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June 1, 2023

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“Educating Today’s Leaders For Tomorrow”

**Leadership Attributes, Shared Understanding, and Stress
Management in Irregular Warfare**

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Class 73

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6 November 2022

Leadership Attributes, Shared Understanding, and Stress Management in Irregular Warfare

When people think about war, they usually imagine the contemporary methodology that most of today's nation-states employ. Their mental image might be of infantry Soldiers executing tactical maneuvers in various formations or tanks and field artillery raining steel on enemy positions. On the contrary, most people's minds might not summon visions of guerilla fighters or insurgents who engage their enemy and then melt away into the background. However, this sort of fighter exists on today's battlefield and illustrates an atypical form of conflict – irregular warfare. Irregular warfare includes guerilla fighters and insurgencies and can incorporate other activities such as terrorism, sabotage, subversion, and other asymmetrical threats (Department of Defense, 2010). Wars such as World War I, World War II, the Korean War, and the Gulf War highlight the application of contemporary methods due to large-scale combat operations. However, wars like Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Ukraine demonstrate the use of non-contemporary means to achieve results because the fighting conditions changed for all participants and varied from that of large-scale battles.

In relative terms, irregular warfare tends to have a negative or less-than-honorable connotation. However, many nations, including the United States, utilize irregular warfare to achieve an end state that would be otherwise impossible to attain using contemporary methods. Furthermore, it is imperative to understand that, just like contemporary warfare, irregular warfare requires agile and sophisticated leadership to yield success on the battlefield. This concept stems from the axiom that irregular warfare commonly requires small group tactics that cut off fighting elements from their larger organization and thus require a decentralized form of command and control. This paper discusses how leaders in decentralized command structures adjust their

leadership attributes of character, presence, and intellect, create a shared understanding and manage stress during irregular warfare.

Adjusting Leadership Attributes

The structure of irregular warfare requires leaders of small groups to shift and pivot as the operational environment changes and opportunities become available. While a leader's agility might make it easier to adjust to the changing environment, their leadership attributes of character, presence, and intellect could either assist or dissuade their ability to adjust based on the leader's mindset. The Department of the Army (2022) affirms that character is a person's authentic essence, comprised from their unique morals, virtues, values, consciousness, and sense of purpose. These elements constitute their identity and act as the moral framework for all their actions and decisions.

Often what drives a leader towards engaging in irregular warfare directly links to their character, and, in that case, their character is less likely to change or adjust. Consider the rise of insurgents during America's last war with Iraq as an example where irregular fighters engaged in warfare primarily based on their morals, values, and purpose. In this example, the character of Iraqi insurgent fighters served as a call to arms because, from their perspective, their values and principles compelled them to try to legitimize their ideas and actions in the face of an American-backed Iraqi government (Crisis Group, 2006). This example also highlights the idea that the character of insurgent leaders served as more of a forcing function than anything else.

While a fixed sense of character may initially compel individuals to gravitate towards irregular warfare, leaders are more likely to adjust their presence and develop their intellect to strengthen asymmetrical operations. A leader's presence relates to their overall demeanor, actions, and words while engaging their Soldiers. During irregular warfare, leaders utilize their

presence to motivate their Soldiers to achieve victory despite unfavorable odds. For example, the current war between Russia and Ukraine demonstrates how the presumed underdog of the fight – Ukraine – utilizes motivation to repel attacks and protect its sovereignty against the invasion from Russia and, more impressively, counterattack to devastate Russia's military. The defiance demonstrated by Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, whose presence serves as extrinsic motivation for the rest of the country to stand up and fight, emboldens Ukrainian fighters to persist and win.

Like presence, leaders apply their intellect based on the situations they encounter. They utilize their knowledge and experience to identify problem sets and create shared understanding, enabling them to think critically and creatively to work out the problem and apply solutions (Department of the Army, 2022). While there are numerous forms of knowledge, most leaders develop their intellect through education and experience. Furthermore, intellect not only refers to individual aptitude but also implies a need to understand which team members possess expertise in other areas and skill sets so that leaders can leverage their team's talents in various situations. Leaders of great intellect develop an understanding of their adversaries, rapidly adapt to their environment, take the initiative, and create opportunities to exploit their foes. For example, Hamming (2022) indicates that there has been a significant uptick in intra-jihadist conflict and fratricide. By having this knowledge, western countries can exploit this confrontation between warring jihadists to increase fratricide among these groups, further weakening or destroying them and reducing the overall number of jihadists worldwide. The West's exploitation of intra-jihadists fratricide would be a significant achievement in the West's strategy and shows an example of how to leverage intellect in irregular warfare.

Creating a Shared Understanding

Part of being a leader of intellect means that the leader understands they cannot single-handedly accomplish every task associated with mission accomplishment. Instead, leaders must rely on their teams to fully comprehend the strategic vision of the operation and execute tasks that support their objectives, especially when engaged in decentralized operations. Decentralized execution necessitates information dissemination at the lowest level feasible to enable subordinates to make well-informed decisions consistent with their commander's intentions (Department of the Army, 2019). This concept captures the essence of creating a shared understanding and serves as a principle of mission command within the U.S. Army. Creating a shared understanding becomes particularly necessary during irregular warfare because asymmetrical operations seldom rely on top-to-bottom communication during engagements. Instead, sister elements depend on mutual accord to safeguard the ability to move freely in the battle space in support of tactical objectives.

Additionally, asymmetrical fighting can incorporate unified action partners from other nation-states alongside groups of decentralized local elements. When operating with unified action partners to achieve a common goal, shared understanding becomes critical to meeting objectives. For example, Downin (2021) suggests that General Petraeus created a shared understanding and aligned American Soldiers, allies, and the Iraqi populace in Mosul, Iraq, during the Iraq war to fight insurgents. Downin (2021) further declares that General Petraeus established conditions that allowed partners to participate in asymmetrical operations in his area of responsibility, explained the purpose of those measures to local governments, and included allied troops in the planning stages to create a common operating picture for all stakeholders. This example highlights a turning point in the Iraq war and attributes much of General Petraeus's

success to his ability to comprehend an ill-structured problem, develop a common operating picture, set goals, and communicate these aspects with his allies and subordinates to achieve favorable outcomes.

Managing Stress

No matter how great a leader's attributes are or how well they create a shared understanding for their compatriots, it is inevitable that stress becomes a considerable element that leaders must contend with in war. The two types of stress that leaders must be aware of are physical and non-physical. Physical stress can be immediate, caused by internal physiological demands or external environmental factors, and usually has a negative impact on the body; however, in contrast, non-physical stress could appear immediately or over time and generates from mental stressors that challenge the brain's perceptual, cognitive, and emotional systems (Department of the Army, 2016). Stress management in combat operations requires a balanced approach. Under certain conditions, stress can lead to a Soldier's increased performance because the body creates hormones such as adrenaline, which increases blood circulation, breathing rate, and alertness (Cleveland Clinic, 2022). An increase in adrenaline may prepare a Soldier for the impending fight; however, this state of readiness is unsustainable in the long term, and overloading stress can render a Soldier combat ineffective.

While it is unrealistic to assume that leaders can account for every stressor associated with combat and irregular warfare, there are some definitive areas where leaders may exert positive control. Of those areas, sleep hygiene and nutrition are the most impactful and controllable factors in the operational environment. Sleep hygiene aims to ensure the Soldier's body and brain have sufficiently recovered to withstand repeated exposure to physical and mental stress. Sleep deprivation can have extreme impacts, including decreased motor function

and hallucinations. For example, Barzilay (2015) recounts a story where former Navy SEAL Stew Smith claimed he managed without sleep for three days before he began to hallucinate things that were not there. After his continued wake for 72 hours, Smith recalled seeing a bodybuilder where there was actually a fire hydrant, as well as mistaking an airplane for a flying horse and a bridge for a gigantic Pez dispenser. While this scenario played out in a controlled training environment, it demonstrates how the consequences of sleep deprivation in combat would more than likely lead to severe consequences and adverse outcomes.

The asymmetrical environment poses other challenges, too, including limited access to quality nutrition. Nutrition is equally vital as sleep hygiene because it fuels the energy needed to sustain combat operations. Unfortunately, Soldiers and leaders sometimes undervalue nutrition, especially when deployed to an austere environment that lacks quality food items. Because of the lack of quality food availability, Soldiers often turn to stimulants such as caffeine and nicotine. Copeland (2019) further codifies this point and argues that tobacco and coffee fueled most modern wars in today's history. Leaders must help Soldiers develop personal nutrition plans that support ideal physical and cognitive function and lifetime illness and injury prevention (Department of the Army, 2020).

A more significant and challenging area for leaders who manage stress for their teams and themselves is the ability to deal with injury and death on the battlefield. The psychological effects of seeing or causing death are unparalleled in life and present an extreme challenge for some Soldiers, particularly when required to continue fighting. Complications to this notion occur when Soldiers experience things like increased civilian casualty rates of women and children or severely limited access to behavioral health care for extended periods. These experiences can lead to mental health issues, commonly referred to as post-traumatic stress,

which impedes a Soldier's ability to fight. Additionally, these mental health issues may not form immediately and could go unrecognized for long periods or surface randomly. For example, Martin (2011) declares that a Pentagon study found that almost 30% of the drone pilots it looked at experienced what is known as "burnout" in the military. Martin (2011) also contends that another survey of drone operators on active duty revealed that 17% earn a "clinically anxious" diagnosis, and the pilots' stress levels have increased to the point where they are affecting their professional and personal lives.

Summary

Regardless of if it is drone pilots who fly combat missions from their workstations or civilians who pick up arms in defense of what they love, the non-contemporary battlefield poses significant challenges that leaders must accept and adapt to in order to succeed. This paper discussed how leaders in decentralized command structures adjust their leadership attributes of character, presence, and intellect, create a shared understanding, and manage stress during irregular warfare. The examples in this paper show the need for continued awareness regarding challenges posed by irregular warfare. Furthermore, this composition demonstrates that irregular warfare is an amorphous form of battle and requires adaptability, familiarity with the common operating picture, and sophisticated leadership strategies to be prosperous in tomorrow's wars.

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