

Developing Strategic Leaders

Major Martha G. Granger, U.S. Army

The Army has no choice but to face change. It's in a nearly constant state of flux, with new people, new missions, new technologies, new equipment, and new information.

—Field Manual 22-100, *Army Leadership*

REVOLUTIONS in military affairs (RMAs), whether spawned during peace or war, are accompanied by one constant—change. New enemies, new tactics, new uniforms, and new terminology, to name a few, will be scorned or embraced for whatever reason by whatever individual for centuries to come. During Vietnam, “killed in action” became “killed in hostile action” to make death more palatable for mothers and fathers at home.¹ Last year, the Army’s recruiting slogan “Be All You Can Be” became “An Army of One” to make the Army more palatable for the daughters and sons at home. The 1980s also seem to have introduced the less palatable term “risk-aversion”—the supposed new mentality that is plaguing American leaders, civilian and military alike. In a U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC) leadership lecture, a major asked about this new phenomenon and how the leaders of tomorrow are expected to handle it. The hesitant response, that this question wasn’t “useful,” though seeming politically correct at the time, appears quite appropriate. Upon further reflection, the real question, and one more useful though difficult to answer, is whether risk-aversion is really the problem.

Today’s military leaders operate in a complex politico-military environment, and their decisions involve quite a bit of risk. Their success is hampered by what some observers perceive as an aversion to risk instilled early in their careers. Furthermore, military leaders often do not fully or correctly appreciate the diplomatic or international ramifications of their decisions or actions. The fear of making mistakes or taking risks combined with a lack of understanding for politico-military situations often leads to doing

the wrong thing. Doing the wrong thing, even at the tactical level, can mean strategic disaster.

Doctrine alone will not enable strategic military leaders to develop the necessary decisionmaking skills to make the right decisions; however, a study of historical examples might. History provides numerous examples of leaders who failed at international politics and war because they did not appreciate a situation’s diplomatic or military subtleties or because they were not astute risk assessors. The Army’s challenge is to grow young tactical leaders into mature strategic leaders who are capable of strategic thought and action in a complex politico-military environment but who do not fear making mistakes or taking risks.

Doing the Wrong Thing

American military leaders, of all services, are brought up in the belief that vigorous action saves the day, and it is always better to do something, even the wrong thing, than to take no action at all.

—T.R. Fehrenbach

If the root of the problem is, in fact, doing the wrong thing, the modern leader will not find solace in the old school of thought that preferred action over inaction. Contemporary soldiers and a sensitive society no longer condone a wrong action over inaction that preserves a status quo. Military professionals, like all professionals, have come to recognize two categories of wrong actions: wrong actions resulting from incompetence or blind ambition, or both; and actions assessed as wrong from the viewpoint of hindsight, “hindsight being 20/20.”² With the processes of risk assessment and risk management ingrained in Army doctrine since the 1980s, the former sort of wrong action is unlikely.³ Far more likely, however, is category two, “an error or fault, a misconception or misunderstanding,” or more commonly, a “mistake.”⁴

The Army accepts that its people will make mistakes: “Any time you have human beings in a

complex organization doing difficult jobs, often under pressure, there are going to be problems. Effective leaders use those mistakes to figure out how to do things better and share what they have learned with other leaders in the organization, both peers and superiors.”⁵

However much inclined and trained to accept mistakes and learn from them, military leaders and the nation have a lot to lose when making either mistake, especially at the strategic level. T.R. Fehrenbach notes, “the one thing a democracy has in common with a dictatorship is that when there is a military failure, heads must roll.” Interestingly, Voltaire adds that lopping off heads “is not a bad policy, since it tends to encourage the remaining leaders.”⁶ The problem with such a policy, however, is that it can encourage the remaining leaders in one of three ways: to engage in self-discovery and self-improvement to prevail in a similar situation, to avoid that situation altogether in the future, or to explain why the head rolled. The last seems not only to account for why military leaders lied about body counts in Vietnam but also how a climate of intolerance for mistakes—a zero-defects mentality—emerged 20 years later.⁷

Yes-Men and Zero Defects

The pragmatic man worries about today or tomorrow, never the day past tomorrow. He rarely seeks, and he seldom creates. Pragmatists create no new ways of life . . . they believe in balance, compromise, adjustment. They distrust enthusiasms; they trust what works. They make good politicians, excellent bankers, superb diplomats. They never build empires, either of the earth or of the spirit.

—T.R. Fehrenbach

Moral courage. Encouraging dissenting opinions. Are we doing better at this today? I don't think so. If you saw the Joint Chiefs testify before Congress on readiness, it was an eye-opener. They came on a bit bolder than before, but they still lost. This is at the top—and I think the problem is worse in the ranks.

—Retired Colonel Jack Kem

Whether during peace or war, U.S. military leaders have always sought potency, and potency requires daring; however, daring often results in heads rolling. Such a climate of intolerance for mistakes undermines moral courage; “No” becomes “Can do!”⁸ Yes-men and pragmatists emerge—leaders who play it safe and say whatever appeases, regardless of the second- and third-order effects. U.S. Army Field Manual (FM) 22-100, *Army Leadership*, warns against yes-men: “Strategic leaders can't afford to be surrounded by staffs that blindly agree with everything they say. Not only do they avoid

ing themselves with ‘yes-men,’ they also reward staff members for speaking the truth.”⁹ Sir Winston Churchill maintained, “If you have an important point to make, don't try to be subtle or clever. Use a

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pile-driver. Hit the point once. Then come back and hit it a second time—a tremendous whack!”¹⁰ Colin L. Powell, in *My American Journey*, agrees but offers a caveat: “When we are debating an issue, loyalty means giving me your honest opinion, whether you think I'll like it or not. Disagreement, at this stage, stimulates me. But once a decision has been made, the debate ends.”¹¹ It seems, then, that truth is good until it isn't good anymore—identifying that point is the key. Retired General (GEN) Wesley K. Clark called it “balance,” although he was obviously never able to achieve it.¹²

It is difficult to say when a zero-defects mentality emerged in the Army, although clearly it was a peacetime development. It is also difficult to capture its multiple meanings and applications. An outside perspective, not surprisingly a British one, provides some help here. As the saying goes, “it is easier to identify in others characteristics which may be all too present but unnoticed in ourselves.”¹³ For example, Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) D.T. Eccles, in an article published in the *British Army Review* in 1996, described four American military culture trends observed during a tour of duty in Sarajevo: nervousness concerning soldiers' physical safety, strict ties to political correctness, fear of making personal administrative errors, and reluctance to disagree with superiors. He goes on to say that these trends “combined to produce an intolerance for mistakes or what is known as a ‘zero-defect culture’ within the American Military.”¹⁴

FM 22-100 also cautions against a zero-defects mentality: “There is no room for the ‘zero-defects’ mentality in a learning organization. . . . If the message you hammer home is ‘There will be no mistakes,’ or if you lose your temper . . . every time there's bad news, eventually your people

will just stop telling you when things go wrong or suggesting how to make things go right.”¹⁵ Even a leader who encourages a strict standard of excellence can unwittingly fall victim to the zero-defects mentality by saying, “Don’t take any chances. Don’t try anything you can’t already do perfectly, and for heaven’s sake, don’t try anything new.”¹⁶ A zero-defects command climate

When many urged an offensive operation against Iraq, Powell advised the president that sanctions were just as viable an option. . . . Because of his counsel, Powell earned the label of “reluctant warrior.” On this, he replied: “Guilty. War is a deadly game; and I do not believe in spending the lives of Americans lightly. My responsibility that day was to lay out all options for the nation’s civilian leadership. . . . The sanctions clock was ticking down. If the President was right, if he decided that it must be war, then my job was to make sure we were ready to go in and win.”

strangles initiative and stunts experience and judgment.¹⁷ So, although zero defects significantly reduces the chance of mistakes, it simultaneously reduces the possibility of a positive development, thus breeding stagnation and reluctance.

Imagine the impact of zero-defects thinking if LTC Hal Moore had subscribed to it in the Ia Drang Valley in Vietnam in 1965. This topic of discussion in a combat leadership class at CGSC led students to ask, “What would Moore have done if Second Lieutenant Henry Herrick had lived?” There are several possibilities: Moore could have relieved Herrick for being overeager and rash, separating his platoon from the company, and getting his soldiers killed; he could have retained Herrick in his position, thus teaching them both (and the company commander) a valuable lesson; or he could have cited Herrick for bravery in spoiling the enemy’s massive frontal attack on the entire battalion.¹⁸

A zero-defects attitude would have forced Moore to relieve Herrick for his mistake. The platoon then would have stood a good chance of having to learn the same lessons over again under its next green and eager lieutenant. Unit initiative, morale, and motivation would have suffered. Judging by Moore’s other actions at landing zone X-Ray, especially his forgiving reaction to the misplaced napalm strike, the logical assumption is that he would have retained Herrick as the platoon leader.¹⁹ The platoon and Herrick would have learned valuable lessons to apply

in future battles without significant loss of any more morale than had already occurred; however, option three remains a stretch even considering hindsight. Since Herrick did not survive his mistake, only Moore can answer the question. However, it appears safe to say that the trend in at least the last decade would have pointed to relieving Herrick.

Assessing, Assuming, and Averting Risk

Generations of US officers are growing up without being encouraged to exercise any autonomous authority and with little instruction in how to assess and then be prepared to take risks in pursuance of a military objective. Thus there is an erosion of the key virtue which underpins every military organization: the moral courage to take risks.

—LTC D.T. Eccles

FM 100-14 defines risk as “the probability and severity of a potential loss that may result from hazards due to the presence of an enemy, an adversary, or some other hazardous condition.”²⁰ Assessing, assuming, and averting risk, especially risk to soldiers’ lives, is something leaders do everyday. Still, leaders must risk soldiers’ lives everyday, everywhere, while training for or responding to everything from disaster relief to global war. Since 1989, the Army has deployed 35 times and “has been in Kosovo for a year, Bosnia for 5, Southwest Asia for 10, the Sinai for 18, Korea for 50, and Europe for 55 years.”²¹ Add to this high operating tempo the stress of a transitioning Army, dwindling resources, digitization, and inherent organizational and individual turmoil, notes retired Colonel Jack Kem, a leadership instructor at CGSC, and the possibility of loss multiplies quickly.²² Although the United States has the most esteemed, most respected, and most feared military in the world—both persuasive in peace and invincible in war—the military is not impervious to loss.²³

Despite the obvious risk the above situations pose, assessing risk appears to be conditioned by observation and experience. FM 100-14, *Risk Management*, states, “perception of risk varies from person to person. What is risky or dangerous to one person may not be to another. Perception influences leaders’ decisions.”²⁴

Various perceptions of risk raised great debate about force-protection measures during Operation Joint Endeavor, the NATO peace enforcement operation in Bosnia. Because of different perceptions of risk to soldiers, force-protection measures differed among participating armies. French and British commanders relaxed their force-protection posture to berets and soft caps with no body armor, while U.S. commanders put their forces in “full battle-rattle.”²⁵ Clark, at that time the director of



strategic plans and policy for the Joint Staff, attributed the U.S. decision to several factors: the Vietnam war; the extremely low casualties taken in the Gulf; and the failed raid in Mogadishu, Somalia. He found it interesting that “the same pressures were not operative on our European Allies. France, and to a lesser extent the United Kingdom, suffered loss after loss in peace keeping operations in the Balkans and elsewhere. Those risks, while regrettable, were considered part of the duty.”²⁶

LTC Alistair J. Deas, a British exchange officer instructing at CGSC, shed some light on the topic: “I had never heard of risk-aversion until I came to the United States. The British military and society see risk as part of a soldier ‘doing his duty.’ It may well include dying in battle, and this is accepted as the mere nature of the business. British soldiers are trained and operate as infantrymen first, and conduct autonomous mission estimates and risk management from corporal to captain to major. We never change our mission due to risk, and we accept risk in realistic and dangerous training and operations. If we take casualties, we regret them certainly but don’t

dwell on them with lengthy investigations or witch hunts.”²⁷

The differing perceptions, however justified or applicable, led to assumptions and accusations on both sides in Bosnia. Some NATO commanders believed the United States was timid and afraid, while some U.S. commanders believed NATO valued their troops’ lives less or that American soldiers were more lucrative targets.²⁸ Regardless, the differing perceptions were never resolved or integrated.

FM 22-100 does not address how risk-aversion, especially aversion to casualties, might lead to overly cautious execution of military operations. This tendency to avert risk might be better termed “risk-avoidance” rather than risk-aversion, although the latter term is used for both. Similarly, casualty aversion and casualty avoidance have been added, and although these are notable topics for debate, they are not the same thing.²⁹ Some argue that President William J. Clinton withdrew troops from Somalia in 1993 as the direct result of the casualties suffered and the risk of incurring more just as President Ronald Reagan withdrew troops from

Lebanon in 1984 for the same reasons.³⁰ Does that make the U.S. military averse to risk and casualties? Not exactly.

Just as the current FM 22-100 unequivocally states that a zero-defects mentality has no place in the Army, future editions of FM 22-100 may likely warn military leaders the same about risk-aversion. By its very nature, risk-aversion circumvents the Army's doctrinal risk-management processes. These processes are intended to reduce soldiers' exposure to risk but not to reduce the Army's ability to fight boldly and decisively: "Risk management is not an add-on feature to the decision-making process but rather a fully integrated element of planning and executing operations. . . . Risk management helps us preserve combat power and retain the flexibility for bold and decisive action. Proper risk management is a combat multiplier that we can ill afford to squander."³¹ It is not risk itself that makes operations "too costly—politically, economically, and in terms of combat power (soldiers' lives and equipment)" but the failure to manage risk effectively.³² FM 3-0, *Operations*, drives home the same point: "Effective risk management results in mission accomplishment at least cost."³³

Risk-Aversion and Strategic Operations

The nation expects military professionals as individuals and the Army as an institution to learn from the experience of others and apply that learning to understanding the present and preparing for the future. Such learning requires both individual and institutional commitments.

—FM 22-100

FM 22-100 attempts to provide guidance on how military leaders might think and act strategically. Chapter 7, "Strategic Leadership," is devoted to inspiring strategic military leaders in the politico-military arena of modern peace and war. The chapter provides positive guidelines, motivating quotations, and anecdotes from notable Generals of the Army George C. Marshall, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Douglas MacArthur; Admiral William J. Crowe, Jr.; Sir Winston Churchill; and GENs Robert E. Lee, Ulysses S. Grant, Colin L. Powell, and Gordon R. Sullivan. One summary in particular recounts Marshall's success during World War II. Among his many qualities was his ability to stand up respectfully but firmly for his convictions: "He refused to be intimidated by leaders such as Prime Minister Winston Churchill, Secretary of War Henry Stimson, or even the president. Though he was always respectful, his integrity demanded that he stand up for his deeply held convictions—and he did without exception."³⁴

What chapter 7 does not seem to address is when

or how the strategic leader should think and act as a soldier or as a statesman.³⁵ The distinction seems to turn on how to influence Washington without making official policy, how to influence policy-makers' minds without overtly or publicly making policy, or how to take action without that action being perceived as a statement of a policy that is, in reality, not espoused by the administration in power.

Clark found himself in this predicament, and he blamed Washington for it. In 1999, Clark explains, as Yugoslavia's military machine began ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, he was donning the dual hats of commander in chief, U.S. European Command, and of Supreme Allied Commander, Europe. After assessing a viable threat in his region, Clark maintained constant pressure on both NATO and Washington to plan an air and ground offensive against the Serb movement. Although Washington balked and NATO was fully engaged in Bosnia, Clark persisted. Despite visible and verbal signs of discouragement and disapproval from the White House, he and his staff worked relentlessly behind the scenes in what he called a resistant medium to manage the often incompatible objectives of the 19 NATO governments and still plan the most decisive operation possible.

Ultimately, Clark's plan was executed as NATO's first armed conflict. Serb police and military were replaced with an international security force in Kosovo, and costly ground conflict was avoided. It had been a limited war with limited means and objectives but successful coercive diplomacy nonetheless. Clark viewed it as a victory, and although initially shocked to find himself relieved and retired in the aftermath, he reflected that the warning signs had been there all along: "Somewhere in the back of my mind I had been half expecting something. I had pushed very hard to make the strategy work in the Balkans. Almost from the start there had been frictions, and after [GEN John M.] Shalikashvili's retirement in September 1997, it had been a cool relationship with the Secretary and his team."³⁶

Thomas L. Friedman, in *The Lexis and the Olive Tree*, cites globalization as the impetus for the conclusion to the NATO operation in Kosovo. He argues that the days of great powers fighting great wars are over. In today's globalization system, great powers seek to avoid civil or regional conflicts. If they do get drawn into a Kosovo-like situation, he explains, "they try to get out as fast as possible, because owning such places does not enhance their power, but diminishes it."³⁷ Of course, the assumption that this was the rationale of the Clinton administration is just that—an assumption.

Economic globalization is threatened by the new face of terrorism, and military leaders are having a tough time combating it. In an *Inside*



1st Cavalry Division troops respond to North Vietnamese fire at LZ X-Ray during the Ia Drang Valley campaign, November 1965.

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the Pentagon article, Washington says the military is conventional and cautious in fighting the new enemy: "Several current and former defense officials say [Secretary of Defense Donald] Rumsfeld remains 'frustrated' with the conventional mindset he encounters among many military officers leading the services . . . fresh thinking, creativity and ingenuity will be needed to fully understand the adversary and take it apart. Drawing that out of U.S. military leaders—for whom cautiousness and reliability, not risk-taking and out-of-the-box-thinking, are often regarded as desirable characteristics—has been like 'pushing on a noodle' for Rumsfeld as he undertakes this challenge."³⁸ Their cautiousness might arise from fear of repeating the mistakes of military history and from relying on doctrine and lessons learned.

In defense of cautiousness, Robert D. Kaplan, in *Warrior Politics*, argues that cautiousness may very well be essential for the statesman as well as

for the military leader in the future: "More than in any previous epoch, perhaps, the statesman of the future will need to control his emotions, for there will be much to be angry about. Groups that refuse to play by our rules will constantly be committing outrages. Overreaction will exact a terrible price, as technology brings us closer, for example, to the Middle East than Europe ever was."³⁹ Whose assumptions, accusations, and decisions are right or wrong in these scenarios only scratch the surface of the struggle strategic leaders will face. What is important is how to resolve or achieve balance in these issues.

Growing Strategic Leaders

Some of the finest leaders in our country, military and civilian, public sector and private, learned what they know about leadership while in our ranks.

—GEN Eric K. Shinseki

This generation's Marshalls may need to employ more than just respect and firmness to secure political support for a particular course of action. Today, U.S. Secretary of State Powell enjoys a winning reputation, but he admits that the decisions he made and the decisions he accepted along the way were not always easy. One month after becoming the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff in October 1989, Powell saw the need for sweeping changes in U.S. military strategy. Drawing upon his own observations, years of experience, and informed intuition as a military leader, he predicted the events of the next 5 years: a strictly defensive Soviet force, a reunified Germany, and likely trouble spots for U.S. involvement in Korea and the Persian Gulf. He matched these projections to strengths and structures for each of the services, identified where cuts could be made, and prepared a briefing for then Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney.

Keenly aware of the difficulty he would have in selling his prediction and recognizing the competing demands on policymakers already engulfed in decisions regarding Panama, Powell waited. A few days later, the Berlin Wall fell, and Powell took that opportunity to make his proposal. Afterward, his proposal accepted, Powell returned to his office and asked for clean charts in preparation for a meeting at the White House the next day. "They looked stunned," he remarked, "and I could understand why. In the past, sea changes far less radical than what I was proposing took years rather than days to work their way through the Joint Staff labyrinth."⁴⁰

In this situation, Powell garnered support for his course of action by influencing policymakers through his thorough and sound analysis, but he recalls a different response to his advice during the Persian Gulf war a scant year later. When many urged an offensive operation against Iraq, Powell advised the president that sanctions were just as viable an option. He presented the advantages and disadvantages of both options but believed if sanctions did not work, the offensive option was always open. Because of his counsel, Powell earned the label of "reluctant warrior." On this, he replied: "Guilty. War is a deadly game; and I do not believe in spending the lives of Americans lightly. My responsibility that day was to lay out all options for the nation's civilian leadership. . . . I had done my duty. The sanctions clock was ticking down. If the President was right, if he decided that it must be war, then my job was to make sure we were ready to go in and win."⁴¹

Powell was able to distinguish between his

role as a soldier and his role as adviser to policymakers between "stimulating disagreement" and "loyalty."⁴² In both scenarios, however, Powell was careful to consider personalities, current situation, competing demands on resources, conflicting interests, varying perceptions, and especially timing.

Another strategic leader, one who is spearheading the current RMA and who has put his career on the line to drive the Army's transformation from its post-Cold War mentality, is Army Chief of Staff General Eric K. Shinseki. The most visible sign of this transformation has been the change in the Army's headgear, but the most controversial aspect has been Shinseki's determination to introduce equipment and organizations that bridge the gap between the Army's "magnificent light forces" and "magnificent heavy forces" to create "greater lethality, survivability and deployability all across the force."⁴³ Most military leaders would be hard-pressed to argue that this change is not long overdue, and they value Shinseki's foresight and outlook.

Kaplan notes that Shinseki's innovations will inevitably influence policy: "In an age when it took weeks to mobilize and transport armored divisions across the seas, it was possible for American presidents to consult the people and Congress about doing so. In the future, when combat brigades can be inserted anywhere in the world in 96 hours and entire divisions in 120 hours . . . the decision to use force will be made autocratically by small groups of civilians and general officers, the differences between them fading as time goes by."⁴⁴ One must argue, however, as we await the verdict, that Shinseki has acted in accordance with doctrine in his role as a strategic leader in innovating and creating change. As FM 22-100 explains, "the Army's customs, procedures, hierarchical structure, and sheer size make change especially daunting and stressful," but Shinseki is committed.⁴⁵

The Future

It is time for the military in the United States, in particular, to put the legacy of Vietnam and even Somalia behind us. It will be necessary to take risks in war. It will be up to the military to mitigate these risks—by sound preparations, bold action, integrated political-military strategy—but we will not be able to escape them. And we cannot pass all the responsibility to the politicians above us.

—Retired GEN Wesley K. Clark

The challenge for today's aspiring strategic military leader will be to learn to connect effectively, perhaps even fuse, the role of strategic military thinker with the role of strategic diplomatic thinker. As Friedman puts it, "connectivity is productivity . . . connection enables, disconnection disables."⁴⁶ The U.S. Army War College echoes this message: "Strategic leaders also must shape regional security environments by fostering the development of democratic patterns and processes of civil-military relations. Thus, as the nexus between the statesman and the military professional becomes increasingly complex, strategic leaders must focus on developing complementary competencies and an understanding of both their shared and separate responsibilities in the national security decision-making process."⁴⁷

Kaplan believes this commingling of political and military roles will eventually create a system in which military and civilian leaders' separate responsibilities will cease to exist in warfare. "Every diplomatic move will also be a military one," he argues, "as the artificial separation between the civilian and military command structures that has been a feature of contemporary democracies continues to dissolve." Kaplan advocates a return

to the unified leaderships of the ancient worlds and calls it the "basic truth of all political systems."⁴⁸ With such unified roles, leaders will not struggle with the fine line between soldier and statesman.

Under a fusionist theory, military men and women must open their military minds to incorporate political, social, and economic thinking with their military thinking. They must become military statesmen and assume nonmilitary responsibilities.⁴⁹ U.S. military strategic leaders will be required to integrate political with military strategies for increasingly higher stakes: economic strength, homeland security, open markets.

Unifying the roles of soldier and statesman is the key to successful strategic courses of action. Until this key is cut, great strategic leaders like GEN H. Norman Schwarzkopf will continue to prefer retiring with great victory over suffering "a thousand defeats at the hands of Congress."⁵⁰ It is no longer useful to argue that "one whose general is capable and not interfered with by the ruler will be victorious."⁵¹ To succeed as both soldier and statesman, it is more useful to ask, "how can a general and a ruler who are capable be victorious?" **MR**

NOTES

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