLIAM S. LIND, *MANEUVER WARFARE HANDBOOK* (1985).

²² *Id.* at 73-89. Lind describes these concepts as enemy "surfaces and gaps."

²³ See generally DAVID GALULA, *COUNTERINSURGENCY WARFARE: THEORY AND PRACTICE* (2006); Frank G. Hoffman, *Complex Irregular Warfare: The Next Revolution in Military Affairs*, 50 ORBIS 395-411 (2006).

²⁴ Colin S. Gray, *Thinking Asymmetrically in Times of Terror*, 32 PARAMETERS (2002).

²⁵ Lawrence G. Shattuck & David d. Woods, *Communication Of Intent In Military Command And Control Systems*, in *THE HUMAN IN COMMAND: EXPLORING THE MODERN MILITARY EXPERIENCE* 279-292 (Carol McCann & Ross Pigeau, eds., 2000).

²⁶ LIND, *supra* note 21, at 13-15. Lind describes the Commander's Intent as a "long-term contract" between the Commander and his subordinate leaders. The immediate mission is what the Commander wants done, but he allows his subordinates the latitude to exercise creativity and initiative in determining exactly how they will accomplish that mission.

²⁷ James C. Duncan, *The Commander's Role in Developing Rules of Engagement*, 52 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REV. (1999).

²⁸ ANTHONY H. CORDESMAN, *THE IRAQ WAR: STRATEGY, TACTICS, AND MILITARY LESSONS* (2003).

²⁹ LIND, *supra* note 21, at 12.

³⁰ EDUARDO SALAS & GARY A. KLEIN, *LINKING EXPERTISE AND NATURALISTIC DECISION MAKING* (2001).

³¹ See VANDERGRIFF, *supra* note 10.

³² Fred Leland, *Deciding Under Pressure...and Fast Workshop Success and Evolutionary Adaptability*, LAW ENFORCEMENT & SECURITY CONSULTING WEBSITE, at [http://www.lesc.net/blog/deciding-under-pressurehellipand-fast-and-evolutionary-adaptability\(03/28/2009\)](http://www.lesc.net/blog/deciding-under-pressurehellipand-fast-and-evolutionary-adaptability(03/28/2009)).

³³ These comments were taken from the anonymous end-of-course surveys that students and participants completed after the conclusion of the workshop "Deciding Under Pressure and Fast" which teaches how to apply ALM in existing POI.

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The Homeland Security Review

A Journal of the Institute
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ISSN 1554-3234