

Military Leadership: What Is It? Can It Be Taught?

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Upon being ordered to West Point as superintendent in 1945, I duly reported for instructions to the Army chief of staff, Dwight D. Eisenhower. To my surprise he limited his comments to two points, the importance which he attached to the honor system and his strong feeling that the academy should include in its curriculum a formal course designed to teach cadets the principles of military leadership. In his view, this had never been adequately undertaken in the past despite the fact that the preparation for military leadership was a prime objective of West Point education.

Armed with this mandate from General Eisenhower, upon taking over my duties I promptly initiated an elementary course in the psychology of leadership as a first step and thereafter watched the development of the course with keen personal interest. As events turned out, it marked for me the beginning of a quest for the ultimate sources of leadership and a satisfactory answer to the questions posed by this article—What is leadership? Can it be taught?

Having agreed to summarize my tentative conclusions on these points, I must begin by stating my understanding of what is meant by military leadership. I take it to mean the gift enjoyed by a limited number of commanders who have been able to derive a maximum measure of military effectiveness from themselves, their associates, and all other resources placed at their disposition. If this is indeed leadership, how is it produced? What are the talents and attributes of the men who possess it?

Assisted by historical studies of individual cases and by personal contacts with proven leaders, a student of this subject can assemble a list of attributes apparently shared by many eminent leaders and in due course arrange them according to some system of classification. My own efforts have led to an arrangement in four categories under the headings of professional competence, intellectual capacity, strength of character, and inspirational qualities.

In the case of the first category it is fairly easy to agree upon the attributes which one ordinarily associates with professional competence. One expects a military leader to demonstrate in his daily performance a thorough knowledge of his own job and further an ability to train his subordinates in their duties and thereafter to supervise and evaluate their work. His competence may be further confirmed by evidence of good judgment in choosing key assistants in command and staff functions—proof that he knows a good man when he sees one.

Also he may be expected to give importance to maintaining physical fitness. Because of the strenuous demands of military life, a competent officer should regard his career as an arduous endurance race for which he must remain constantly in training. To do so, in early life he should acquire habits of moderation in eating, drinking, working, and playing—activities any one of which if carried to excess may impair his effectiveness as a leader. Napoléon might have won at Waterloo had he been physically fit to ride a horse on the day of the battle. Alexander might have found new worlds to conquer had he been less successful in finding wine and dissolute companionship in early life.

But an ideal leader must have qualities beyond those of a competent professional. If he is to rise above subaltern grades, he must acquire a disciplined and orderly mind—one as accustomed to thinking hard as his body is inured to working hard. His intellectual interests should be as broad as the scope of the national interests for which his profession undertakes to provide security. In 1962, President Kennedy made this point in an address to the West Point graduating class in which he stressed that its members must prepare themselves for dealing with problems outside the military field—diplomatic, political, and economic matters to include a knowledge of the foreign policies of other nations. In his view the ideal leader was more than a military specialist—he was a man of wide horizons capable of perceiving the military role in a setting of integrated national power derived from many sources.

If asked to identify certain intellectual gifts particularly appropriate to the tasks of such a leader, I would underscore the importance of clarity and facility in oral and written expression. A career officer is constantly engaged in attending school, teaching school, training men and units, explaining military issues to superiors and setting forth to them the relative merits of alternative decisions and courses of action. In all such tasks he must be able to speak and write lucidly and persuasively, carefully avoiding any professional jargon which may becloud his thoughts and obscure his meaning. As chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, I found that I spent an inordinate amount of time acting as a high school English teacher, simplifying and purifying the language of important staff papers to make them readily comprehensible to civilian leaders. While military communicators need not aspire to a high literary quality in their style, they must be clear and concise if

they are to avoid misunderstandings which may prove fatal to the outcome of matters of great moment.

Similarly, as a speechmaker, a commander need not rise to Churchillian heights of eloquence, but he must be able to speak easily and effectively to his men, explaining to them the why of their tasks and spurring them to action at critical moments. Napoléon was famous for his ability to rouse his men, a skill never better demonstrated than in his proclamation in 1796 to the ragged Army of Italy awaiting to invade Lombardy. Although regarded by some historians as a regrettable invitation to plunder the “rich provinces and opulent towns” of the enemy, it gave the French soldiers an *élan* which carried them to six victories in a fortnight and launched their commander on his career of conquest.

The task of identifying subordinate qualities becomes much greater in the case of our third category, which embraces the traits of character encountered in successful leaders. Historically, those traits have generally included virtues such as reliability, courage, dedication to mission, determination, and self-discipline. Napoléon stated it more briefly: “The chief virtues of a soldier are constancy and discipline,” but he was thinking of soldiers in the ranks, not those in high command. The latter must above all have the ability to exercise command in such a way as to gain and retain the respect and confidence of their men—not merely by virtue of their professional competence and intellectual gifts but also from evidence of strength of character. Men going into danger want a leader they can count upon, one who though demanding much of them will bring them back alive and victorious. They will readily accept a stern commander if it is apparent that he views his rank as an obligation to them, not as a personal privilege and honor. Once such bonds of mutual respect and confidence unite a leader and his men, they become a mighty force capable of the deeds of such famous fighting units as Caesar’s Tenth Legion, Napoléon’s Old Guard, and Jackson’s Stonewall Brigade.

Such thoughts led me to a consideration of the final category—the inspirational qualities of a leader who can incite his men to unusual acts of valor. Many of the qualities previously discussed—competence, physical fitness, intellectual power, strength of character—contribute to the image of an inspiring leader but they are not sufficient in themselves. There are many able officers who are competent, intelligent, and reliable, yet remain dull, unimaginative, and uninspiring—incapable of stirring a pulse, raising a cheer, or moving a soldier toward the enemy. Something else must be added to produce a “critical mass”—some spark which will release enthusiasm and even fervor in quite ordinary men and thereby obtain from them extraordinary results.

What constitutes this spark? Is it innate as it appears in some cases or may it be acquired by effort on the part of some while remaining unattainable by others? Is it definable or merely perceptible? A distinguished justice of the Supreme Court, the author of a widely discussed opinion on obscenity, was asked by a friend to define it. “I can’t define it,” he replied, “but I sure know it when I see it.” Perhaps this aspect of leadership is of the same order.

Regardless of the elusiveness of the quality, one can readily identify its presence in an officer who has it. In the first place he is likely to give the external impression of a leader—he looks, acts, and obviously feels a leader. Gen Phil Sheridan on his stone horse in Sheridan Circle conveys that impression even today as he seems to bow to admirers aligning the square. General Patton has always looked the beau sabreur in his shining boots, pearlhandled revolvers, and glittering helmet—trappings worn deliberately to call attention to a leader in the same way and for the same purpose that Henry of Navarre wore his white plume “into the ranks of war” at the battle of Ivry.

A sure indicator of the charisma of a leader is the effect of his presence on his troops. General Lee needed only to ride by a column on Traveler to arouse both the cheers of his men and their concern for his safety. Gros’s painting of the young Bonaparte carrying the tricolor across the fireswept bridge at Arcola exemplifies the intrepid leader exposing himself to animate troops. Wellington, who could hardly be accused of Bonapartist bias, said that Napoléon’s presence on the field was worth 40,000 troops to the French. The Iron Duke, himself a stern, no-nonsense commander who described his recruits from England as “the scum of the earth,” succeeded by some mysterious gift in converting this scum into the veterans who manned the squares at Waterloo, turned back the Old Guard, and toppled the emperor. The unique spark which glowed in the personality of such leaders, even if undefinable, was no less real in presence and effect.

Before closing this survey of leadership, we might seek further clues to its nature in the qualities of a few well-known American leaders of World War II. Let us take, for example, the cases of General Marshall, the wartime Army chief of staff; General MacArthur, the commander of a theater of operations in the Pacific; General Bradley, an Army group commander in Europe; and General Patton, our most famous armor commander. I have chosen them because of their acknowledged eminence, their differing levels of responsibility, and their surprising contrasts in personality, habits, and methods.

As to professional competence, they were all thoroughly equipped for their wartime assignments but as the result of differing circumstances. By virtue of his unusually rapid promotion in and after World War I, MacArthur spent little time in the junior grades and had unusual opportunities to prepare for his subsequent wartime role by peacetime service as Army chief of staff and later as field marshal of the Philippine Army. Whereas he never had to learn the soldier’s trade at each level in a laborious ascent to high command, the other three waited long years before reaching general rank, a delay which allowed ample time to ground themselves in the tactics and techniques of their arms of the service. Marshall, by his many years between wars spent at Fort Benning, had the added opportunity of becoming acquainted with many of the ablest officers of the infantry, a valuable asset, when, as chief of staff, he became responsible for choosing and assigning the senior generals of an expanding Army.

In the intellectual field, MacArthur was always notable for the breadth of his interests and the brilliance with which he

gave expression to his thoughts. Marshall was often referred to as a man with “a steel-trap mind”—he impressed not by brilliance but by the logic and clarity of his thinking. Bradley had the manner of a schoolmaster—in fact, he had taught school prior to entering West Point and later, as a major, instructed cadets in mathematics at the academy.

Patton, deliberately I suspect, fostered the impression of a flamboyant, hard-riding cavalryman, the antithesis of a scholar. On the latter point, the West Point faculty, by their low academic rating of Cadet Patton upon graduation, appeared to agree. But, Patton was deeply read in military history and was in fact a profound student of the profession of arms and the art of war. In Africa and Europe, he never missed the opportunity to pause at a nearby battlefield of the past before moving on to do battle on a field which would later bear his name.

The task becomes more difficult when we seek to appraise the character and inspirational power of such men. I would award the palm for strong character to Marshall—he has always typified to me utter integrity and moral fearlessness. After a hard decision, he had a way of folding his arms and saying: “Well, let the chips fall where they may.” Bradley stood out by his calm judgment, his quiet, business-like manner and his evident concern for his troops. In the course of the battle for the Normandy beachhead, I was amazed to receive the unsolicited help of a combat command of the 2d Armored Division. General Bradley, the Army commander, had noted German tanks moving into my division sector and had hurried armor to reinforce our lightly armed airborne troops.

While Patton was known as a rough-tongued, arbitrary commander quick to wrath, during my service in his Third Army in the Battle of the Bulge, I could never have asked for a more considerate commander. Anything the division needed at Bastogne he provided—if he had it. It is just possible that some of this consideration stemmed from the fact that he never caught me in the division command post during his recurrent visits to the front. His antipathy for commanders who allowed themselves to become tied to their headquarters was well known—and, I might add, well justified.

There is much to learn from both Patton and Bradley if only because of the dissimilarities in their appearance, personality, and methods of command. When caught in the limelight of world attention, Patton was no shrinking violet—indeed he rarely operated out of range of a friendly photographer. Bradley was modest to a fault and quick to pass the credit to his subordinates.

On the evening of 7 March 1945 Generals Ridgway, Gavin, and I were guests at dinner of General Eisenhower at his headquarters near Reims. In the course of the evening, the general was called to the telephone in an adjacent room to receive a message from General Bradley whose advance had been halted by the barrier of the Rhine. Shortly we heard an excited whoop from Ike who rushed back beaming: “What do you know! Brad has just seized an unguarded bridge at Remagen and he’s apologizing to me because he says it isn’t a very good one!”

A sharper study in contrast was the difference in the way in which Patton and Bradley took leave of their senior com-

manders on the eve of two important operations, the invasion of Sicily on 10 July 1943 and the Normandy landing, 6 June 1944. I happened to be present at both.

A few days before the opening of the Sicilian campaign, Patton assembled his general officers in Mostaganem, Morocco, for a final discussion of plans. It was an all-day session with Patton taking little part until the very end. Then he took the floor and regaled us with a moving account of the gallant performance of green American troops in the North African operations in the spring. It was clear that he wanted to remind us generals going into our first combat that there is nothing wrong with our troops—and thereby warn us that if anything went awry it would clearly be the fault of the generals. He closed with a menacing wave of his swagger stick and an ominous farewell: “The meeting’s over. On your way and I never want to see you bastards again until you’re ashore with your outfits in Sicily.”

It was far different at First Army headquarters in Bristol, England, when General Bradley took leave of his corps and division commanders shortly before D-day. Bradley personally conducted the meeting and personally cross-examined each senior commander regarding his plans and his readiness for unexpected contingencies. When my turn came, I faced the Army commander, pointer in hand, before a map of my division sector and proceeded to recite my plans, feeling once more a cadet hoping for a passing mark from the instructor.

When the day was over, Brad, like Patton in Africa, felt the need to say something to inspire his commanders as they embarked on the greatest military operation of recorded history.

But Brad was no speaker and he sensed it at this critical moment. So he simply folded his hands behind his back, his eyes got a little moist, he gulped, and said quietly, “Good luck, men.”

Which way was the better, Patton’s or Brad’s? All I can say is that we did our best for both.

In this discussion, I have been obliged to neglect my old West Point superintendent, Douglas MacArthur, for lack of pertinent data. The fact is I never saw MacArthur from the morning of 13 June 1922 when he gave me my diploma until the fall of 1955, when I called on him in New York at the Waldorf Towers to pay him my respects as the new Army Chief of Staff. I rang his doorbell with some trepidation, as I suspected that, in his view, I was one of the Marshall-Eisenhower clique which had derogated the importance of the Pacific theatre where he had fought and won the war. But when the door opened, there was MacArthur in person, arms outstretched, to give me a warm embrace and a hearty welcome—“Max, it’s good to see you again!” Whereupon the new Chief of Staff became another fascinated victim of the famous MacArthur charm which few escaped—with the possible exception of President Truman.

After this rambling effort to explain and illustrate what seems to be the nature of successful military leadership, I am still left with a question to be answered. Can leadership in the case used here be taught or is it a talent which eludes the methods of the schoolmaster and the scholar? In large measure, I would rally to the view which General Sherman expressed on this subject: “I have read of men born as generals peculiarly endowed by nature

but have never seen one.” As he had obviously known able generals on both sides of the Civil War, one must conclude that he believed that they had learned or had somehow acquired their gifts through means other than heredity.

Among our four categories of leader attributes, there is little doubt that professional competence and a trained intellect can be developed by standard educational methods. Professional competence has long been the primary objective of the military school system maintained by the armed forces, the overall success of which has never been challenged. A sound mind in a sound body has been an accepted goal of the educative process since antiquity. Hence, there seems no reason to doubt that the leadership qualities of our first two categories are susceptible to being taught and learned.

The possibility of teaching character is somewhat more doubtful. However, religious teachers, prophets, and sages of all times have undertaken to teach moral principles by precept, example, parable, and fable. Parents have used the rod to reinforce precept in enforcing on their children a decent respect for the behavioral code of contemporary society. The fact that, by such means, many men have acquired habits of virtuous conduct which they have pursued over much of their lives at least in many cases provides ample ground to believe that the attributes associated with high moral character can be successfully taught or learned.

I must admit, however, that the acquisition of inspirational qualities through teaching techniques is far more un-

certain. To some extent, such attributes can probably be acquired through studies of historical and contemporary examples but unfortunately there is no corpus of literature or base of scientific data available to help the researcher in this relatively unexplored field. Students of war and of the military profession have conducted few if any thoughtful investigations seeking to identify the sources of the inspirational qualities of certain leaders. It may be argued that the aspiring young leader may obtain academic instruction in certain arts and techniques which appear related to this quality—such subjects as public speaking, debating and histrionics, the latter suggested by the dramatic skills demonstrated by a Patton or a MacArthur. Also studies in sociology and mass psychology may provide clues to the means available to a leader to influence the reactions of his followers.

But such approaches though useful are insufficient to plumb this secret of leader magnetism. In the end, the greatest promise for the researcher probably lies in close association with successful practitioners of this black art and an opportunity to observe their styles, methods, and tricks of the trade. He might even explore the ground for President Lincoln’s feeling that the quality of General Grant’s whiskey had something to do with his quality as a general. All leads must be pursued tenaciously if we are ever to reach a solution to this fascinating riddle—what makes the inspiring leader?