



The Creativity Conundrum

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In the Clint Eastwood classic *Heartbreak Ridge*, Eastwood's character, Gunny Highway, is charged with turning a group of misfits into Marines. In a particularly telling scene, Highway wakes his platoon at 5 a.m., an hour earlier than normal. Groggy and half-asleep, a member of the platoon rebukes, "Gunny, it's 5 a.m. You said we were going to begin at 6." To which Highway responds, "So I lied. So I can't tell time. You're Marines now. You adapt. You overcome. You improvise."¹ Or in other words, you get creative. The ability to be creative, or think creatively, has long been recognized as a core component to successful leadership at all levels of command. Especially at the strategic level, the ability to think creatively and adapt to changing circumstances is often the difference between life and death, victory and defeat. British General Field Marshal Douglas Haig in World War I and U.S. General David Petraeus in the Iraq War, each for very different reasons, are good examples of the importance of creativity and innovation to leaders at the strategic level. And despite general agreement to this fact by most senior leaders, the military on the whole is ill-equipped for producing leaders who are adaptable, flexible, and who can think creatively. Rather, its personnel makeup, focus on operations, and sheer bureaucracy all combine to create and reward leaders who are risk-averse, conformists, and good at maintaining the status quo. It is no surprise then, that at times when the military has needed creative leaders most, men like Douglas Haig got promoted and men like David Petraeus sent to Fort Leavenworth.

The Importance of Creativity - Haig & Petraeus

With over 35 million casualties, World War I was a human tragedy. Of the roughly 15 million deaths, 10 million were military losses. The British alone lost nearly 900,000 of its young men.² And while there is blame enough to go around on both sides, Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, Commander-in-

Chief of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), has gone down ignominiously as a symbol of a military leader who, saddled with his own self-determination and indoctrinated by his military training, could not find creative ways to achieve victory at a lower cost. Albert Einstein has famously defined insanity as “doing the same thing over and over again expecting different results.” But this was exactly the strategy that Haig employed. Obsessed with the idea of a “decisive offensive” in which the cavalry performs the triumphant role, Haig launched offensive after offensive without a clue that his tactics and ideas were outdated, an anachronism obliterated by the advent of the engine and the machine gun.³ The catastrophes of 1915 tell the story well. Under Haig’s leadership, the BEF’s four major offensives in 1915 all ended in defeat at the cost of nearly 300,000 casualties.⁴ Was there a better way to conduct warfare in 1915? Perhaps the answer is “no,” but Haig’s sin lies not so much in his strategies, but rather in the fact that he refused to even allow himself to think that a better strategy might exist. Perhaps his lack of creativity and innovation is best encapsulated through his own words written in 1926: “I believe that the value of the horse and the opportunity for the horse in the future are likely to be as great as ever. Aeroplanes and tanks are only accessories to the men and the horse, and I feel sure that as time goes on you will find just as much use for the horse—the well-bred horse—as you have ever done in the past.”⁵ Yet for all of Haig’s faults as a leader, he was the epitome of what the British military bureaucracy valued in their officers and the obvious choice to lead the BEF in 1914 as war loomed.

When General David Petraeus was named Commander of U.S. Forces in Iraq in 2006, the war was all but lost. In his book *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006-2008*, Thomas E. Ricks describes 2006 Iraq as a “dystopian dream, a kind of laboratory of failure and inhumanity. There was no government to speak of in the summer of 2006. There was only anarchy and dread.”⁶ Similar to Haig in World War I, the situation in Iraq owed itself in large part to leaders who clung to outdated tactics and doctrine when the reality on the ground dictated something entirely different. The U.S. military leaders at the time, General John Abizaid and General George Casey, both outstanding officers in their own right, continued to push a failed strategy to the brink of defeat.⁷ Enter David Petraeus. Very much different from the typical officer built from a military bureaucracy, Petraeus earned a Ph.D. from Princeton and quickly learned the importance of thinking things through for oneself. About the importance of his education at a civilian graduate school and how it impacted his ability to think independently Petraeus writes, “The first and most important is that a stint at graduate school takes military officers out of their intellectual comfort zones. Such experiences are critical to the development of the flexible, adaptable, creative thinkers who are so important to operations in places like Iraq and Afghanistan.”⁸ Somewhat predictably, Petraeus’ penchant for independent thought was quick to draw the ire of senior U.S. leadership, including former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. Their disagreements over the U.S. strategy in Iraq either directly or indirectly led to Petraeus’ next assignment, in which he was “sidelined” to the staff colleges at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.⁹ This split between Rumsfeld and Petraeus is a textbook example of how the military bureaucracy tends to squash those who exhibit independent, creative thought. As Deresiwicz writes, “He was way ahead of the leadership in Baghdad and Washington, and bureaucracies don’t like that sort of thing. Here he was, just another two-star, and he was saying, implicitly but loudly, that the leadership was wrong about the way it was running the war.”¹⁰ Only when Rumsfeld resigned his position was Petraeus allowed to assume command of U.S. forces in Iraq and put his creative and innovative counterinsurgency strategy to the test.¹¹ Ironically, one of the central tenets to his strategy is the idea that officers need to think flexibly, creatively, and independently.¹² His strategy, the Surge, was a success. And while the full epitaph is yet to be written on the Iraq War, if nothing else General David Petraeus allowed the U.S. to achieve a dignified exit and gave the people of Iraq a real chance at peace. However, for all of Petraeus’ strengths as a leader, he was exactly the opposite kind of officer the U.S. military bureaucracy wanted leading its forces in 2003 as the country prepared for war.

Finding Creativity - The Military Bureaucracy

Given historical precedent, breeding creativity into the force should be of utmost importance to military leaders. In reality, however, the military continues to fall short in this arena, a fact that is embodied by our notorious tendency to “fight the last war.”¹³ There are predominately three reasons for this. First, the military on the whole does not attract people whose strength lies in creativity. Second, the military’s necessary focus on operations does not offer sufficient time for activities that enhance creativity. And finally, the sheer nature of the military bureaucracy (or any bureaucracy) breeds conformity, rewarding people who are like-minded, know how to follow orders, and are good at keeping the routine going.¹⁴

The search for answers as to why the military has difficulty when it comes to breeding creativity among its leaders must necessarily begin by looking at the personality traits of those in uniform. Using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator as a guide, recent Navy studies show that roughly one out of every two Navy leaders fall under the so-called “Traditionalist” temperament.¹⁵ Traditionalists, or S-Js in Myers-Briggs slang, are people who value words like dependability, reliability, thoroughness, responsibility, duty, trustworthiness and service to society.¹⁶ In Navy parlance, they are the people who ensure the ship gets underway on-time and ensure the safety and security of nuclear power plants. Or put simply, they make organizations go. Unfortunately, Traditionalists, while not unimaginative, are predisposed towards a thought process based more on details and experience than intuition, ideas, or analysis of what could be. And in this fact lies the conundrum. The very people who make military organizations run are the same people who can hold an organization back when the circumstances call for a course-change. The situation is summed up well by F. M. Young: “It isn’t the incompetent who destroy an organization. The incompetent never get in a position to destroy it. It is those who achieved something and want to rest upon their achievements who are forever clogging things up.”¹⁷

While there are any number of possible solutions to rectify this conundrum, overcoming inherent personality biases among our leaders is especially difficult due to the insidious nature of the problem. Leaders are simply not aware they are prejudiced against certain actions or ideas. For example, a 2011 survey of Navy Flag Officers asked them to rank a set of principles on a scale of Not Important to Extremely Important.¹⁸ Items that were ranked of Higher Importance were right in the Traditionalist wheelhouse: Decision effectiveness, understanding operational picture, and control of time (among others). Of Lesser Importance were the abstract ideas not usually associated with Traditionalist strengths: Innovation, creative action, concept derivation, encouragement of risk-taking, and addressing abstract issues (among others). These results, when transposed against our military’s doctrinal documents which highlight adaptability, agility in thought, flexibility in decision making, and innovation as required leader abilities, offer a unique insight into how personality biases can influence even those in higher leadership positions.¹⁹ On the one hand, our doctrine says that creativity is important. Yet the very people who are entrusted to instill that doctrine into the force are not wired to think in that way.

The second reason one typically doesn’t find creativity among our leaders stems from the idea that when faced with the competing interests of operations and post-graduate education, the military will pick operations almost exclusively. To understand the opportunity cost associated with these choices, one must first understand the origins of creative thought. Creativity originates from the ability to concentrate on a single problem, silence the outside world and develop your own ideas.²⁰ Or as Deresiewicz postulates, creativity is “Thinking for yourself.”²¹ He elaborates on this idea by saying, “The answers to dilemmas cannot be found on Twitter or Comedy Central or even *The New York Times*. They can only be found within—without distractions, without peer pressure, in solitude.”²² Post graduate education is one forum that provides officers this opportunity. Perhaps the most profound example of

the value of post-graduate education can be seen in one of the great strategic leaders of the modern age - General Colin Powell. Incredibly, General Powell attended three different post-graduate programs throughout his distinguished military career. These experiences were instrumental in shaping his *unique* view of how military force should be applied globally.²³ For example, what is now commonly known as the Powell Doctrine likely would not have been possible without the mind-expanding experiences afforded by post-graduate education. Unfortunately, in today's environment of budget austerity and imminent reductions, officers are lucky to get one post-graduate experience during a career, let alone three.

Compounding matters, when graduate-level education is *required* for senior officers, such as Joint Professional Military Education, it only tends to reinforce values and beliefs that an officer has already grown accustomed to. Combine these facts with a predominately Traditionalist population base, and a situation is created that leaves officers susceptible to indoctrination, only able to look at a problem through a single lens. The danger of this type of indoctrination is best encapsulated by the quandary the British Army faced in World War I. As one historian remarked,

The British army was actually fighting two wars during 1914-18, a hidden war took place within the external war, and pitted the power of prewar ideas and the power of prewar army structure, against the encroaching reality of a 'modern' technological war. Senior British officers began to accept the technological reality, but could not go on to propose appropriate solutions because the power of prewar ideas, and the strength of the prewar army structure largely prevailed over the need to find a means of discussing, thinking through, and accepting basic changes in warfare.²⁴

The final reason the military is ill-suited to breeding creativity among its leaders is the military bureaucracy itself. Bureaucracies, by their very nature, reward conformity above all else.²⁵ Take the typical military career path. From commissioning, most officers have a fairly good idea what they need to do to make O-6, the general benchmark of a successful military career. Hard work. Yes. Some level of competency. Sure. But assuming the talent and drive is there, nowhere along that path does it require one to take risks, question how things are done, and certainly not question why they're done. Those traits might actually *derail* one's path to O-6. Conformity is rewarded with silver eagles. To understand the rationale behind this type of thought process, one must again turn to personality type analysis. Myers-Briggs studies have shown the military is comprised mostly of "Thinkers," those who make decisions based on logic. Given this, it does not make logical sense to put one's career on the line when the consequences of such an action can have second order effects on one's family and way of life. The military fitness report system is another powerful inhibitor of independent thought. As Colin Powell found out, to go against the boss's wishes can often put your entire military career at stake. And although Powell was "rescued from oblivion," he later reflected, "It would not be wise, however, to run that risk again."²⁶ When one's family and lifestyle are on the line, conformity can be alluring.

By the end of "Heartbreak Ridge," Gunny Highway had little trouble transforming his platoon into an elite fighting machine. Hollywood is like that. Give a person two hours and they can perform miracles. In the real world, however, issues are seldom as cut and dry. Such is the case for instilling greater creativity into the military. Like most things in life, balance becomes the operative word when attempting such a sea change. Focus only on the generation of new ideas and the organization ceases to run. Stand too long on conviction and miss fundamental shifts in warfare paradigms. The truth lies somewhere in between. I believe the answer lies in self-awareness and creating command climates that encourage creative thought. Too often we do things because "that's the way it's always been done" and that simply is not a good enough answer. Officers must keep their minds open, even to ideas that were

once unthinkable. A Navy without a carrier strike group, an Air Force without manned aircraft. The trick is being open to the possibility, knowing when that time has come, and then having the flexibility of mind to act on those convictions. As Roger von Oech states, "It's easy to come up with new ideas; the hard part is letting go of what worked for you two years ago, but will soon be out of date."²⁷

¹ IMDb, available at <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0091187/quotes>.

² *Commonwealth War Graves Commission Annual Report 2009-2010*.

³ Ronald E. Ratcliff, "The Enigma of Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig", U.S. Naval War College National Security Affairs Faculty, May 2010, 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵ Quote of Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig in 1926

⁶ Thomas E. Ricks, *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006-2008* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), 395.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ David H. Petraeus, "Beyond the Cloister", *The American Interest*, Vol. 2, No. 6 (July-August 2007), 1.

⁹ Charles M. Sennott, "General David H Petraeus: The general's knowledge", *Men's Journal*, 2008, 4.

¹⁰ William Deresiewicz, "Solitude and leadership", *The American Scholar* (Spring 2010), 3.

¹¹ Sennott, "General David H Petraeus: The general's knowledge", 4.

¹² Deresiewicz, "Solitude and Leadership", 4.

¹³ Dr. G. Terry Madonna and Dr. Michael Young, "Fighting the Last War", June 4, 2002,

<http://www.fandm.edu/politics/politically-uncorrected-column/2002-politically-uncorrected/fighting-the-last-war>.

¹⁴ Deresiewicz, "Solitude and Leadership", 1.

¹⁵ Command Leadership School Survey of Navy Leaders, Group Size=8,997.

¹⁶ Paul D. Tieger and Barbara Barron-Tieger, *The Art of SpeedReading People* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 1998), 88-89.

¹⁷ F. M. Young, "Leading Thoughts: Building a Community of Leaders", available at <http://www.leadershipnow.com/creativityquotes.html>, accessed 3 Jan 2012.

¹⁸ Dr. Olenda E. Johnson and Dr. Marcus M. Stewart, Capabilities Based Competency Assessment Flag Officer Leadership Survey, "Developing the Next Generation of Flag Officers", 5 April 2011.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower (CS21), Capstone Concept for Joint Operations (CCJO), National Military Strategy (NMS), and Joint Operating Environment (JOE).

²⁰ Deresiewicz, "Solitude and Leadership", 5.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Michael J. Waters, "Colin Powell: His Path From Soldier To Statesman", The United States Naval War College, 7.

²⁴ Ratcliff, "The Enigma of Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig", 10.

²⁵ Deresiewicz, "Solitude and Leadership", 4.

²⁶ Waters, "Colin Powell: His Path From Soldier To Statesman", 8.

²⁷ Roger von Oech, "Leading Thoughts: Building a Community of Leaders", available at <http://www.leadershipnow.com/creativityquotes.html>, accessed 3 Jan 2012.