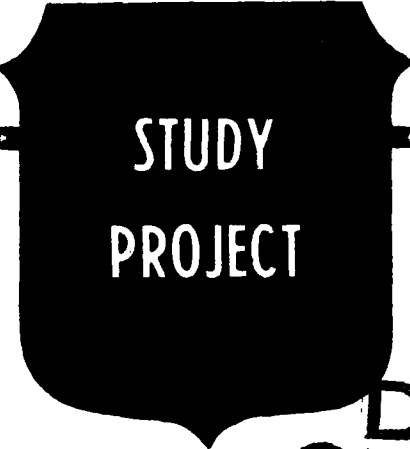


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LEADERSHIP AT THE OPERATIONAL LEVEL

BY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL CHARLES M. BLACK, FA

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USAWC MILITARY STUDIES PROGRAM PAPER

LEADERSHIP AT THE OPERATIONAL LEVEL

AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT  
INTENDED FOR PUBLICATION

by

Lieutenant Colonel Charles M. Black, FA

Lieutenant Colonel Clayton R. Newell  
Project Advisor

U.S. Army War College  
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania 17013  
17 March, 1988

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ABSTRACT

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At first glance, there appears to be many different styles of leadership demonstrated by the greatest generals of history -- the most successful of the operational-level leaders. This paper examines the proposition that these styles are more properly identifiable as the personas chosen by each leader, and that they otherwise shared an identifiable set of personal leadership qualities that are the requisites for superior operational-level leadership. The specific personal leadership qualities are discussed in detail, along with historical examples intended to support the logic used and to clarify understanding.

*for Military Commanders,  
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Let's start with a tired but assumed true cliché: there are as many leadership styles as there are leaders. After considerable study, I believe that this cliché is not accurate when the topic of discussion is leadership at the operational level. At first glance, there certainly do appear to be widely divergent yet nonetheless successful leadership styles practiced by many of the great generals of history. Upon closer inspection, however, an astounding degree of similarity of personal leadership qualities is woven into the leadership of our most successful and most highly regarded senior leaders (I will name but a few specific persons: plug in who you will; the principle still works). This certainly indicates that the particular combination or set of leadership qualities of the operational leader determine the effectiveness of his leadership style.

Casual observers often tend to confuse the image that a particular leader personates with his actual leadership style. That leadership style is based on personal leadership qualities that may actually be in opposition to the image that, for one or several of myriad reasons, the leader feels that he must project. To determine the true leadership style of any operational-level leader, or to determine what successful operational-level leaders are made of, we must look beneath the personation to the person: we must identify the personal leadership qualities that shape the "how" of that officer's leadership style.

My contention is that, regardless of the image that they individually chose to project, the majority of the great generals shared in common certain personal leadership qualities.

Many people have espoused their preferred lists of qualities, traits, etc., required for successful leadership. I have my own, submitted herein, that I feel were shared by most of the great generals. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the personal leadership qualities that I contend are most

important to successful leadership at the operational level. The personal leadership qualities discussed herein are not intended to be all-inclusive; you can no doubt think of others. Only those personal leadership qualities that I consider most important are discussed. There is no relative importance or priority implied by the order in which the qualities are discussed. The order used is merely a convenient way in which to address the different qualities.

Self-knowledge (Self-confidence). Leadership consists of an upwards spiral, a spiral of self-knowledge, self-improvement...<sup>1</sup> Many people have realized that it is difficult to know where to go unless you first know where you are. The bedrock of a leader's ability to lead is an understanding of people. Because operational-level leaders, of necessity, work with abstractions and requisite trust in others, this is especially true for them. This understanding of people must start with self. Understanding oneself helps us to understand others; to put ourselves into their shoes. General Anthony McAuliffe commented, "A combat leader has to be something of a psychologist... this is something that a man learns over the years...an understanding of men...you learn to measure people."<sup>2</sup> General George Patton told his son, "...what you must know is how man reacts. Weapons change, but man, who uses them, changes not at all. To win battles you do not beat weapons: you beat the soul of every man..."<sup>3</sup>

We measure other persons against the yardstick of our own experience with ourselves. If we do not know ourselves, we cannot know others. Leaders are actually three people: who they are, who they think they are, and who they are perceived to be;<sup>4</sup> they must strive to make these three as like one. One tool in this effort is continued improvement of self-knowledge. The great

majority of discussions of leadership identify the critical need for self-knowledge as a requisite for fully effective leadership. Successful operational-level leaders have accepted responsibility for themselves. They have identified their strengths and seek to use them to their advantage. They also know their weaknesses, and take action to compensate for them. Perhaps most important, they have the self-confidence, born of their efforts at self-knowledge and the skills learned thereby, to perform exceptionally as senior leaders.

Intellect. Clausewitz wrote that "no great commander was ever a man of limited intellect", and that the difficulty of the intellectual activity increases as one moves "up the ladder."<sup>5</sup> I accept this as a partial description of intellect, but prefer a broader answer. In his discussion of military genius, Clausewitz included a capacity to "scent out the truth."<sup>6</sup> In addition to pure intelligence, successful operational-level leaders have the wisdom, good judgement, and emotional balance to make critical decisions based on ambiguous information. Because operational-level leadership involves a significant amount of working with uncertainty, the most successful of the operational-level leaders possess what Napoleon called "a superior understanding"; understanding based on training and practice but relying no less on intuitive judgement than on rational calculation.<sup>7</sup> This is similar to the Clausewitzian description of "coup d'oeil"; the "inner light that leads to the truth."<sup>8</sup>

There is one additional component of the intellect that is demonstrated by successful operational-level leaders. That component is the capacity for learning. Great people follow ideas. They actively seek new knowledge and concepts, and value innovation. It has been said that "the true general is

the creator quite as much as the applier of knowledge."<sup>9</sup> History convinces me that this is true.

"Strategic" Thought. Related to intellect because it is a mental quality, strategic thought refers to the operational-level leader's sense of breadth in framing his decisions and actions. He is always cognizant of the "ripple" effect. First and second-order effects are considered as an integral part of the decision-making process, as is the relationship of the operational-level decision to the overall strategy. The element of time is also integrated into this process: it is virtually demanded for successful integrated thinking, cause-and-effect considerations, and anticipating future events and requirements.

Anticipation is an element of strategic thinking. By being able to be proactive rather than reactive, successful operational-level leaders can act to shape the issues that affect them, instead of being shaped by the issues.

A final element of strategic thought is a sense of history. Field Manual (FM) 22-103 encourages senior leaders to maintain a historical perspective to "ascertain those lessons and principles that led to success or failure on the battlefield."<sup>10</sup> Ardant du Picq stated that "Only study of the past can give us a sense of reality, and show us how the soldier will fight in the future."<sup>11</sup> The very study of war theory that operational-level leaders must do demands a study of military history, for the theories are evolved over time and current ideas (and "innovations") are generally based on historical experiences. Also, the successful operational-level leader is aware that the present is tomorrow's history. He is concerned with his effect on posterity. He is sensitive to the time factor in the cause-and-effect relationships discussed earlier, and avoids doing in the present something that will be

counter-productive in the future, or serve as a hinderance to future efforts.

Character. General Dwight Eisenhower stated that "character in many ways is everything in leadership."<sup>12</sup> Some (probably not many) might argue the relative importance of this quality, but none would argue that it is not a requisite leadership quality for successful operational-level leadership. General Joseph Stilwell stated, "A good commander is a man of high character (this is the most important attribute)..."<sup>13</sup> General Archibald Wavell said, "(the leader) must have good character..."<sup>14</sup> General Matthew Ridgway argues more strongly, saying, "Character is the bedrock on which the whole edifice of leadership rests."<sup>15</sup>

Difficulty arises in trying to get our intellectual "hands" around the idea of character: it is a many-faceted quality, with myriad opinions on its integral components. I find that the following elements comprise character, in its definition as an element of successful operational-level leadership: integrity, honesty, emotional balance, stamina/endurance, and selflessness.

Many of the greatest generals agreed that the first two elements from the preceding list must be included in any discussion of character. To General Omar Bradley character meant "dependability, integrity, the characteristic of never knowingly doing anything wrong, that you would never cheat anyone, that you would give everybody a fair deal. Character is an all-inclusive thing. If a man has character everyone has confidence in him."<sup>16</sup> General William Simpson said that "A man of high character has integrity, he is honest, he is reliable, he is straightforward in dealing with people..."<sup>17</sup>

There is less consensus on the other elements that I include as components of character, but ample arguments for such inclusion do exist. Clausewitz states that "strength of character does not consist solely in having powerful

feelings, but in maintaining one's balance in spite of them,"<sup>18</sup> and "...a strong character is one that will not become unbalanced by the most powerful emotions."<sup>19</sup> This is the essence of what I mean by emotional balance; the ability to remain cool-headed and stable under stress.

Stamina/endurance, as a component of character, means the capacity for sustained mental agility and intellectual honesty. At the operational level, where uncertainty and abstraction are the norm, this is no small requirement. But, the great generals all demonstrated this concept of mental stamina.

Finally, all successful operational-level leaders demonstrate selflessness as an element of their character. General Eisenhower had a slogan that he tried to live by: "There's no telling how much one can accomplish so long as one doesn't need to get all the credit for it."<sup>20</sup> Selflessness in this context goes beyond giving or sharing credit. It can also be expressed in the concept of loyalty; to subordinates, to leaders, to units or institutions, to the Nation. General George Marshall fought against a move to have him promoted to Field Marshall because he feared that it would ultimately hurt his rapport with Congress and present an obstacle to the primary mission of winning the war. Secretary Stimson considered Marshall's opposition to be a "wonderfully unselfish thing..."<sup>21</sup>

Courage. Without question, courage is an undeniable, clearly demanded leadership quality for the military leader at any level. For the operational-level leader, courage has a much broader application than the purely physical dimension. Clausewitz speaks of the "courage to accept responsibility, either before the tribunal of some outside power or before the court of one's own conscience."<sup>22</sup> Richard Simpkin stated that the operational-level commander "needs the moral courage to keep his judgement unclouded when forced to accept

short-term set-backs for the sake of long-term aims, or to follow a course which he knows will cause heavy casualties among men who trust and respect him. Above all, he needs the moral courage to make big decisions fast and to stick to them."<sup>23</sup>

The preceding quotes provide insight into the several elements that are included under the leadership quality called courage; the elements of decisiveness, tenacity, and risk-taking.

Clausewitz discussed determination, but I infer from his description that his thoughts seem to closely match my ideas about decisiveness. He said that "the role of determination is to limit the agonies of doubt and the perils of hesitation..."<sup>24</sup> and, "Determination proceeds from a special type of mind, from a strong one...Conscious of the need to be decisive..."<sup>25</sup> I doubt that any of the great generals were often guilty of vacillation!

The element that I call tenacity refers to the conviction to stick to a given course of action, minus some sound basis for making a change or correction. General Eisenhower stuck to his decision to conduct campaigns west of the Rhine to destroy German forces following the Ardennes counter-offensive, although Brooke strongly objected. Several weeks later, Brooke was to tell Eisenhower, "You were completely right...thank God you stuck to your guns!"<sup>26</sup> This same conviction must also carry the operational-level leader through periods of uncertainty. General Eisenhower again, remembering the decision regarding the date for the Normandy invasion, wrote, "Again I had to endure the interminable wait that always intervenes between the final decision and the earliest possible determination of success or failure..."<sup>27</sup>

Finally, courage at the operational level of leadership must include an ability to accept risk. It simply cannot be avoided at the operational level.

Some argue that risk-taking is the essence of operational art. I will not belabor the issue here: there are certainly ample proofs of the fact that risk is present at the operational level, and examples of how great generals have withstood the potentially debillitating effects of sustained mental operations in conditions of uncertainty, and of their outstanding successes. There is an old adage that says, "A flock of sheep led by a lion will prevail over a pride of lions led by a sheep."<sup>28</sup> The record of our most successful operational-level leaders demonstrates the accuracy of that adage.

Vision. FM 22-103 states that "...vision provides the capability to organize because it establishes focus for action and guidance to the organization which will follow. Moreover, it is the basis on which senior leaders or commanders generate the moral leadership power our constitutional heritage requires to activate the professional resources needed to muster and sustain organizational trust, cohesion, commitment, and will to meet any challenge."<sup>29</sup> These are beautiful words: further, they are clearly truthful words. FM 22-103 also says that, "...vision, for those at senior levels, is a personal concept of what the organization must be capable of doing by some future point. It is the target."<sup>30</sup> This is the essence of vision for operational-level leaders.

The great leaders of our time have been not only effective operators and decisionmakers, but also people of vision who have had a marvelous sense of what was possible, how to set and articulate goals, and how to motivate their people to strive successfully for those goals.<sup>31</sup> Virtually all of our successful operational-level leaders have demonstrated the communicative ability to instill noble, transcending values or motives into the activities of their organizations.

Vision also shares some elements with the leadership quality of Strategic Thought, which was discussed earlier. Vision and Strategic Thought share a basic requirement for the ability to understand how the operational-level vision and activities fit into the larger, strategic, picture. This aspect of the quality of vision calls upon operational-level leaders to have a global perspective. The best of our operational-level leaders demonstrate "a sense or breadth,...[the ability] to see relationships between apparently unrelated objects, to see patterns in incomplete information, to draw accurate conclusions from inchoate data."<sup>32</sup> Thus, my concept of the vision shared by the great generals marries the ability to conceptualize an endpoint or condition, and to inspire people to strive toward it, with the ability to place that same endpoint or condition in the proper context within a strategic or world view; even to have considered the larger picture while formulating the endpoint.

Communicative Ability. I simply cannot conceive of any way to lead men without an ability to communicate. Truly, communicative ability is essential in all forms of interpersonal relations; leader, follower, and peer. In the preface to his book Follow Me, Major General Aubrey Newman wrote, "This book deals throughout with [handling men], the management of men in command and leadership..."<sup>33</sup> He then goes on, in nearly five dozen vignettes from his personal experiences and observations, to illustrate the central importance of communications in the business of management of men.

Because the scope of their responsibilities is so broad, operational-level leaders cannot personally "do everything." Beyond the obvious requirements for direct, one-on-one communications, it is critically important to successful operational-level leadership that the leader be able to obtain the commitment of his subordinates to the accomplishment of his vision. He must

be able to make them understand the basic direction of his vision -- his goals, purposes, etc. -- so that he can allow them adequate leadership latitude and still be confident that their actions will not be at cross purposes to his desired course. General Glenn Otis says, "A tactical commander needs a clear idea of the operational scheme to understand why, as an example, he receives little or no air support although his forces are being hard-pressed. Each corps commander has to understand my intent and concept; otherwise he will spend a lot of time crying."<sup>34</sup>

Communicative ability includes two-way skills. The successful operational-level leaders were also good listeners. Part of General George Marshall's success as a leader was a result of his ability to listen when subordinates reported to him. He quickly grasped the basic points and had a remarkable memory for details.<sup>35</sup> General Marshall's ability is shared by other operational-level leaders of his stature.

The best of the operational-level leaders are not only good speakers and writers and listeners, but are also skillful persuaders and explainers. Wellington, victor at Waterloo, once said, "I like to convince people rather than stand upon mere authority."<sup>36</sup> The ambiguity inherent in problem-solving at the operational level allows for divergent opinions, based upon the different viewpoints (i.e., responsibilities) of the participants in the solution process. Successful generals are able to mediate and negotiate the resultant conflicts in the process of, as Wellington said, "convincing" the group toward consensus, or at least acceptance. These leaders are also equally able to encourage and use healthy conflict to ensure that as many sides as possible of an issue are addressed before a decision is made. They realize that conflict is vital to dynamic problem-solving, and are able to use it to their

advantage and to better accomplish the given mission or solve the given problem.

Coalition Building. The ability of large organizations to function together as effective teams is dependent on several factors. Some of the most important (but by no means all) of these factors include a collective sense of purpose, a common feeling of team membership, and shared values. The best of the operational-level leaders develop a sense of teamwork in their organizations by constantly communicating their vision and intent, by clarifying standards, and by their personal involvement across a broad range of levels and activities. They create a feeling of shared responsibility for outcomes. Further, they encourage innovation, fully realizing its great value in combat (and the need to nurture and develop it before the shooting starts). Finally, successful operational-level leaders realize the importance of their subordinates' perception of them. J.F.C. Fuller pointed out that "...[the general] always sets the example which the bulk of his subordinate commanders will follow. If he becomes an office soldier they will become office soldiers. If he does not face discomfort and danger, neither will they..."<sup>37</sup> The best of the senior leaders are able to skillfully develop this needed coalition and teamwork, and to shape the "social architecture" needed to encourage and support a viable collectivity of effort.

My prescription for the characteristics of an effective social architecture is similar to what Martin van Creveld identified as the needs for successful organizations: decision thresholds fixed as far down the hierarchy as possible, with freedom of action at the bottom of the military structure; creation of such low decision thresholds through providing "self-contained" units at the lower levels; effective two-way information transmission; active search for information by each headquarters, to supplement routine information sent

up to it by subordinate units; and maintenance of an informal (as well as formal) network of communications.<sup>38</sup> As a minimum, all but one of these needs are also conditions that nurture teamwork.

At its center, coalition building is sharing. Successful operational-level leaders have the ability to develop mutual trust and confidence and a feeling of effort and reward between themselves and their subordinates. That is the basis of coalition building.

Morale (Motivation) Building. The best of the operational-level leaders understand the human factor, and meet the needs of their subordinates. They actively seek opportunities to recognize people as "winners", especially at the lower levels of leadership and among the junior enlisted personnel. Conversely, they handle corrective action with sensitivity and in a manner designed to produce as positive an outcome as possible. When it came to recognition for performance, Patton believed that a general officer should "assume the responsibility for failure, whether he deserves it or not"; and if things went well, he should "invariably give the credit for success to others, whether they deserve it or not." His reasoning was that a general who took all the blame and gave everyone else the credit would get more out of his subordinates.<sup>39</sup> Admittedly, this is an extreme example, but the basic idea has great merit: sharing success has been a common practice among the great generals.

The best generals also demonstrate that they care about soldiers, in the way that they deal with their soldiers. The soldiers of their organizations are treated with the respect due to them as contributing members. They are treated as adults; provided information salient to their duties, provided practical autonomy, listened to, and made to believe that their opinions and suggestions are worthwhile and desired.

This discussion of morale (motivation) building has implied throughout the operational-level leader's personal interaction with subordinates. The most successful operational-level leaders have interacted with (or at least been visible to) their subordinates; especially at the lower levels. After Issus, and despite a sword wound in his thigh, Alexander toured to see the wounded and promised all who were known to have been brave in that battle "a donation suitable to their desert."<sup>40</sup> General Patton believed that a leader, in order to make himself known in the lower echelons, should exhibit an individualism calculated to cause men to talk about him. His soldiers knew him as a personality. Those who were close to Patton saw him as an actor. He could turn his showmanship on and off as the situation required. He had different characterizations.<sup>41</sup> But, Patton recognized that personal leadership could be overdone. "I find," he wrote, "that people get used to you if they see too much of you." He maintained a careful balance to avoid overexposure.<sup>42</sup> General Patton may be, for some, an illustration of the far end of the spectrum of leadership style, but I am confident that no one will deny that he possessed leadership quality as a morale (motivation) builder. He shares this quality with the majority of the other great generals.

Understanding of the Nature of Power and Authority. General James G. Harbord stated a great truth with the words, "Discipline and morale influence the inarticulate vote that is constantly taken by masses of men when the order comes to move forward...a variant of the crowd psychology that inclines it to follow a leader. But the Army does not move forward until the motion has carried. 'Unanimous consent' only follows cooperation between the individual men in ranks."<sup>43</sup> The mere holding of power and authority does not overcome the historic conflicts of social order: in fact these elements, if used

unwisely, may well exacerbate such conflicts. The successful operational-level leaders understood that conferred power and authority is only minimally effective until the conferee earns the respect and trust of his subordinates; a higher plane of cooperation than mere crowd psychology, and the "loftiness" of which can be directly affected by the given general. J.F.C. Fuller said, "...whatever a general may be, he is always the example which the bulk of his subordinate commanders will follow...If the general-in-chief does not face discomfort and danger neither will they; if they do not, neither will their subordinates, until the repercussion exhausts itself in a devitalized firing line."<sup>44</sup>

Successful leadership is based more on consideration and respect of men than anything else. General George Marshall, correcting a young officer, first took him out of the hearing of the men, then said, "Hayne, you were perfectly right in reprimanding that man; but you weakened your position by losing your temper. You must also remember that the man is an American citizen just the same as you are."<sup>45</sup> Just as an artisan must understand how to use his tools, so must the military leader, whose tools are his men...Patton told his commanders, "General Officers must be vitally interested in everything that interests the soldier."<sup>46</sup>

The great generals also understood that power and authority carry an aura of their own, and that with some calculated efforts they can use this to advantage. A review of the preceding examples cited in this discussion will provide many examples of image (even legend)-building. Although General MacArther was seen only infrequently by his troops, his style of showmanship when he did visit surrounded him with a mystic aura. General Patton, of course, embodied high drama. General James Gavin, recalling action on Sicily, relates,

"As I drove up on the high ground...there was General George Patton, ivory-handled pistols and all, standing overlooking the busy scene in the harbor... He exuded confidence and was very much in command. It was good to see him..."<sup>47</sup>

And now I have come full circle: having begun with leadership personation, I end with it as a facet of the understanding of power and authority. The great operational-level leaders share the knowledge that true power and authority are conferred upon the leader by the led. And, although image can contribute, the means by which leaders gain the willing performance (and perhaps even sacrifice) of their subordinates is through the exercise of a specific brand of leadership; a style that incorporates the leadership qualities discussed herein.

I believe that the ten personal leadership qualities discussed here are shared by the most successful operational-level leaders; that, in fact, the qualities are required for "greatness." Leadership is an art; as such, certain talents are required to practice the art successfully. At the operational level of leadership, the talents required are these ten personal leadership qualities. Not all painters are capable of becoming great masters. Not all military leaders are capable of becoming great generals. The "spark of greatness" comes from the unique combination of human qualities -- leadership qualities -- discussed.

In one way or another, all ten leadership qualities ultimately involve people. "The art of leadership, the art of command, whether the forces be large or small, is the art of dealing with humanity."<sup>48</sup>

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