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Welcome to this dedicated issue of *Air & Space Operations Review* focused on the topic of the organizational dynamics of toxic leading in the military. While the problem of toxic leadership in the US military is not new, the use of the term and the growing literature on toxic leadership are relatively recent. Perhaps because of this recency, those concerned with the problem have not yet developed theories of the relationship between the dimensions of an organization and this kind of destructive leadership behavior.

In *Tarnished: Toxic Leadership in the US Military*, George E. Reed, an expert on toxic leading in the military and a retired Army officer, asks the reader to ponder whether the US military contains elements that “incubate or sustain toxic leadership.”¹ He then proposes that in any organization resides an “unholy trinity”—“toxic leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments”—that fuels the problem.² His example of how this trinity applies to any US military service also clearly comes from his own experience in the Army.

With Reed as one of a small number of esteemed subject matter trailblazers, in this issue, readers are encouraged to engage in critical thinking about toxic leading in the context of the organization. The people most directly involved—military practitioners and researchers in related fields—need to think more deeply, dialogue more openly, and write more freely about the exchange between toxic leaders and the organizations that keeps breathing life into this pathology. The vital work of identifying the organizational dynamics of toxic leading will not happen on autopilot, without conscious direction and effort. Nor can those of us invested in the maintenance of an effective fighting force afford to wait for others to pursue remedies.

While the task is urgent, it also demands great care. These same professionals will have to grapple with the uncomfortable truth that organizations often inadvertently foster toxic leadership in their struggle to survive and succeed. The argument behind this issue’s special focus is that just as the core reality of organizations is deeply buried and hard to ascertain, the tendency of organizations to mask or rationalize toxic leading is difficult to explain, thus frustrating diagnosis, treatment, and recovery.

Given all the literature stressing the power of organizational culture, the prospect of linkages between toxic leading and organizational dynamics is remarkably under-researched.

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1. George E. Reed, *Tarnished: Toxic Leadership in the U.S. Military* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2015), 48.

2. Reed, 48–49.

Of the few studies which directly address this prospect, one written in 2009 states, “Toxic leaders thrive only in a toxic system.”³ It uses the term “organizational chameleons” to describe toxic military leaders, which stresses this point: There is a give-and-take that occurs between toxic leaders and their organizations and a process to how these leaders use and navigate their organization to remain camouflaged.⁴

The primary theoretical assumption on offer here is that on some level the culture must be conducive to this kind of harm, inadvertently providing mechanisms for leaders to hide their role and even to hide all evidence of the harm itself. Therefore, in these pages you will encounter new thinking on just how organizations cultivate and shape toxic leading.

The opening article of this dedicated issue advances three such mechanisms worthy of study at the level of a military branch: the military service’s key assumptions which stem from its worldview; its method of early survival, or the combination of habits that keep the organization alive in its infancy; and certain features of the service’s “personality,” namely the preferences, biases, and fears that founders, such as General Hap Arnold, tend to bake into the organization.

Next, a team of military authors including Danielle Stringer, Jeff Hurlbert, Michael Boswell, and Steven Barfoot, has selectively reviewed the current and relevant literature, both from the lens of what is available on toxic leading and which scholars are crucial to building this multidisciplinary focus. The article describes that effort and proposes a coherent, Air Force-specific definition of toxic leadership. Two of the authors are part of US Air Force efforts as a service to officially define toxic leading.

The next two articles examine the fascinating role of the follower in exacerbating or even creating toxicity, whether through or around the leader. Fil Arenas investigates the toxicity found in the leader’s entourage, while Matthew Wunderlich employs two case studies in the task of uncovering toxic followership and how its operations can corrupt the leader’s effectiveness.

The issue concludes with an examination of a popular television miniseries, *Band of Brothers* (2001). Amber Batura and Sean Klimek employ historical analysis as a contribution to toxic leading literature. Investigating whether toxic leading is a modern problem or one much older than that, they reveal the lessons history offers to help us understand the phenomenon.

The hope of every author, including myself, is that the reader will not only advance their knowledge of this problem, but also find strength in their organizations and in the good people within them to deal more effectively with toxic leading, to reduce such toxicity, and perhaps to even help leaders avoid it or repent of it! The fact that the military profession performs the indispensable role of national defense should motivate rather than intimidate those in the profession even more to succeed in these vital tasks of combating toxic leading.

3. Michael E. Kusy and Elizabeth L. Holloway, *Toxic Workplace! Managing Toxic Personalities and Their Systems of Power* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 10, qtd. in Reed, 49.

4. Kusy and Holloway, cited in Reed, 49.

Foreword

Regardless of the service, each of us connected to the US military and its vital role in national defense has an obligation to make our military even better than it is at this moment. Rooting out the problem of toxic leading in the military by identifying its contours, strengths, and weaknesses and producing effective responses—without hampering our services and what they do best—is one way to act on that obligation.

While there are so many more people behind the scenes of these pages that have provided invaluable support to the authors and to me, I would be neglectful if I failed to acknowledge at least some of these wonderful people. I could not have completed the work of organizing this issue without the amazing professional and personal counsel and encouragement of my wife, Cris Connelly. Lisa Beckenbaugh, chair of Air Command and Staff College's Department of Leader and Research Development, has been both a wonderful boss and a staunch supporter in all my research efforts—thank you so much! *Air & Space Operations Review* editor in chief Laura Thurston Goodroe and the journal's senior editor Lynn Ink have been champions and guides, and never missed a beat on providing stellar encouragement and guidance throughout the process.

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