

Reflections on my Journey through Master's

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The focus of the academic field of Terrorism and Counterterrorism (TCT) is to develop knowledge and skills that enable successful mitigation of terrorism. In choosing this program, I sought to enter an academic program that would complement my field of professional endeavor, namely, private security. I have been involved in the private security business since 1990 and I have owned and operated my own private security company, Valiant Private Security (VPS) since 2010. Over the course of that time, VPS has taken on clientele that could potentially be targets for terrorism; political rallies, high-value company events, hostile terminations, and protection of critical infrastructure represent such assignments.

The TCT Master of Science (MS) program at the Henley-Putnam School of Strategic Security (HPSSS) at National American University (NAU) is multifaceted. The program includes many aspects that are applicable to my profession and that apply to my company's past, current and anticipated future clientele. As I made my way through the program, I reflected on my work for such clientele and how aspects the program presented might have informed my past, present, and future work. The HPSSS portion of the NAU website describes the program, noting aspects such as:

Understanding (of) terrorism...developing effective responses...(familiarization with) concepts of terrorism and counterterrorism strategies and techniques...(and) defense to deter and prevent acts of violence...counterterrorism research, threat management, and terrorist techniques...analytical rigor, contingency planning, and proactive security measures...understanding (of) state-sponsored, political, social, economic, religious, and criminal extremism as well as terrorism history and counterterrorism policy throughout

counterterrorism studies courses...critical thinking, judgement, and cultural sensitivity...(Henley-Putnam School of Strategic Security, 2026).

The program description approximates the MS TCT Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs), which are designed to measure program-related competencies. For instance, mastery of PLO M1 demands competence in critical thinking and problem solving, directly related to analytical rigor, contingency planning, and proactive security measures. Mastery of PLO M2 requires professional competence, a theme characterized by the entire HPSSS MS TCT program description. With the program's emphasis on papers and discussion boards, PLO M2's requirement to critique and debate relevant information and PLO M3's requirement to demonstrate clear and effective communication are ubiquitous in the MS curriculum. Collaborative projects and discussions address PLO M4's requirement to collaboratively formulate solutions. Critical thinking, judgment, and cultural sensitivity inform professional competence related to PLO M5's emphasis on personal and social responsibility.

I have mastered the five MS TCT PLOs because I consistently demonstrate information literacy, ethical and analytical decision-making, effective research and writing, applied security practice, and professional communication across major assignments and professional activities. The aim of this reflection is to set out evidence that demonstrates mastery of each PLO.

Program Learning Outcome 1: Critical Thinking and Problem Solving

TCT – PLO M1: Use critical thinking & problem-solving skills to evaluate options for preventive, deterrent and response actions related to the counterterrorism profession (National American University, 2026).

Evidence of mastery of this PLO can be found in my paper *Threat assessment of CJNG – Revised* (2026), which focuses on the Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generacion (CJNG), one of Mexico's most powerful and brutal transnational criminal organizations (TCOs), also a foreign terrorist organization (FTO). Key learning came in the process of selecting CJNG as the paper's focus. Before embarking on my MS program, I had considered TCOs as solely criminal entities. As I continued through the program, learning how CJNG and other such cartels have crossed into the realm of terrorism, specifically narco-terrorism (U.S, Department of State, 2025; Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2026), changed how I view TCOs, replacing an incomplete set of assumptions with more updated information.

In developing the CJNG threat assessment, I began by defining the problem's scope and selecting relevant sources on CJNG's structure, capabilities, and recent activities. I drafted initial sections that framed CJNG as a strategic threat and outlined multiple preventive, deterrent, and response options. From there, I refined the assessment, exploring operational feasibility, risk, and impact. This process required me to provide specific recommendations, demonstrating ability to apply structured critical thinking and threat-assessment methodology to a real-world, high-consequence actor, and this is what I would point to as demonstration of mastery of PLO M1.

Program Learning Outcome 2: Professional Competence

TCT – PLO M2: Critique information from a variety of sources to debate its relevance to address issues of counterterrorism (National American University, 2026).

Mastery of this PLO requires the student to effectively filter information for relevance and credibility, or evidentiary strength. My paper *Terrorism via our Southern Border – Revised* (2026) provides evidence of mastery of PLO M2. This paper draws on a variety of information

sources (government reports, media accounts, and academic analyses) and critiques them to address terrorism-related issues at our southern border. It addresses the relevance and limitations of different types of evidence and policy narratives, aligning well with PLO M2's requirement to "critique information from a variety of sources to debate its relevance to address issues of counterterrorism (National American University, 2026)."

By this time in my academic journey, I had developed the technique of gathering many reference sources and then paring them down to include only those in which I found relevant, credible information; although I cannot point to an exact "a-ha moment" at which point I learned this technique, it strikes me as the academic equivalent of such a moment, as it marked a turning point in my thinking and writing as relates to research. Put plainly, it reduced reliance on intuitive thinking and forced greater reliance on credible peer-reviewed research.

Thus, for *Terrorism via our Southern Border*, I started by assembling a diverse set of sources, including government reports, think-tank analyses, media accounts, and academic work. I drafted the first version aiming to contrast how each type of source framed the threat. I shifted from simply reporting those views to critiquing their evidentiary strength. This process shows my ability to interrogate information rather than accept it at face value, and to use that critique to build a more evidence-based assessment of terrorism risk at our southern border.

Program Learning Outcome 3: Communication

PLO M3: Communicate clearly and effectively in a variety of mediums to a variety of stakeholders both within and external to the counterterrorism profession (National American University, 2026).

Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk Security Program – Revised (2026) demonstrates mastery of PLO M3 because I used it to communicate recommendations, reference threat assessments, and translate analysis into actionable guidance in a practical, professional medium aimed at counterterrorism/security stakeholders (property management, security personnel, and local authorities). I wrote the paper as applied professional guidance, not just academic analysis, forcing me to tailor it to practitioners, management, and possibly local regulators, demonstrating clear written communication for stakeholders, as PLO M3 demands.

I intended this paper to read almost as a consultation. In writing it, I sought to project myself into a hypothetical role of a security consultant aiming to provide information for an important client, as if the Boardwalk had hired my firm to consult for them. I drafted the threat and vulnerability sections, then restructured them into clearly labeled subsections with concise recommendations and justifications that the Boardwalk could implement. During revision, I focused on tightening the connection between the risk analysis, applicable standards, and the step-by-step measures proposed, ensuring that each recommendation was defensible and practical. This artifact demonstrates my ability to communicate complex security analysis in a clear, professional format that is usable by decision-makers outside the classroom, precisely the sort of writing that I intend to use in my professional career.

Writing the Boardwalk paper reminded me just how much local laws (in this case, those mandating public access to the beach, for example) can impact security policies, even on private property. In this case, while those laws don't entirely thwart security objectives, they come close to doing so. If there were any moment or time that I would call an "a-ha moment", my

realization of how such good intentions can have negative ramifications in important matters would likely be that moment for me.

Program Learning Outcome 4: Collaboration

PLO M4: Work collaboratively in diverse groups to formulate solutions to prevent and forestall emerging threats within the counterterrorism profession (National American University, 2026).

My mastery of this PLO is evinced in the co-authored paper *Group Project on Terrorist Motivations – Revised* (2026), which synthesizes multiple perspectives (Richardson, Hoffman, Post, Kruglanski, etc.) into a unified framework, demonstrating teamwork in research, division of labor, and integration of four authors' writing. Drafts document the sections and analysis I contributed, providing evidence of collaborative planning and refinement of collaborative work, through which I contributed content and structural refinement.

I drafted sections linking various authors' framework to behavioral and threat-assessment concepts, including how intent, capability, and symbolic targeting inform threat analysis. I shared the drafts with the team and participated in restructuring discussions that merged my material with teammates' work. Together, we refined the outline, redistributed paragraphs for better flow, and refined the assignment until it read as a unified voice. This process demonstrates mastery of this PLO by illustrating my ability to contribute content, respond constructively to peer feedback, and help integrate different perspectives into a coherent group product.

This assignment was informative in the sense of enriching my understanding of group dynamics, working with differing participation levels, and observing the importance attributed to

various information, some of which was ultimately omitted, and some of which was negotiated into the final product. In this assignment, I saw how each member of the group is subject to sacrificing some of what he or she wants in order to achieve the overall group goal, and I was also reminded vividly of how group dynamics, in this case, participation levels, can influence a project. In retrospect, I consider this a key aspect of mastery of the PLO, and it serves as this PLO's "a-ha" moment for me.

Program Learning Outcome 5: Personal and Social Responsibility

PLO M5: Apply ethical and civic-minded approaches to policy and reform within the counterterrorism profession (National American University, 2026).

My paper *Final Draft Combat Strategy – Revised* (2026) indicates mastery of PLO M5. The paper engages with policy, operational decisions, likely rules of engagement and ethical constraints in a counterterrorism context. It considers the implications of different strategic options for civilians and state actors, and legitimacy, directly applying ethical and civic-minded approaches as PLO M5 demands. The *Combat Strategy* paper shows engagement with decision-making and broad consequences, where ethical and civic-minded considerations often surface.

I began by outlining operational options and then integrated ethical and civic-minded considerations, such as civilian risk, legitimacy, and long-term strategic consequences. Early drafts focused heavily on tactical effectiveness; through revision, I added emphasis on areas such as deterrence, which can thwart a terrorist attack without the use of any violence at all, thus combating terrorism in perhaps the most ethical way possible by sparing as much life as possible. The paper also touches on rules of engagement and proportionality. The recommendations in the

final draft were thus balanced to include non-violent pre-operational methods as the preferred strategy to comply with legal and moral constraints.

This paper shows my growth in applying ethical and civic-minded reasoning to policy and operational design, rather than treating ethics as an afterthought or relying solely on post-terrorist attack tactics that are likely to include violence, which can sometimes impact non-combatants. This represents an “a-ha moment” for me in terms of an important learning curve that demonstrates mastery of PLO M5, as it incorporates anti- and counterterrorism methods that lend themselves to elevated ethical and moral outcomes, methods that seek to avoid use of force per se, much less use of excessive force.

Conclusion

My Journey through Master’s has been challenging, enlightening and informative. Reflecting on how the aspects of the various PLOs have emerged in my assignments has given me a different perspective on learning and on counterterrorism. Critical thinking, problem solving, competence, communication, collaboration, and personal and social responsibility have all played roles in my learning at various times. I am gratified to have used this experience to achieve mastery in this endeavor, and I intend to carry with me throughout my career the lessons learned along the way.

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