Johns Hopkins SAIS is the lead partner with the Secretary of Defense Strategic Thinkers Program (STP) of the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD). This highly competitive, one-year program selects a small group of talented, field-grade military officers and Department of Defense (DoD) civilians to participate in a unique curriculum leading to a Master’s degree in International Public Policy (MIPP). Students immerse themselves in the conceptual dynamics and trends of war and strategy and analyze their role in the development of effective decision-making and execution of strategy and military operations. Once coursework is completed, graduates use their strategic thinking skills in demanding principal staff assignments at OSD, on the Joint Staff, on a Combatant Commander’s staff, or in other senior-level headquarters. Others go to command positions. STP prepares graduates to identify innovative approaches to manage unanticipated security challenges in the context of national policy objectives, ensuring that our nation’s top civilian and military leaders have the support of world-class strategic thinkers.

“I’m reminded that we democracies have no ordained right to survival. History teaches us that the bravest troops and even skillful admirals and generals are not enough for victory: Sound strategy is essential to reducing the tragedy of war’s occurrence and ensuring the democracies prevail when unavoidable trouble looms. We expect much from you, giving everything that’s required to ensure that our world remains safe for democracy. I wish each of you challenges and adventures as you continue to master your essential trade, for now, more than ever, our Republic requires your finest performance.”

— General Jim Mattis, U.S. Marines, 26th Secretary of Defense (RET)

“[The Strategic Thinkers Program was a transformative experience. I had seen the taught various intense academic and DoD training programs by the time I entered STP, but none provided a framework to think about strategy or how to think strategically like STP. I emerged from the program a better officer with a better appreciation for the depth, public, and center of war and strategy. STP also gave me a better strategy, for now, more than ever, our Republic requires your finest performance.”

— William Strohecker, USAF

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— Janine Garner, USMC

APPLICATION PROCESS

The application process is internal to DoD. The Services and Defense Components will be taking nominations for the 2025–26 cohort in November 2024 and will provide candidate recommendations to OSD in December 2024. OSD will make selections by February 2025. Note: All military officers nominated for the program must be in the O-4 or O-5 paygrade, having completed at least 10 years on active duty before the start of the STP academic year, received a favorable evaluation in at least one key operational assignment, and finished Joint Professional Military Education Phase 1, attaining an overall ranking in the top 20 percent—preferably the top five percent—of their class. All civilian leaders nominated for the program must be in the GS-13 or GS-14 pay band, have a demonstrated record of success in a graduate-level program, and possess at least one year of supervisory or managerial experience acquired within the last five years.
"Teaching in the Strategic Thinkers Program is an enormously invigorating experience. Bright and committed students make us feel like we are recruiting the best young professionals. Those in STP use their combined but diverse professional experiences to get good answers as they debate and pursue the issues. Their work rate is phenomenal. Professor Marston sets high standards and so elicits a response which means that they get through their team efforts as well as from him."

—Margaret MacMillan

"STP focuses on the strategic and policy levels of war. The STP course brings everything together through a study of war, strategy, and military history in depth and breadth, and so elicits a response which means that they get through their team efforts as well as from him."

—Robert Green

"Solving differently now by using these learned lessons, reading, writing, and debate students can extract reciprocity of war and strategy. Through extensive historical case studies in width, depth, and context. We talk a lot about "lessons identified" and present a nuanced solution. In the Profession of Arms, we are encouraged to engage with current and past leaders of the highest caliber, at all branches to help shape my knowledge and design creative solutions for the most complex of problems. This program additionally placed me on a successful path, not only with the practical method of operating a large amount of information, but in the consideration of all aspects of interconnected issues facing our nation."

—Holman Agard, USN

"The Strategic Thinkers Program has greatly impacted my career and perspective as a leader since graduation. My academic experience was immersed in the latest in strategic war literature and scholars, expanding my perspective across the joint force to consider international and domestic issues and their impact to factories to foxholes. This program provides an ideal venue for experienced, mid-career officers to engage with current and past leaders of the highest caliber at all branches to help shape my knowledge and design creative solutions for the most complex of problems. This program additionally placed me on a successful path, not only with the practical method of operating a large amount of information, but in the consideration of all aspects of interconnected issues facing our nation."

—Dan Murphy, USMC

"I’m grateful that St. John’s graduate with a strong professional and military background had the opportunity to attend the Strategic Thinkers Program. The students are offered a creative and challenging environment to explore military history. The program provided students with a unique perspective that only a study of war via depth, breath, and context can offer. If you are serious about your military profession, STP will prepare you for the duties in the highest levels of the department."

—Dr. Marston, USA