"We Few, We Band of Brothers"

Organizational Toxicity in History and Film

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Toxic leading is by no means a modern problem—it is a human problem. As such, scholars can take a historical view in their analyses of toxic leading, enriching the study of this problem with additional resources. The authors present an example of this broader scholarly approach in the film study of leadership, using the dramatized World War II television film series *Band of Brothers*, which compares the leader behaviors of several characters along a spectrum of harm. Among other suggestive conclusions, the analysis indicates that toxic leading combines a disregard for one's organization and a disregard for other people, and that habitual practice of virtuous behavior inhibits progress along a spectrum of harm that would otherwise result in chronic toxic leadership.

Since the term toxic leader came into popular use and scholarly application in the mid-1990s, the toxic leading literature has tended to organize around a small number of topical interests, none of which has necessarily emphasized toxic harm conceived on a spectrum. One of the earliest such examinations, representative of work in the related fields of public administration and management studies, emphasizes qualities and traits of various kinds of leaders and assesses the impact of these qualities.[1]

Another work typical of investigations of toxic leading in various psychological fields attempts to distinguish between leaders who are justifiably demanding and those who are inexcusably harmful.[2] Research on the prevalence of toxic leaders in the military usually involve explanations of the challenges of the profession of arms and how these challenges can push or invite leaders to become toxic, or can trigger toxic behavior via the leader's past experiences or personality tendencies.[3]

Scholars from multiple backgrounds have studied the interaction between toxic leading and other constructs, such as narcissism, to determine the effects of these other constructs on leader behavior.[4] One team of researchers developed the "Toxic Triangle," a model that

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1. Marcia Whicker, *Toxic Leaders: When Organizations Go Bad* (Westport, CT: Quorum Books, 1996).
2. Harvey Hornstein, *Brutal Bosses and Their Prey* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996).
3. George E. Reed, *Tarnished: Toxic Leadership in the U.S. Military* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2015).
4. Joe Doty and Jeff Fenlason, "Narcissism and Toxic Leaders," *Military Review* (January–February 2013); and see also Birgit Schyns, Barbara Wisse, and Stacey Sanders, "Shady Strategic Behavior: Recognizing Strategic Followership of Dark Triad Followers," *Academy of Management Perspectives* 33, no. 2 (May 2019).

assumes toxic leading results from the interplay among three factors: destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and a conducive environment.[5]

While the toxic triangle broadens the scope of investigation by highlighting the interaction among multiple variables including some that are not leader-centric, the above representative literature tends to conceive of toxic leading within a yes-no framework: Has harm from the leader's behavior occurred or not? In part, the film study below is intended to generate investigation of the idea that toxic leading occurs along a spectrum of harm. The possibility of such a spectrum could increase the potential for further research to aid organizations in stopping or reversing toxic leading.

In examining toxic leadership in the profession of arms through the lens of film and history, few works of entertainment have rivaled the impact of the HBO miniseries *Band of Brothers*, created by Tom Hanks and Steven Spielberg and based on Stephen Ambrose's history by the same name. *Band of Brothers* portrays the historical experience of the paratroopers of E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne Division—or "Easy Company"—during World War II. Its ten episodes have affected millions in the United States and worldwide; it deserves its place as a profound and enduring statement of the meaning and sacrifice of that war effort and of the veterans who gave themselves to it. This miniseries provides an excellent context for the study of virtuous leadership characteristics—especially in combat, which may be the ultimate test of leadership and conviction.

Within that topic of study, the article investigates the incidence of toxic leadership by examining the *Band of Brothers* series to compare the qualities of some of the military leaders featured in it. It also juxtaposes the fictionalized versions of these men with their historical experiences to better understand the implications of their leadership behaviors. Which leaders consistently displayed virtuous behavior under stress? Which leaders wavered, at times resisting temptation and at other times succumbing to an unvirtuous passion or to a vice? Finally, which leaders crossed a line and resembled today's understanding of a toxic leader?

Part of the study's intent is to explore history and film to suggest that toxic leading is not merely a modern problem, but that it attends to persistent human conditions and human frailties. Modern work environments certainly exacerbate the effects and characteristics of toxic leading. But, just as surely, the temptation exists to see toxic leadership as a solely modern problem and to accept an overly reductive context within which to examine such toxicity. For example, a toxic leader may abuse their staff via cell phone texts on the weekend, but analysts may miss that the transgressive behavior is not the use of cell phone technology or how modern offices function—instead, it is the violation of group or organizational culture and accepted workplace norms (weekends are personal time), which can be a constant problem across time and technology.

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5. Art Padilla, Robert Hogan, and Robert Kaiser, "The Toxic Triangle: Destructive Leaders, Susceptible Followers and a Conducive Environment," *Leadership Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (2007).

Another related intention of the article is to open other mediums and genres, including this dramatized historical series, as part of the body of literature on toxic leading. If this problem has always been with organizations, researchers can learn more about it by adding historical analyses to those of the present and very recent past. Finally, this article suggests understanding toxic behavior as a spectrum could potentially allow the organization to moderate toxic leading in significant ways—to lessen it, combat it, and sometimes prevent it—if unvirtuous and problematic behavior is identified early and rehabilitated.

The film study asks a number of questions. First, which leaders in the miniseries display a persistent intent to harm others in the organization and seek evidence of that harm? Second, to what degree did these leaders align the markers of harm with the organization's culture and practices? Third, what is the relationship among virtuous behaviors, unvirtuous behaviors, and the identified toxic leadership examples? This last question reveals the authors' follow-on intent, related to future research directions, which is to examine whether toxic leading occurs in the absence of virtuous practice, and relatedly, whether researchers should pursue the utility of presenting virtuous behaviors as a remedy to reduce the frequency of toxic leading or to prevent leaders from "crossing the line."

Intent to Harm: The Fictionalized Sobel

In the premiere episode of *Band of Brothers*, a group of soldiers including Joseph Liebgott and his fellow Airborne recruit, Shifty Powers, address the rumors involving the competence of their unit leader, Captain Herbert Sobel:

> Soldier: He screwed up one maneuver.
>
> Liebgott: I'm always fumbling with grenades. It would be easy if one went off by accident, you know.
>
> Powers: Well, now, they must have put him in charge for a reason.
>
> Liebgott: Yeah, 'cause the Army wouldn't make a mistake, right, Shift?[6]

For Liebgott and the men of Easy Company, the Army does make that mistake in placing Sobel in a position of leadership. This exchange of dialogue encapsulates the anger, frustration, and resentment the men feel toward their commander and his toxic behavior. Up to this point in the episode, Sobel is petty and harsh, lacking any compassion or empathy toward his men. He causes harm and seemingly enjoys doing so—traits often associated with toxicity and characterized as such.

The Army defines toxic leadership as "a combination of self-centered attitudes, motivations, and behaviors that have adverse effects on subordinates, the organization, and mission

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6. *Band of Brothers*, season 1, episode 1, "Currahee," written by Erik Jendresen and Tom Hanks, directed by Phil Alden Robinson, aired September 9, 2001, on HBO.

performance."[7] Incidentally, the most current Army doctrine publication has removed "toxic" from its doctrine and instead categorizes such behavior as counterproductive leadership. Sobel's seeming lack of virtuous traits such as understanding, mercy, and justice damages the men's trust, jeopardizing their confidence in their leader and the organization.[8]

The exchange between Liebgott and Shifty also highlights the role the Army as an organization has in developing a leader like Sobel. The Army placed him in charge of the men and rewarded him through promotions. An analysis of the different examples of leadership in *Band of Brothers* reveals that it is Sobel who demonstrates an intent to harm and a satisfaction in the harm caused, his actions enabled by the fact the Army promoted him.[9]

The first introduction to Sobel is his inspection of Easy Company, as he uses any perceived violation to take away passes. What starts as revoking individual passes for creases in pants, rust on equipment, or dirt in the rear aperture turns to a revocation of passes for the entire company and a run up Currahee, the mountain for which the episode is named.[10] Sobel's training is tough and harsh and often portrayed as unnecessarily difficult.

One clear demonstration of his intent to harm follows his and Dick Winters' promotions. Sobel suggests to Winters to reward the men with a special meal of spaghetti on a day planned only for lectures and instruction. After the men gorge themselves, Sobel cancels instruction and forces the men on another run up the mountain, reminding them in their sickness that they could give up and there would be "no more Captain Sobel."[11] It is this kind of behavior, where he purposefully places the men in situations that should be rewarding but end up as punishment, that engenders the anger, resentment, and hostility voiced by Liebgott.

Many of Sobel's actions, while harsh, could arguably be understood as an attempt to prepare the company for the realities of war. In one instance, he forces the men to march twelve miles with no water, and then forces a repeat march when one of the men drinks water. While this is an excessive order, he could have been attempting to prepare the men for the austere and desperate situations experienced during combat.

Yet the episode does not portray Sobel as ultimately having good motives toward the men. Instead, his character and motives are often portrayed as selfish and self-serving, as when he criticizes Winters for making him look bad because the company was late on a night march. While the company is the best at Currahee, Sobel's harmful intent is to reflect glory on himself—a form of vanity—and not necessarily to better his men and the

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7. Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA), *Army Leadership*, Army Doctrine Publication 6-22 (Washington, DC: HQDA, 2012), 3.

8. See Michael Skerker, David Whetham, and Don Carrick, eds., *Military Virtues* (Havant, Hampshire, UK: Howgate Publishing Limited, 2019).

9. Reed, *Tarnished*, 69.

10. *Band of Brothers*, "Currahee."

11. *Band of Brothers*.

company. This behavior further alienates his men, destroying trust and jeopardizing the organization.[12]

While his training and behavior are harsh, what further drives the men of Easy Company to view Sobel as toxic are his own failures in leadership situations and a perceived incompetence at necessary skills. The series depicts instances where Sobel often makes poor leadership decisions in training that could lead to death in real-world combat. In one example, Sobel ignores the advice of Winters and others and forces the men out of a protected ambush position despite protestations, only for those men to be immediately killed in the exercise, highlighting his impatience and inability to plan a successful maneuver.

In Europe, Sobel is unable to read a map correctly, leading his men to get lost and ultimately miss the rendezvous for a coordinated attack during an exercise.[13] The combination of his perceived selfishness, his lack of necessary skills and behaviors under the pressure of combat, and the degradation of connection with his troops results in his ultimate toxicity as he loses the men's trust.[14]

While Sobel demonstrates problematic behavior, much of it falls within the norms of Army training. Sobel is able to conduct many of his punishments and actions with little official scrutiny from superiors as such behavior reflects the values and goals of the organization. The men of Easy Company boast the highest performance rates in the battalion and some of the best officers. This is seen as a reflection of their training and their commander, and Sobel is rewarded through promotion by the organization.

It is not until Sobel attempts to punish Winters for failing to complete contradictory orders that he crosses a line that causes the organization to notice a problem in the company. Sobel offers Winters two options for his supposed failure: accept Sobel's punishment or face trial by court martial. Winters refuses to take the punishment on principle, to Sobel's surprise, and faces the court martial to keep his reputation as an officer intact.

Though both options Sobel provided were within his authority and technically allowed by Army discipline, Easy Company interprets the actions to be vindictive and spiteful. The attack on Winters, whom the men trust, respect, and view as competent, becomes the impetus for a mutiny. While they lose respect for Sobel as a man and lose trust in his abilities as an officer in combat, his attempt to remove the one person they felt could lead them forces a group of noncommissioned officers to resign to the battalion commander. This mutiny drives higher leadership to evaluate Sobel's effectiveness as a leader and ultimately remove him from Easy Company to a training position at jump school in Chilton Foliat.[15]

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12. Jean Lipman-Blumen, *The Allure of Toxic Leaders: Why We Follow Destructive Bosses and Corrupt Politicians—and How We Can Survive Them* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), 18–22.

13. *Band of Brothers*, "Currahee."

14. Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser, "Toxic Triangle," 179.

15. *Band of Brothers*, "Currahee."

Sobel's leadership in *Band of Brothers* demonstrates the intent to harm and to seek evidence of that harm, one of the key elements of toxic leading.[16] He utilizes his position and his knowledge of the norms and acceptable behaviors within the organization to hide the extent of his harm and punishment on the men of Easy Company. Moreover, he is rewarded by the organization for doing so with a promotion to captain as his company continues to perform outstandingly, despite the brewing discontent and mistrust.

The men in Easy Company, also products of the culture of the Army, do not make many efforts to challenge Sobel's tactics until they lose confidence in his abilities in combat. Ultimately, Sobel's commander uses the same organizational practices to continue to retain Sobel but removes him from a position to exact greater harm.

While the organization's culture created an environment in which Sobel, and others like him, could thrive, it also had ways of removing him, short of firing, from a position that might get men killed. This so-called solution is representative of many military and nonmilitary organizations that tolerate toxic leading and allow it to perpetuate through the process of diverting it, as a kind of partial damage control—people are moved to positions in other organizations rather than disciplined or terminated.[17] The goal in these cases clearly is mitigation rather than elimination of the problem.

Intent to Harm: The Historical Sobel

While this analysis focuses on the fictionalized version of Captain Herbert Sobel, there are real men and events behind the actors and stories in *Band of Brothers*. Juxtaposing the historical events with the fictionalized version in the series reveals more nuance around toxic leading behavior and its effect on the leader, subordinates, and the organization. While several men of Easy Company agree with the miniseries' characterization of Sobel, there are also contradicting experiences that argue Sobel was not as bad or as incompetent as he was made out to be in the series. Bill Wingett, a machine gunner, recalled, "I'll argue hands down with anybody who says Sobel was the SOB they often say he was. He was tough, yes, he was as tough as anybody you'll ever know. But he was not a bastard."[18]

After Sobel was transferred from Easy Company, most lost contact with him. He never attended a reunion with the 101st, with some claims that he held resentment toward the men. Sobel eventually attempted suicide, surviving, but severing his optic nerves. His family never knew or understood the reason for it. He died in a Veterans Affairs hospital, where he lived the remainder of his life with little contact with his immediate family beyond his sister, who attended to the details of his passing.[19]

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16. Reed, *Tarnished*, 69.
17. Tony Kern, *Darker Shades of Blue: The Rogue Pilot* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1999).
18. Bill Wingett, in Marcus Brotherton, *We Who Are Alive and Remain: Untold Stories from the Band of Brothers* (New York: Berkley Publishing Group, 2009), 55.
19. Michael Sobel, in Brotherton, 252–58.

While Sobel earned a reputation for harsh and petty treatment and strict training, the series leaves questions as to his intent and his goals in how he trained the men. Clearly Sobel's leadership style created a fissure between himself and Easy, leaving some issues unresolved. His toxic leadership style ultimately separated him from Easy Company during World War II, and from men who might have understood him better later in life.[20]

Sobel's life provides a lesson for organizations. When functions of the organization persist in hiding toxic leadership traits by covering over them or lessening their effects without addressing the toxic leader and the problematic behavior directly, harm may not only extend to the subordinates but may also adversely affect the toxic leader and those around them. In this case, it appears the Army never confronted Sobel regarding his hidden intent to harm others in the act of accomplishing the mission. This removed the possibility of an official intervention that might have prompted him to reflect and rehabilitate some of his behaviors to become a more effective leader.

Despite how well Easy performed under Sobel, the majority of men lost trust in his ability to lead them in combat. Ultimately this harmed Sobel with a loss of career opportunities and a separation from his fellow troops.

A Spectrum of Toxicity

While Sobel's character remains the leader with the most intent to harm in *Band of Brothers*, there are other examples of toxic leadership or unvirtuous behavior throughout the series, such as a leader's cowardice, neglect of his subordinates' welfare, or violation of others' basic human rights—acts which scholars have agreed open doorways to sustained toxic harm.[21] In observing this, it seems more useful to assess toxic leadership on a spectrum, taking into account virtuous behaviors, unvirtuous behaviors as potential early indicators of toxic leading, egotistical or negligent leading, and the intent to harm and seek evidence of harm as the extreme. Elements such as the disregard for people, the disregard for the organization, and a perceived level of competency contribute to the toxicity. By thinking about toxic leading as an outcome rooted in a spectrum of behaviors, it may be possible to identify warning signs or understand the development of toxic leadership over time.

Unvirtuous behaviors can provide organizations with warning signs that some leaders may be heading toward toxic leading if there is not an intervention or confrontation. In other cases, neglectful or egotistical leaders cause harm to their subordinates, but might not have the intent to cause that harm or seek evidence of it. If leaders show unvirtuous behaviors or negligent/egotistical leadership, is there a possibility that they can still be good leaders or that they can be redeemed? Are they as toxic as the leader, like Sobel's character, who has an intention of harm? *Band of Brothers* provides examples of this leadership in Lieutenant Norman Dike and in Captain Ronald Speirs and Captain Lewis Nixon.

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20. Sobel, 252–58.
21. Alan Goldman, *Transforming Toxic Leaders* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 6–7, 52–53; and see also Lipman-Blumen, *Allure*, 19–22.
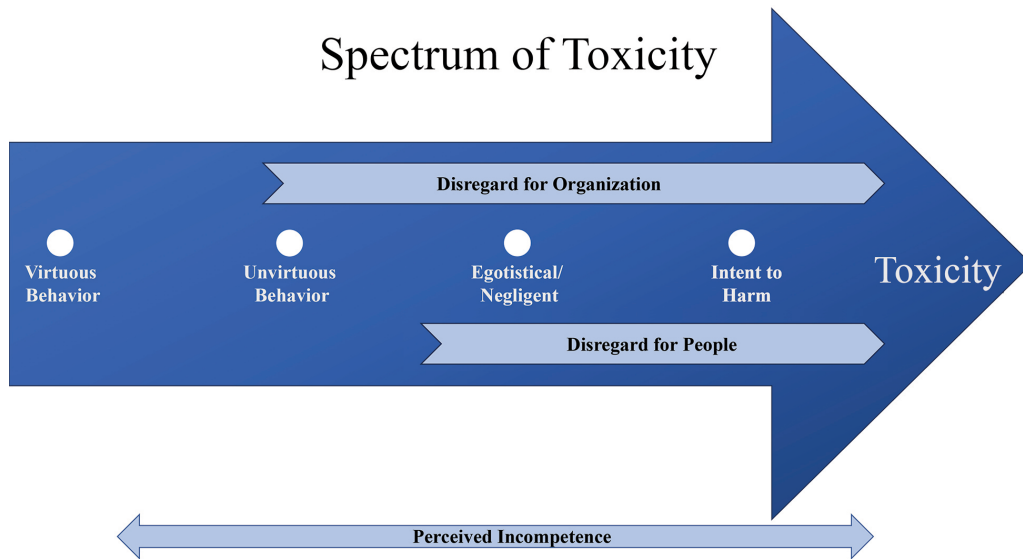
Spectrum of Toxicity

Figure 1. Interaction between leadership behaviors and other elements toward toxicity

In episode 7, "The Breaking Point," Dike is a replacement officer for Easy Company. When first introduced, the men are questioning Sergeant Carwood "Lip" Lipton on Dike's whereabouts. When a soldier dies from an accidental self-inflicted gunshot wound, it is Lip who reports to then-battalion commander, Winters, instead of the commanding officer for the unit, Dike. Winters questions why a sergeant is briefing the battalion commander rather than the lieutenant, whose duty it is. Lip covers for Dike, but the episode makes clear his frustration.

Dike is portrayed as frequently walking away from the men in Bastogne or heading back to headquarters to make calls. He is often missing in crucial moments of decision and frequently does not engage with the men or attempt to know the men in any meaningful ways, as demonstrated when he asks Lip about his past but disappears before Lip can finish his response and reciprocate in kind.

In Ambrose's book, *Band of Brothers*, Winters stated, "Basically we had weak lieutenants. I didn't have faith in them," and recalled that Dike was "a favorite protégé of somebody from division HQ."[22] For Winters, Lip, and the men of Easy Company, this meant that Dike was given the chance for company command in order to make him promotable, not because he was gifted in the field. They worried that he cared more for his promotion and about his future position than he cared for the men he was leading, and were concerned this would get them killed. In the miniseries, this negligence and self-regard culminates

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22. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's Nest* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 205.

in the attack on Foy, Belgium, when Dike freezes, unable to direct the men, resulting in several casualties before Winters relieves him of command.

Dike's character represents egotistical/negligent behavior, as he is seemingly absent and self-oriented, leading to the alienation and resentment of his men. But unlike Sobel, he is not depicted as intending to harm or looking for the effects of that harm.[23] In the voiceover of "Breaking Point," Lip posits that "Dike wasn't a bad leader because he made bad decisions. He was a bad leader because he made no decisions."[24] In basic terms, the harm that Dike allows or creates is a follow-on result of his self-absorption and consequential neglect in the care of others. The lack of care is neither intentional nor instrumental as it would be in the case of a toxic leader who is seeking evidence that he has harmed another person.[25]

Complicating the series' portrayal of Dike is the reality of his historical service. Dike earned two Bronze Stars, one in Holland and the other during Bastogne, for saving three wounded soldiers. He went on to be an aide to General Maxwell Taylor, remained in the Army Reserve following World War II, and served during the Korean War, ending his military career at the rank of lieutenant colonel.[26] Contrary to Winters' retelling in the book version, Clancy Lyall, another Easy Company soldier, recalls that Dike "was shot in the shoulder while taking Foy, near a haystack. That's when Ron Speirs came running across the field."[27]

The contested memories of the incident also highlight a further complication in analyzing Dike's leadership capability. Was he a toxic, self-indulgent, negligent leader or was the battle at Foy just a personal breaking point for a wounded man? For Easy Company, Dike exhibited toxic traits in his inability to make decisions or connect with the men. The organization placed an inexperienced lieutenant in combat command over a battle-hardened group in order to provide a favored officer the ability to promote. It was the organization's promotion structure and requirements that placed Easy Company in the hands of Dike, but it was also the organization's procedures that allowed Winters to relieve Dike of command.[28]

Again, while Dike displayed some toxic traits in the series, he did not demonstrate the intent to harm, nor did he seek evidence of his harm. Considering Norman Dike's overall service record in reality, a possible account of these events would implicate the followers as well as the leader. In other words, Dike's inexperience created a reaction in his subordinates that developed intense friction which worsened the relationships and prevented growth

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23. Lipman-Blumen, *Allure*, 20.

24. *Band of Brothers*, season 1, episode 7, "The Breaking Point," directed by David Frankel, written by Graham Yost, aired October 14, 2001, on HBO.

25. Lipman-Blumen, *Allure*, 20.

26. Paul Combs, "Historical Errors in 'Band of Brothers:' Even the Best Shows Get It Wrong Sometimes," Medium.com, November 27, 2022, https://medium.com/.

27. Clancy Lyall, in Brotherton, *We Who Are Alive*, 177.

28. Laurence Peter and Raymond Hull, *The Peter Principle: Why Things Always Go Wrong* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1969), 20–22.

in Dike's behavior as a leader. Was this just the wrong company for Dike to succeed in after the experiences the men endured to this point?

In *Band of Brothers*, Sobel and Dike represent toxic leadership behaviors with different degrees of harm. Dike's harm often came in the form of negligence and passivity, resulting in the inability to gain the confidence or trust of his men, while Sobel actively sought to harm through his petty punishments and retaliatory behaviors.

Do behaviors like Sobel's and Dike's start with the intent to harm and negligence or do they grow from early indicators into higher degrees of toxicity? Speirs and Nixon provide examples of how unvirtuous behavior could be an early indicator of potential toxicity, despite demonstrations of good leadership in other ways.

In the series, Nixon, as Winters' closest friend, was portrayed as a drunk and with a certain disregard for the rules and order of the military, but "every member of Easy interviewed for [Ambrose's *Band of Brothers*] said . . . Nixon was the most brilliant staff officer he knew in the war."[29] Nixon is one of the few Airborne officers to make a third jump that ends in tragedy. Only he and two others make it out while the rest of his unit is killed in the aircraft. It is here the series demonstrates Nixon's reliance on alcohol to deal with his wartime experience and emotions as he hunts for a bottle of whiskey amid the empty ones. Winters informs him he has been demoted due to his drinking even as Nixon continues to drink.[30]

In this instance, the only true harm for Nixon's behavior is to himself and his own career, but Nixon's alcoholism calls into question his future ability to lead. In a combat situation, this could be detrimental for the men under his command and leadership. Despite the fact Nixon "was a genius in addition to being a brave, common sense soldier," his excessive drinking compromised his ability to do all aspects of his job as evidenced by his demotion. Left unchecked, this problem might have crossed over the line eventually into more dangerous and toxic behavior for the men under his command.[31] While Nixon remained a good leader to the men in Easy Company, other officers guilty of unvirtuous behavior such as excess or intemperance could cause significant harm to the men, the mission, and the organization.

While Nixon's character is tarnished primarily by his excessive drinking, Speirs has a more complicated reputation. Tough, hard, but often called a good combat leader, Speirs is the subject of many rumors, including shooting one of his own officers for being drunk, and killing unarmed German POWs.[32] Yet his willingness to place himself in danger, as evidenced by his run through the Battle of Foy to relay information, and his quick, common sense decision-making in battle make him a favored leader among Easy Company.

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29. Ambrose, *Band of Brothers*, 163.

30. *Band of Brothers*, season 1, episode 9, "Why We Fight," directed by David Frankel, written by John Orloff, aired October 28, 2001, on HBO.

31. Ambrose, *Band of Brothers*, 240.

32. *Band of Brothers*, "Breaking Point"; and *Band of Brothers*, season 1, episode 2, "Day of Days," directed by Richard Loncraine, written by John Orloff, aired September 9, 2001, on HBO.

Like his fictionalized character in *Band of Brothers,* Speirs carried a complicated reputation among his men in reality. Private David Kenyon Webster thought Speirs was as good an officer as Winters and liked him for his bravery and his leadership, though recognized that other men "loathed Speirs on the ground that he had killed one of his own men in Normandy, that he was bull-headed and suspicious, that he believed there was no such thing as Combat Exhaustion."[33]

Speirs cared for his men and demonstrated strength in leadership, but his attitude and callousness toward killing could be considered an early indicator of toxic leading; if left unchecked, they could be dangerous. In the miniseries, when Sergeant Grant is shot by a replacement private, the men capture the assailant and beat him. Speirs briefly joins in, almost killing him, before ordering his release over to the military police.[34] His violent behavior violates his responsibility as an officer to model and ensure good order and discipline in his unit. Though he ultimately follows procedure, his participation in the vigilante justice demonstrates a rashness and lack of prudence.

Like Nixon's, Speirs' unvirtuous behavior, manifesting primarily as a lack of restraint when under pressure, does not make him a bad or toxic leader to many of the men in Easy Company. Both are well-respected and decorated men, though they both indulge in excess and arguably a lack of prudence. Yet their behavior leaves the opportunity for others to be harmed, for men to ignore the law, code, and duty, and to create situations that could cause further detriment and harm to the good order and discipline of the company.

Vices, when pursued for their own sake, can lead to other unvirtuous behavior. Nixon's excess and Speirs' rashness demonstrate a disregard for the organization and its established artifacts, espoused values, and the norms of the Army they serve.[35] Thus, unvirtuous behavior and a disregard for the organization can be an indicator of potential toxicity. These behaviors, uninhibited or imbalanced with other virtuous leadership traits such as temperance or prudence, may evolve into toxic leading.

Conclusion

An analysis of the leaders in *Band of Brothers* reveals that toxic behavior might be better thought of as a spectrum in which certain actions unimpeded can lead one further into toxicity. In short, a process may be at work where certain behaviors could drive a leader to increase harmful intent and behavior until they become toxic. Speirs and Nixon were both recognized as good and capable officers in their own ways, but they each showed what some may deem unvirtuous behavior: Nixon's intemperate drinking and Speirs' lack of empathy, rashness, and unjustifiable uses of violence.

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33. Ambrose, *Band of Brothers*, 241.

34. *Band of Brothers*, season 1, episode 10, "Points," directed by Mikael Salomon, written by Erik Jendresen and Erik Bork, aired November 4, 2001, on HBO.

35. Edgar Schein and Peter Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership,* 5th ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2016), 18.

Clearly, leaders can present unvirtuous behaviors and still be good leaders if they work to curb such behaviors and place the interest of the unit and the organization over their self-interest. Speirs and Nixon continued to place the lives of their men at the forefront of their actions. Arguably, they still upheld the organization's interest as well, though they had become jaded by the bureaucracy, as evidenced by Nixon's disregard of his own demotion. Though the desire to place the needs and survival of their men over their own self-interest kept Nixon and Speirs from progressing further along the spectrum of toxic leading behavior, their unvirtuous behaviors represented early indicators of their future potential for toxic leadership.

Dike exhibits another form of troubling behavior as characterized in *Band of Brothers*. In his time with Easy Company, Dike was not present, did not make decisions, and was more interested in his future career trajectory than in the present role he served to lead Easy Company. He was absent to the point of negligence, leaving Sergeant Carwood Lipton to lead the men in his place. This negligence had dire consequences in the Battle of Foy when Dike's decisions led to the deaths of several men before he froze, unable to command his men. Easy Company perceives Dike to be self-interested and negligent, but as portrayed in the miniseries, his intention is not malicious and there is no true desire to cause or see harm.

It might be useful to acknowledge that some leaders create toxic environments without malicious intent due to negligence or a lack of interest in their own unit, people, or organization. This egotistical/negligent leadership often demonstrates a disregard for people that, left without mitigation or interference, could lead to more severe and detrimental behavior in the future. While there is no intent to harm, this negligence can often cause significant problems to the culture and climate of an organization and leaves a gap of leadership that subordinates, not all as skillful as Lip, can fill in the absence. This can create a toxic environment for the followers in the organization who feel unheard, unseen, and forgotten by their leadership.

Finally, Sobel exhibits the more extreme toxic behavior that presents a true intent to cause harm and see the consequences of that harm. While many men went on to acknowledge that Sobel's training prepared them for the upcoming hardships of the war, it did not create a trust in leadership or in the organization for his men. Sobel's own unvirtuous traits—envy, jealousy, self-interest, egotism—were left unchecked. He punished the men at Currahee based on petty grievances and jealousies rather than justified indiscretions.

Sobel's leadership might be remembered very differently if he had employed similarly harsh training countered with a respect for the men's time and an attempt to connect and bond, showing true care for their health and well-being. His actions, as the men understood them, rarely showed that he held any true consideration for them. Instead, most of the men believed that Easy Company was an extension of Sobel's own value and success, and that he was willing to sacrifice their health and well-being for the sake of his own reflected glory.

Sobel's actions also reveal that a toxic environment requires a level of perceived incompetence from subordinates. While Sobel pushed his team to run Currahee, perform perfectly at inspections, and make no mistakes in exercises, his inability to read maps, his

poor decision-making in exercises, and questions about his own physical abilities caused further resentment among his unit. Dike's actions were also met with more hostility for his inadequacy while the unit was willing to give more grace to Nixon and Speirs for their behaviors because of their abilities and their compassion for the men. Ultimately, a disregard for people—maybe even an unconscious one—a disregard for the organization, an intent to harm and seek evidence of that harm, with a perceived incompetence among followers combine into a more extreme form of toxic leading.

The organization's role in toxic leadership is one that needs to be further explored. According to the analysis of *Band of Brothers*, Sobel was able to manipulate the punishments and regulations of the organization to cause further harm to his men. The revoked passes, inspections, and performance awards he used were all artifacts of the organizational culture of the Army that allowed his behavior and treatment of the men to be rewarded instead of curtailed. It took a mutiny of senior noncommissioned officers, also a use of the organization's rules and procedures, to see any change or restriction to Sobel's actions.

Dike, Nixon, and Speirs all operated both within and outside of the organization's espoused beliefs and standards. It is more difficult to ascertain if they worked to align their behaviors with accepted organizational norms and practices to justify their behavior, but it is clear that norms developed within the organization allowed certain incidences to occur.

Dike's time with Easy Company was a result of the organization's need for their officers to have combat experience to promote. This was an accepted practice, and in his situation, put the men of Easy Company at his discretion despite his lack of battlefield experience. Speirs' and Nixon's behaviors, while technically illegal or immoral to the espoused beliefs of the organization, were tolerated and often encouraged based on less transparent cultural norms and practices. Left unchecked, Speirs' casual disregard for violence outside of combat and Nixon's drinking could have led to the harm of men in their unit and under their command. Further scholarship should explore the role of the organization in creating, allowing, or curbing toxic leaders as well as exploring how toxic leaders use the organization to justify their behaviors.

While *Band of Brothers* provides many examples of both good and bad leadership to analyze, it is important to remember that the fictionalized account is based on real men and historical events. Delving into their stories beyond the film series brings even more questions for future scholarship. If toxic behavior can be thought of as a spectrum, where there is potential for intervention and rehabilitation, is there a point on the spectrum where the leader is no longer redeemable? Are followers' perceptions all that are required to make one toxic? What roles do aptitude, gender, race, and other identifying traits play in the perception of toxicity? Is there a difference in a leader who presents some toxic behaviors versus a toxic leader? Finally, further research should be conducted on the consequences of toxic leadership on the leaders themselves.

Sobel's life story reveals a man isolated from those who shared his wartime experience. He never reconnected with Easy Company, and other accounts claim he held resentment and anger toward them during his life. Further research on the personal and professional impact of toxic leadership on the leaders might reveal more information on how individuals

later cope with their wartime experience and shed light on resiliency. Sobel, and the other men of Easy Company, demonstrate that thinking of toxic leading behavior on a spectrum provides new ways to explore the possibility of rehabilitation and intervention to prevent and mitigate toxic leadership. ✈☇

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