

# Reflections on Leadership for Would-Be Commanders

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Highly successful leaders aren't born, they are made. And they start working to be leaders very early. The successful careers of such men as Gen George S. Patton or Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, who became legends in their own time, are worth studying closely for what makes a leader. At West Point one can peruse the library of books General Patton collected and read over the course of a lifetime. Many contain his marginal annotations. One of these is of particular interest. Scrawled on the blank flyleaf in Patton's hand one finds under the heading "Qualities of a great general" a list of attributes he had inferred from reading Fieberger's *Elements of Strategy*. What makes this entry of significance for us is the date, 29 April 1909, *after* Patton's last class as a cadet at the US Military Academy and *before* he received his commission as a second lieutenant.<sup>1</sup> In short, the pattern is clear: early in his career Patton recognized that the road to command involves not only conscientious effort to study the experience of others but thoughtful reflection on the meaning of that experience.

Several years ago this writer was invited to give the dedicatory address on the occasion of General Patton's installation in the Hall of Fame at Fort Leavenworth. In casting about for ideas suitable for the occasion he recalled a most revealing bit of evidence in the published Patton papers. Like many another officer, Patton attended the Command and General Staff School (as it was then called), but unlike most, year after year, following his graduation, he wrote back to the school requesting the current map or tactical problems, the exercises set for the class. He didn't ask for the school solutions but worked them out for himself.<sup>2</sup> Here was a true professional, on his own initiative honing his tactical skills against the day when he would lead an army in battle.

Professional military education (PME) can be of substantial assistance to the resident student who applies himself or herself conscientiously. But PME courses are but fleeting opportunities in an extended military career. For those who seriously aspire to leadership, at all levels, self-study, self-discipline is perhaps an equally fitting term, and sustained reflection are essential.

The supply of readings on leadership is virtually endless. The professional journals frequently run such articles, some of them excellent, some trash. The aspiring leader will dip into this literature, reading critically and reflectively, accepting ideas that seem to have the ring of truth or seem to apply to the problems at hand. Sometimes, but not always, the thoughtful reader will want to make notes. The more thoughtful one is, the briefer the notes. What does one do with the notes? File them? Have you established a filing system? Is it

simple and workable? Show me your filing system, and I'll tell you a good deal about the quality of your mind and your thinking processes. But even if you never again look at those notes after writing them down, all is not lost; the mere act of writing them tends to enhance their grooving in your memory. As the old saw had it, expression sharpens impression.

There are countless books on leadership; one of the best is *The Challenge of Command* by Col Roger Nye, a longtime member of the US Military Academy faculty.<sup>3</sup> This brief paperback, though written by an Army officer, can be used to great advantage by officers in all the services. It offers insights to troop leaders from the junior level all the way up to senior staff planners and decision makers concerned with strategy. Along the way it has suggestions on the moral dimensions of officership and the concept of duty. All the chapters are thought-provoking and all are graced with lists of suggested readings, enough to last a lifetime. Another, particularly appropriate for Air Force officers, is Maj Gen Perry M. Smith's *Taking Charge: A Practical Guide for Leaders*, reflections from General Smith's role as commandant of the National War College where he taught courses on leadership in large organizations.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, even the most thoughtful and sustained reading in the literature of leadership will, of and by itself, never make a successful leader. But it should help us acquire a clear conception of what is really involved in the practice of command at successive echelons. At the same time, such reading and reflection should help make us better followers than we would otherwise become. At every step along the way, whether as leader or follower, one sets the insights derived from reading against one's day-to-day experience. Was I wise or foolish in the way I handled that situation? Did I even try to apply the insights garnered from my readings, or did I act impulsively only to rue my action later?

Effective leaders learn from their mistakes. They are willing to suffer the pain of introspection; they ransack their memories for examples of how others have avoided such blunders. For a veritable mine of examples of the psychology of leadership one can scarcely do better than dip into Maj Gen Aubrey Newman's *What Are Generals Made Of?* which contains a wealth of insights derived from experience from newly minted second lieutenant to senior general.<sup>5</sup>

All of the foregoing is merely by way of introduction, reaffirming a notion that should be self-evident: Though formal professional education is useful, it can never substitute for a lifetime of self-directed, self-imposed, self-conducted, self-education. What follows is a suggested technique, a use-

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ful initial approach, an illustrative first step toward a better understanding of what leadership involves for those who aspire to command and are willing to invest time and thought to the process.

Good commanders are harder to find and to cultivate than good staff officers. Everything the Air Force can do to nurture latent talent for command should be done. This would be true even if the effort appears to benefit only that small fraction of the officer corps eventually selected for high command. Since instruction in the art of command is not limited in utility to those who will eventually wield significant authority, those who serve in staff positions must understand the nature of command as surely as those who exercise it.

The terms *staff* and *command* are shorthand symbols for decidedly intricate activities. It is undoubtedly true that the average officer is confident he or she knows the difference between the two. On the surface the distinction is obvious; it can be summed up in the old maritime adage, “pilot’s advice, captain’s orders.” But it is precisely this obvious quality that appears to lie at the root of the problem. Ask yourself: Do I really grasp the fuller dimensions of these two terms, *staff* and *command*, that represent highly complex congeries of ideas and interrelationships?

If staff and command are key words for leaders at all echelons, then it is imperative to explore them exhaustively. Terms so fraught with meaning defy simple definition. Nevertheless, by extracting the principal words from all the definitions one can assemble from browsing in the literature of leadership, it may be possible to illuminate the two functions usefully. Here is a suggested way of going about such an analysis for yourself.

*Command* involves *authority* to make *decisions* that are translated into orders to carry out an assigned *mission*. Implicit in this definition is the notion of responsibility. If command has been assigned a mission, then command is responsible to the higher authority making the assignment. By the same token there are implied *limitations* to the power or the authority of command. If one undertakes to explore the implications and ramifications of each of the italicized words, the outlines of a fruitful discussion begin to emerge suggestively.

For example, take the word *authority*; there are substantial legal implications to this term that officers need to know. Further, they must be familiar with the organizational structure of the Air Force to understand the flow of authority. But not all the authority a commander enjoys stems from legal sanctions. A substantial fraction is moral, stemming from the perceptions of a leader’s power held by subordinates, perceptions that are shaped by such nonlegal considerations as a leader’s presence, demeanor, personality, and other traits. The greater this perceived authority, the more willing a commander’s superiors are to entrust him or her with still greater legal authority, so legal authority and moral authority interact.

Or again, take the word *responsibility*. One normally thinks of responsibility upward; commanders are responsible to their superiors. True, but in a sense no less real if less clearly defined by law, commanders are also accountable to their subordinates. They must reckon with their superiors’

perception of their actions and live with the consequences good or bad.<sup>6</sup>

Every significant word in the various definitions of command should be identified, extracted, and explored for its larger implications. The two examples above are, of course, by no means exhaustive. They are offered only to indicate in suggestive fashion the direction such analysis might take. A similarly intensive treatment should be accorded the term *staff*.

Staff functions can be reduced to three: a staff *investigates*, *formulates*, and *facilitates*. Each of these roles lends itself to substantial elaboration. *Investigate* implies study, that is to say collect, record, assess, or evaluate all aspects of identifying, retrieving, storing, and processing information. *Formulates* implies conceptualizing, planning, projecting, devising alternative courses for the consideration of command. Also implicit in this function is the notion of initiating or originating concepts, proposals, or programs for command decision. Finally, *facilitates* implies informing, coordinating, supervising, monitoring all functions that close the feedback loop in the hierarchy from the upper levels of command to the subordinate levels of operations—the people who execute, implement, perform or carry out orders.

Just as the analysis of key nouns associated with “command” produced a number of suggestive leads for the development of a provocative discussion of leadership, so too a study of the action verbs associated with “staff” offers fruitful suggestions to the same end. The symbolic word *investigate*, for example, virtually dictates a whole series of lessons and exercises designed to train officers to perform this vital staff function with dispatch and precision. The same is obviously true of *formulate* and *facilitate*. This much must be evident. More subtle and more elusive is the implied interrelationships of these several subfunctions of staff work and the relation of staff to command.

Who, for example, initiates? The conventional conception envisions ideas or policies as stemming from command, flowing down to staff for processing, then, with the imprimatur of command in the form of an order continuing on down still further to the operating echelon. This may, indeed, be a pattern, but it is by no means the only pattern. Commanders may or may not initiate actions, concoct policies, or dream up programs. Whether they take such actions on their own initiative or rely upon a staff to feed such ideas up to them, the authority to act and the ultimate responsibility rests with them. A staff, at best, is an extension of the commander’s person. It may originate and devise all significant policies and plans, it may actually initiate every significant action; but unless the commander adopts the proposals of the staff, those proposals remain just that and nothing more.

Clearly, well-trained staff officers will not only recognize the two different styles of command, but will appreciate the fact that the nature of the staff in which they function will vary, depending upon the style of command congenial to the leader. Both styles can be made to work, as numerous historical examples of each testify, but manifestly the most effective style is that in which commanders encourage staff initiatives. This kind of commander extends and enlarges the scope of his or her own creativity whereas, by contrast, com-

manders who limit their staffs to a largely reactive role restrict themselves to the range of their own resources and reduce the job satisfaction and thus the effectiveness of their staffs. Here there is no need to develop further the ramifications of the command-staff relationship; the foregoing should be sufficient to illustrate suggestively some of the several crucially important areas toward which a discussion of leadership might usefully be directed.

#### Notes

1. Col Roger H. Nye, "The Patton Library Comes to West Point," *12 Friends of the West Point Library Newsletter*, March 1989, 1.

2. Martin Blumenson, *The Patton Papers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972–1974), 2 vols.

3. Col Roger H. Nye, *The Challenge of Command* (Wayne, N.J.: Avery Publishing Group, Inc., 1986).

4. Maj Gen Perry M. Smith, *Taking Charge: A Practical Guide for Leaders* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1986).

5. Maj Gen Aubrey S. Newman, *What Are Generals Made Of?* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1987). Most of the episodes in this book are reprinted from *Army* magazine where they originally appeared.

6. For an illuminating analysis of the meaning of authority and responsibility, see Lt Comdr B. C. Dean. "Authority: The Weakened Link," *97 USN Institute Proceedings* (July 1971): 48–52.