

Staff Rides as Pedagogical Practice

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ABSTRACT

Political science instructors have started to make use of the “staff ride”—that is, the combined study of a military campaign, structured visits to related sites, and after-action analysis. Our study is the first examination of the potential utility of this pedagogical tool in civilian political science programs. Although the specific knowledge and skills that any given staff ride promotes depend on its content and structure, the potential benefits include four student learning outcomes: (1) staff rides show students how we might draw lessons from the past and apply them to present or future problems; (2) students may derive an enhanced ability to empathize with military and civilian decision makers; (3) staff rides can highlight the normative stakes in politics; and (4) they can foster connections among the participants. This article describes potential benefits of a staff ride, provides detailed instructional models based on the Battle of Gettysburg and the Tet Offensive, and considers ways to replicate these experiences in more accessible formats.

The staff ride entails “(1) the systematic preliminary study of a selected campaign, battle, or event; (2) an extensive visit...of the actual sites associated with that campaign, battle, or event; and (3) an opportunity to integrate the lessons derived from each” (Knight and Robertson 2020, 5–6).¹ This active learning method has begun to make its way from professional military education (PME) into political science. Undergraduate and graduate courses, as well as short-term fellowships and professional development programs, have made use of the staff ride. Yet, political scientists have not studied the staff ride in the same way that they have studied other forms of teaching and learning. This study is the first such analysis.²

The staff ride, we contend, is a mode of active learning that is fundamentally similar to many other active learning experiences that also offers distinct benefits. The following section describes the potential benefits of staff rides in more detail and then provides models of domestic (i.e., US-based) and international staff rides based on the Battle of Gettysburg and the Tet Offensive. Given that not all instructors have the resources necessary to make a staff ride accessible to their students, our study concludes by considering plausible alternatives to the traditional staff ride that could replicate certain aspects of this experience.

WHY STAFF RIDES

The staff ride as a military institution is more than a century old. Its roots lie in the nineteenth-century professionalization of the Prussian military, and the practice was adopted by the US military in 1906 (Knight and Robertson 2020). Civilian academic programs in political science only recently have begun to adopt this practice.³ From the Notre Dame International Security Center’s Hans J. Morgenthau Fellowship to individual courses such as Scott Sagan’s “The Face of Battle” at Stanford University, staff rides are taking root in political science.⁴ The potential pedagogical functions of staff rides in civilian political science programs, however, have not been examined closely. Given that instructors outside of PME institutions have different goals than their counterparts, it is beneficial to consider whether a pedagogical tool designed for PME would be valuable in a non-PME context.

In considering what students might obtain from a staff ride, we first note that a staff ride is a form of active learning that “engages students in the process of learning through activities and/or discussion in class” (Freeman et al. 2014, 8413–14). If modes of active learning can engage students more readily compared to forms of passive learning, it follows that a staff ride may be a good teaching tool.

More specifically, a staff ride can contribute to general student learning outcomes in a political science curriculum: “[T]he goal for study in a political science major is to maximize students’ capacity to analyze and interpret the significance and dynamics of political events and governmental processes” (Wahlke 1991, 49).⁵ To accomplish this, students must acquire “knowledge about how political actions affect the world in which they live,

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about what shapes and determines those actions, and about what governmental actions can and cannot be expected to accomplish; and knowledge about the behavior of citizens, politicians, states persons, and bureaucrats that affects governmental actions and their consequences,” as well as “the analytic skills needed to

dimensions of government and politics” is a goal that we have for our students, a staff ride may be an especially vivid way of doing so (Wahlke 1991, 57).

Fourth, a staff ride can foster connections among the participants. In a PME context, we may be skeptical of the potential

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apply it to particular political systems...and to situations and problems of most immediate consequence and concern to them” (Wahlke 1991, 49–50). A staff ride can help students to acquire knowledge of this type while incentivizing the development of those analytic skills.

A staff ride may help students to attain learning objectives related to political science and liberal arts training in four ways. First, staff rides show students how we can draw lessons from the past and apply them to present or future problems. From a PME perspective, the goal of a staff ride is to learn what succeeded or failed on a battlefield to improve the modern soldier’s decision making. For civilians, perhaps the greatest value would come in discussing whether there are any lessons to draw from the conflict in question; different courses could focus on different potential lessons. A conflict- or security-focused course might focus on the wisdom of certain tactics or the utility of military force more broadly. Other political science courses might use a staff ride to discuss, for example, the likelihood of future civil or interstate conflict in any given setting, the logistical burdens of waging war, and effective leadership and political communication. In summary, a staff ride provides students with historical knowledge and an opportunity to sharpen their critical thinking—as well as the opportunity to gain “general knowledge” and to sharpen “analytic skills” (Wahlke 1991, 50).

Second, students may derive from a staff ride an enhanced ability to empathize with military and civilian decision makers. However, this does not mean that such an exercise is about developing a positive view of decision makers or their decisions. Rather, a staff ride can help students to better understand the constraints under which decisions are made and the contingency thereof, thereby making Clausewitz’s (1976 [1832], 101) “realm of uncertainty” more concrete. If we want political science students to acquire “knowledge about the behavior of citizens, politicians, states persons, and bureaucrats that affects governmental actions and their consequences,” the battlefield is a good place to observe the confluence of these behaviors (Wahlke 1991, 50).

Third, staff rides can highlight the normative stakes in politics. Individuals have fought and died for many different types of political projects, and a staff ride can demonstrate exactly what motivates such extreme political action and also prompt students to consider which political projects are worth fighting for. Barno and Bensahel (2019a), for example, noted of a staff ride that they organized related to the French resistance of World War II that, “It challenges all of us to think harder about just what we stand for, and to be ready to challenge the comfortable truths of our time—and to be always ready to ask the central moral question: ‘Isn’t this just *wrong*?’”⁶ If promoting consideration of the “[e]thical

for staff rides to produce better battlefield decision making, for example, but the shared experience nonetheless may be valuable for unit cohesion (A. King 2019; Lloyd 2009). A similar argument could apply in civilian contexts, especially in today’s digitally connected world in which face-to-face social interaction is increasingly valuable. The relatively intense, sustained interactions associated with the preparation, trip, and after-action activities of a staff ride can enhance the quality of social ties among students in ways that typical class sessions may not.

In summary, a staff ride can promote student learning outcomes associated with a political science program. The subject matter of most staff rides may lend itself most readily to courses in international relations and security studies, but these student learning outcomes are relevant across subfields. Instructors could approach the same basic staff ride in different ways to tailor the content to their course goals.

RUNNING A STAFF RIDE

How do staff rides work in practice? This section is based largely on one author’s experiences during graduate school at Duke University. Duke’s Program in American Grand Strategy (AGS) is a co-curricular program that offers relevant courses, hosts lectures by policy practitioners, and sponsors field trips to nearby military bases, as well as experiential learning opportunities such as staff rides. AGS typically hosts two staff rides annually: (1) a domestic staff ride to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, to study the Battle of Gettysburg; and (2) an international staff ride that changes location every year (i.e., Gibraltar and Morocco to study Operation Torch during World War II; Vietnam to study the Tet Offensive; and Belgium and France to study the end of World War I). Both domestic and international staff rides are open to current students, faculty, alumni, and supporters of the Program in AGS. Because the Gettysburg staff ride is an all-expense-paid, two-day weekend trip, it is a great way for students to be introduced to staff rides with a relatively lower time commitment. In contrast, international staff rides typically are a week-long trip during either winter or spring break, and they require months of research-based preparation. International staff rides are funded by a combination of participant contributions (financial aid is available to those who may need it) and private donations to the program.

Whereas there are various ways to conduct a staff ride, AGS staff rides focus on the experiential learning aspect by assigning character roles to each participant. The roles range from the higher-level strategic political leaders and tactical military leaders during the battle to a common foot soldier and a civilian student protester at the time. Roles from multiple sides of the

battle are included: for the Battle of Gettysburg, both the Union and Confederate forces were equally represented; for the Tet Offensive, 38 different roles from the American, North Vietnamese, and South Vietnamese sides were assigned. These roles are assigned to the staff ride participants months in advance of the trip to provide enough time to conduct research. During the staff ride, each participant gives a 10-minute presentation in first-person narrative before taking questions, all while in character. At times, there is a debate or a roundtable type of presentation scheduled among strategic political leaders to engage in a more dialogic discussion. Requiring the participants to assume their character role, regardless of whether they agree with their character's philosophy or actions, encourages them to understand their character's background and ideology, which helps them to accurately portray and defend their character's actions. Representing a character that a student does not align ideologically with or support is an exceptional learning experience provided by staff rides. More generally, assuming a role for a staff ride exposes "the human element of war" (Rienzi 2013) and promotes empathetic understanding of key decisions and leaders. The four political science learning objectives remain constant for both domestic and international staff rides. However, students who participate in international staff rides benefit from a study abroad experience by enhancing their worldview, global perspective, and intercultural competency (Carlson and Widaman 1988; Clarke et al. 2009; McCabe 1994), even in a short program (Smith and Mitry 2008).

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The planning and recruitment of both domestic and international staff rides are similar in that both trips are led by pairs of student leaders who create a list of roles and places to visit that are historically relevant, as well as the order and location of presentations. These student leaders are selected during the previous academic year to begin planning for the upcoming year's staff ride. This allows the program staff to embark on a scouting trip during the summer to rehearse the proposed itinerary for logistical accuracy and to establish local points of contact. Having student leaders primarily design the staff ride promotes their organizational and leadership skills.

The next two subsections describe additional details about the Gettysburg and Tet Offensive staff rides, including the student leaders' assessment of the trips. Although the Duke Program in AGS internally collected student feedback post-staff ride to improve future programming, we cannot use and publish the evaluations because participants were not asked for their consent to disseminate the results for publishing purposes; moreover, Institutional Review Board approval was not obtained beforehand. In the future, we recommend taking all of the necessary steps before collecting student evaluations so that educators and researchers can share the feedback more systematically to enhance our understanding of staff rides vis-à-vis other pedagogical practices.

Domestic Staff Ride: 1863 Battle of Gettysburg in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

During this two-day staff ride in Gettysburg National Military Park, 25 participants walked through 11 sites, starting with the Reynolds Statue, passing through the Peach Orchard and Devil's Den (among other battle sites), and ending at the Gettysburg National Cemetery. At each site, from two to five presentations focusing on political policy, military strategy, military operations, or tactics were scheduled. For example, on the first day, we heard from Presidents Jefferson Davis and Abraham Lincoln about their respective political policies. We also heard Generals Robert E. Lee and George Meade describe their respective military strategies during the Battle of Gettysburg that set the stage for the campaign. Experiencing the terrain and hearing the detailed accounts of the characters' involvement at the tactical and operational levels allowed participants to understand why and how the campaign transpired as it did. The group that traveled in March 2017 was joined by a military historian, Colonel Paul Jussel, from the Army War College. He provided additional details that highlighted why physically returning to the battlefield sites to study a campaign is so powerful in understanding the battle. As one student leader described: "[He brought] an otherwise unremarkable landscape to life. Suddenly we were learning that one small crest in a field hid the entire Union cavalry, that battlefield commanders were able to gin up defensive positions out of hills so shallow they escaped

notice, and that gunpowder made the air so thick that soldiers could hardly see 10 feet. Students grappled with questions we take for granted in the era of the instant message, such as coordinating battlefield movement across a line that stretches over a mile and is obscured by a literal "fog of war" (Duke University 2017, 14).

International Staff Ride: 1968 Tet Offensive in Vietnam

This eight-day staff ride with 38 participants began in Ho Chi Minh City before transiting to Hue, ultimately ending in Hanoi. Planning a longer staff ride allowed the group to visit not only the historically relevant sites (i.e., Cu Chi Tunnels, the Khe Sanh combat base on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and the Hanoi Hilton prison, as well as the War Remnants Museum, which showcased graphic images of the Agent Orange aftermath) but also the current US Consulate in Ho Chi Minh City. US diplomats discussed with the group current US-Vietnamese bilateral relations, connecting the past and present.

Being in a place for a longer period also increases the probability of experiencing powerful moments that were not scheduled in the itinerary. On a trip to My Lai (i.e., a village that endured a horrific massacre of civilians by US troops during the Vietnam War), the group encountered a survivor of the massacre

who has remained in the village and who graciously engaged in a conversation. Her story, coupled with stories from a few Vietnam War veterans affiliated with AGS that joined the trip, “helped facilitate complex intellectual and emotional understanding [or war] that no classroom history lecture could replicate” (Duke University 2017, 12). Studying a campaign in first-person narrative while physically experiencing the terrain “reminded [us] of war’s

dismissed simply because a staff ride already has been planned (Franke 2006; Horn, Rubin, and Schouenborg 2016; Rittinger 2020).

Similar to any other mode of instruction, a staff ride has limitations. Nevertheless, for the reasons outlined here, we believe that the staff ride is worthy of broader use in political science instruction. The staff ride provides a rewarding and adaptable

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ALTERNATIVES AND CONCLUSIONS

The staff ride is a valuable method of active learning in political science, but the resources and ability necessary to conduct one may not be available to all instructors.⁷ This section discusses alternative modes of active learning that require a shorter time commitment and less resource investment for instructors who want to offer their students similar opportunities.

First, the traditional staff ride can be adapted to other spaces (Musteen 2019). Rather than a battlefield, the framework of a staff ride may be adapted to other relevant sites, such as seats of government and memorials.⁸ To avoid turning a modified staff ride into a tour, however, this should include pre- and post-trip activities to further the development of desired knowledge and skills. If an off-campus activity is not possible, however, a virtual staff ride could be conducted (C. S. King 2019). Whether using virtual-reality technology or displaying images in an online or in-person classroom, instructors can retain the basic structure of a staff ride without moving off campus. The key changes for a virtual staff ride are in adjustments to the presentation of battlefield terrain. Whereas it cannot fully replicate the immersive experience of physically exploring the actual battlefield site, a well-prepared virtual staff ride can promote similar learning outcomes.

Second, if a staff ride of any type is not possible, alternative modes of active learning can promote similar student learning outcomes. In particular, activities that involve assuming the role of politicians, diplomats, and other officials could be used to enhance student knowledge and sharpen, for example, oral presentation skills. The activity would encourage students to research a situation that actually occurred and to engage with classmates as if they were an actual decision maker living through that situation (DiCicco 2014; Raymond and Sorensen 2008; Wahlke 1991, 55). Active learning exercises that are less grounded in history or involve less student research can serve complementary instructional purposes and should not be

mode of active learning for both undergraduate and graduate students. We think that this study will inspire further research on the comparative merits of different active learning activities in political science education.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

NOTES

1. Knight and Robertson (2020, 5) distinguish a staff ride from a “battlefield tour” as “a visit to the site of an actual campaign, albeit with little or no preliminary systematic study before the visit.”
2. To the best of our knowledge, no political scientists have published peer-reviewed studies that examine the staff ride as a pedagogical practice. Some analyses have been published in non-peer-reviewed outlets; however, most of the existing literature on staff rides focuses on their utility in PME.
3. The spread of staff rides to civilian political science programs appears to be relatively recent. There may have been previous use of the staff ride in these programs, but we could not find any records thereof.
4. See Sagan’s course description at <https://undergrad.stanford.edu/programs/sophomore-college/coursefinder/sophomore-college/face-battle>. The Morgenthau Fellowship, which is designed for doctoral candidates and early-career scholars in history and international relations, includes a staff ride, described as a “week-long study trip to an international battlefield, learning how history, geography, tactics, and strategy intersect” (<https://ndisc.nd.edu/graduate-program/hans-j-morganthau-fellowship>). Other uses of staff rides in political science include those run by the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies Philip Merrill Center for Strategic Studies (see Barno and Bensahel 2019a, 2019b). As noted on the Merrill Center’s website, “Staff rides are excellent opportunities for students not only to learn about a campaign or conflict in-depth but also to build leadership, decision-making, and public-speaking skills” (www.merrillcenter.sais-jhu.edu/staff-rides).
5. The “Wahlke Report” was based on a study commissioned by the American Political Science Association and prepared by a committee that Wahlke chaired.
6. Italics in original. A valuable point of discussion on any given staff ride is to question whether individual soldiers viewed themselves as fighting for the broader political projects at stake or to what extent the state itself or more idiosyncratic reasons pushed individuals into war.
7. See Taylor (2016) and Jenks (2022) for suggestions on crafting accessible learning experiences.
8. See Barno and Bensahel’s (2019b) description of a staff ride that explored political decision making and domestic contestation over the Vietnam War through visits to relevant sites in Washington, DC.

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