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One Civilian's View of Military Leadership

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Military Strategy and Operations

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Leadership is  
one of the most observed  
and  
least understood phenomena  
on earth.

James MacGregor Burns

Civilians who work for the U.S. Government are decidedly not accustomed to being led by their military colleagues. Outgunned certainly, out-muscled probably, outnumbered occasionally but out-led **never!** The military might be the largest single U.S. Government institution and the world's most powerful military instrument but it is constitutionally required to be subservient to civilian authorities. The National Command Authority (NCA) is civilian-oriented and civilian-dominated. God's in His Heaven. All's right with The World.

It would be highly unusual for a civilian (a) to attend an interagency meeting where the military actually controlled the agenda or (b) to participate in an interagency working group where the military was formally in charge. Therefore, a senior military school like the National War College (NWC) is a true educational experience for the relatively few civilians who are selected to attend. For every suit there are at least three uniforms and enough ribbons to decorate an entire office. For the civilians The World as they know it has been turned upside down. The civilian masters have miraculously, mysteriously and uncomfortably become the servants and all is decidedly not right with The World. Besides all the new acronyms (JSTARS must have been grabbed by the military before George Lucas needed it for "The Phantom Menace"), there are new protocols (e.g., higher-ranking officers calling lower ranking officers "sir") and old words suddenly have new meanings (the term "detailer" comes to mind).

This essay is an attempt by one civilian student from the NWC Class of 1999, a person who has had limited professional contact with the military, to delineate and describe certain military leadership qualities and preferences that have been exhibited by the military members of the NWC Class of 1999. This essay is based on some research (see Bibliography), many conversations with classmates (civilian and military) and daily personal observations on how my military classmates behave and, more importantly, lead in a microcosmic interagency setting. There have been many opportunities to make these observations during the past eight months in seminars, in lectures, on PREP-Ts, during sports (where we constantly learn from defeat), during social events and in committee room exchanges of the heated variety.

This essay is not a scientific study nor is it merely personal opinion. It is meant to be an objective view by a Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR) on military leadership and its essential qualities. Hopefully, it will not detract from this essay to declare "up front" that most of my military classmates exhibit effective and responsive leadership which is all the more impressive given some of the institutional barriers and cultural imperatives that often work against them.

*Observation 1:* Both civilian and military cultures must replace the words "civilian masters" with "civilian authorities" or civilian managers" or something more value-neutral than "civilian masters." For every master there must be a servant or,

worse, a slave. Our military colleagues are our valued advisors and we civilians are their customers or clients. Ours is a partnership based on national interests, hopefully complementary national and military security strategies, realistic objectives, reasonable requirements, clear responsibilities and separate functions.

Civilian control of the military is not civilian superiority over the military. It is the constitutionally delineated relationship between civilian authority and the military instrument and it has worked for over 200 years. The relationship may be occasionally tense but it must be continually and mutually respectful. A certain amount of tension is normal and healthy. It is noteworthy that in the NV/C setting civilians never refer to themselves as the "civilian masters." Our military classmates who still use the term need to know that their civilian counterparts would feel more comfortable if the term disappeared from their vocabulary. It is not reassuring when they use the term--more often it is disconcerting.

*Observation 2:* The notion of military service is an honorable one that is crucial in the motivational and inspirational messages coming from the military leadership. The leadership must believe it and be able to articulate it. The military tends to be more open than their civilian counterparts in discussing concepts like patriotism, sacrifice and service. (Marine Commandant Gen. Krulack's speech to the NDU students is probably the best example of evangelical military lecturing the Class of 1999 heard.)

If one believes that words still have meaning, what do the words "military service" mean in 1999? Service is a concept that includes sacrifice and sacrifice is a concept that the military exploits reasonably well. Sacrifice is nearly impossible to sell in the private sector unless there is money attached to it (and then it is not really sacrifice) and it is getting harder to sell in the civilian agencies.

When someone says his son or daughter is "in the service," American citizens know immediately that the individual is a member of the military and not an employee of EPA. There has been a longstanding notion that the military is "in service" to the nation. But do those same citizens understand what service means in the military context? Do they understand what 24 X 7 duty means? Do they understand what "being assigned" means? Do they understand the relative lack of freedom of choice on which the military assignment process depends?

The military takes great pride in the fact that their oath is to the U.S. Constitution and that they literally work for the country. This theme is reinforced countless times in NWC lectures and seminars and in students' dialogues. Civilians work directly for their organizations and indirectly for the country. The military work directly for their country and indirectly for their services. This is a distinction that can lead to an extremely subtle superiority complex on the part of the military.

Recently a national magazine declared on its cover: "The Physically Fit: They Think They Are Better Than You." Imagine the following cover: "The Morally Fit: The Military Think They Are Better Than You." Although there have been recent articles addressing the issue of whether the military generally has a condescending view towards civilians vis-à-vis their moral values, this view is not evident at NWC. What is evident is that the military students are concerned about moral failures in both cultures. They question double standards for officers and enlisted, mendacity on the part of Chief Executives as well as the Joint Chiefs, and they puzzle over people who refuse to play by the rules.

*Observation 3:* The military members of the NWC Class of 1999 are more comfortable raising and discussing values and ethics than their civilian colleagues. It has been noted that the military culture places "heavy stress on moral values"<sup>1</sup> and that "...military organizations are normative."<sup>2</sup> This does not mean that the military includes a higher percentage of ethical beings than the civilian organizations. However, it may mean that the military are more comfortable raising ethical issues in a group setting because their culture encourages it.

Whereas adultery is a personal issue purposefully kept out of civilian organizations' formal evaluation and promotion exercises, it is purposefully brought into military discussions as a "character" issue. The American tendency to eschew value judgments about individuals' personal lives is not a strong tendency in the American military.

*Observation 4:* The military is "seized" with integrity issues--and proud of it. This may explain why military members of the Class of 1999 were generally more incensed over the Clinton-Lewinsky relationship than their civilian classmates. Although it bothered many civilians that the President was involved with a young intern in the White House (thereby showing poor judgment and demonstrating laughably bad taste), the fact that the President lied seemed to produce far more disillusionment in many of the military students. Not that the civilians condone lying but they seem to understand better how someone could rationalize it.

*Observation 5:* The irrationality of war and the death factor (which is, surprisingly, hardly ever discussed at NWC) add a dimension to military leadership that is missing in many civilian leadership challenges. On the one hand, the irrationality and chaos of war provide strong justification for unquestioned authority. As they have developed over the past 3,000 years, military institutions have depended on authority as an imperative when the mission means life or death. Because one must follow orders during wartime or jeopardize the mission or even one's comrades' lives, one is expected to do the same during peacetime. The simple argument is that one must continue to follow orders during peacetime so one will be prepared to follow them should war erupt. One should not get out of the habit of following orders by "slacking off" during peacetime.

It has been noted that "...there is an element of the irrational in warfare that is not susceptible to business management."<sup>3</sup> Warfighters may religiously follow management principles during peacetime and violate them during wartime.. Such is the situational nature of the military leadership. One could argue that all successful leaders are the same but few would believe it. Success for a military leader is highly situational and the situations are highly unpredictable and often dangerous.

*Observation 6:* There is nothing comparable to the Uniform Code of Military Justice nor the Professional Military Ethic for civilians. The military have accepted certain codified and uncoded rules that guide their profession. They refer to them and quote them and depend upon them. The military's acceptance of authority, especially arbitrary authority, is therefore an understandable curiosity to the civilians. The military can forcefully explain its necessity in the context of war but have more difficulty in the context of the peaceful NWC environment.

The civilians at NWC question authority but do not openly challenge it because they are more guests and observers than full participants. This is not a criticism because this reality does not degrade the program. Being a graduate of NWC means less to them professionally than to their military classmates. Despite the Department of State's co-sponsorship and a higher percentage of civilian students than the other senior military schools, NWC is essentially a military institution. The buildings are military buildings; the class president is a military officer and most of the committee chairmen are military officers. The civilians are much more likely to skip a lecture they consider optional than the military. One military classmate said, "If something is on the calendar, we should be there period." His civilian classmates disagreed and one countered, "If it is not worth our time, we will find something better to do."

*Observation 7:* For the military, thinking "outside the box" is restricted by having to keep one foot inside the box. The anchoring to the organization or the institution (which is so critical for the success of many military functions) makes change seem more like "tinkering" around the edges than profoundly changing something from within. Handling change is extremely important to the military. Creating change is not.

*Observation 8:* Military mistakes are more often attributed to the failings of individuals than to organizational inertia or inadequate structure. Personal responsibility is very important in the military culture. Whereas a civilian may want to blame the bureaucracy or the process for a failure, the military officer is more likely to blame the individual. It was notable that NWC military students' discussions prompted by listening to H.R. McMaster's lecture and reading his Dereliction of Duty centered on individual blame, not on institutional failure.

*Observation 9:* The military puts a high value on technical skill or expertise--even after individuals have risen to the top. In most organizations, as one moves up the chain of command into more responsible management positions, there is less emphasis on one's technical skills and more emphasis on qualities like planning, organizing and directing. However, the military admires the technical proficiency longer and keeps it alive longer. Certain exploits or battles or raids or flights are fundamental parts of certain individuals' mythologies. "Credibility is the core of military leadership."<sup>4</sup> The subordinates must believe that the commander knows what he or she is doing. In fact, it has been noted that military leaders have "...a moral obligation to be competent."<sup>5</sup>

*Observation 10:* The unique requirement for and display of physical courage is understated by the military. Most research indicates that soldiers, sailors and airmen do not want to discuss their warfighting experiences--especially with civilians. Some members of the Class of 1999 served in the Persian Gulf War and some were involved in direct combat operations. Some fired weapons and some were fired upon. However, they rarely discuss these experiences and only when someone else raises them. They always seem relieved when the conversation is over. This does not come across as false humility but as genuine discomfort in discussing an experience with someone who truly cannot comprehend what happened. The truth is that the aura of death in combat situations gives military leadership a dimension that civilian leadership infrequently considers, let alone faces. If the primary purpose of the military is warfighting (read. killing), then leadership responsibilities like decision-making and planning become imbued with gravitas

*Observation 11:* The Mission, The Mission, The Mission. Military leadership is driven by the notion of the mission, the goal, the task. Although all the services emphasize the importance of their people, it is clear that the people serve the mission and not the other way around. Protecting one's people is important but there are times when it is imperative that the people must be sacrificed to the mission. This accounts, in part, for why the military becomes so uncomfortable with ill-defined missions. Any mission can cost lives but a poorly defined mission is more susceptible to unnecessary losses and casualties. Accomplishing "the mission" is a goal to which the military strives with a religious, albeit of the secular variety, fervor. (It seems that a study on military culture as a secular religion would be an interesting follow-on to this essay--by someone from the Class of 2000.)

The military depends on structures and authorities to counter what is confusing, irrational, ambiguous and unexpected. Their intellectual tolerance for ill-defined missions is low but their emotional acceptance is high because of factors discussed earlier--namely, the notion of sacrifice and the bottom line acceptance of authority.

*Observation 12:* It has been noted that military culture is supported by hierarchical structures, driven by linear thinking, imbued with prioritization mania (e.g., please provide three options in descending order of importance) and characterized by overriding decisiveness (e.g., we cannot defer this decision--we must come to closure today!) Current management books written primarily for non-military readers emphasize the shift in organizational structures from Phase One Hierarchies to Phase Two Matrixes and now to Phase Three Networks. Although many private sector organizations are between Phases Two and Three and some civilian organizations are between Phases One and Two, the military as a whole is still stuck in Phase One--with a few Phase Two experiments thrown in to keep their critics at bay.

Granted that the military services are not subsidiaries of the Center for Creative Management, it is still apparent that the military is much more comfortable with experimentation in technology than in organizational structure. The civilian students (whose own organizations are not exactly known as world class innovators) have probably heard the phrase "That is how we've always done it," more in the past eight months than in the past eight years.

*Observation 13:* Military virtues do not exist for their own sake--they are primarily and essentially functional.<sup>6</sup> A partial list of military virtues would include self-sacrifice, courage, obedience, loyalty and integrity. These virtues are required if there will be battlefield success and are primarily associated with heroic leadership. They are not "nice to have" but the military unit must have them--especially during war and especially in its leadership.

*Observation 14.* The further removed from war the military leaders are, the more managerial qualities they need beyond the basic military virtues (see Observation #13). The leaders will need organizational and administrative skills and some will even need specialized technical skills. As military leaders move away from direct combat into managerial jobs, they will need to call upon their military virtues less often and spend more time on resource planning, productivity analysis, and learning new technologies. But these virtues, although dormant, will be called into action when the mission requires it and must not be allowed to atrophy.

The National War College is as far away from direct combat and managerial responsibilities as a military leader can get. Despite the sedentary academic environment, certain leadership qualities are still demonstrated. At NWC the military leaders qua students can talk about military virtues but have few opportunities to demonstrate them. However, there are many opportunities to demonstrate other leadership characteristics in leading seminar discussions, belonging to committees, running sports events, RSS trips, PREP-Ts, etc. Without these leadership outlets, the military students would probably suffer from "non-

leadership anxiety." Few civilian students would suffer from the same neurosis. Although both groups claim to consider their NWC experience as an opportunity to escape from corporate responsibility and reflect on significant strategic issues, one group is noticeably inclined to seize responsibility--whether the administration expects it of them (which is true) or whether they cannot live without it (which is also true).

*Observation 15:* It is interesting that the NWC civilians are much more accustomed to situations in which groups select their own leaders or captains or at least call for volunteers. In the formal NWC seminars and RSS meetings, the military are already assigned their leadership roles. Form follows function and function follows role. The exercises are all laid out, the roles are pre-determined and the participants follow outlines of prepared questions and timelines. It could be argued that this process is provided in the interest of time but it is interesting that in eight months few if any have ever challenged any process that has been provided by the administration. It has been noted that hierarchical structures in general are deleterious to creativity and innovation and challenge.<sup>7</sup>

*Observation 16.* Speaking of time, the military are more driven to complete tasks on time than to listen to all the different points of view. In various exercises it has been clear that for the military students it is important to complete the task, answer all the questions and finish on time. It is often the case that hearing divergent points of view and reaching true consensus are less important than getting the job done. Several civilian classmates have observed that the military students are so seized with completing the task that they do not even notice when others have "dropped out" or "shut down." It is also unclear whether the military students truly understand and value what consensus means. Their culture emphasizes decisiveness and command authority. It is not fair to conclude that the military students are insensitive to their fellow classmates but it is appropriate to acknowledge the so-called "blinder effect" that ignores or shuts out those comments and digressions considered peripheral to the basic thrust of the assignment and completing "the mission." Consequently, better ideas may be overlooked.

*Observation 17:* The military are much more willing to be supporters of a cause than of civilian authorities whom they cannot admire. Accepting civilian control of the military when it comes to setting National Security Interests and Objectives is not the problem. Accepting civilian control of military objectives is problematic. The thought that President Clinton is choosing targets in Yugoslavia is the worst kind of distortion of the relationship between the civilian authority and its military instrument. The military culture values heroes, people who make sacrifices and people of integrity.

*Observation 18:* The military students are more conscious of conditions, situations and time than their civilian classmates. It goes with the territory that military leaders must know the terrain, the battlefield, the weather, etc. Military leaders know that conditions can change suddenly, situations can develop unexpectedly and time can accelerate quickly. They live in secure structures in order to combat an insecure world. On the one hand, they are thought to resist change and stay with what has worked in the past. On the other hand, they are expected to respond quickly and decisively to changes they cannot completely anticipate. They are trained to have contingency plans and to respond quickly to crises and emergencies. Gen. George Patton once stated that "Nothing ever stays the same in war." Both civilian and military students live in a changing world filled with ambiguities and confusion. The military have identified and embraced a ballast made out of historical institutions, authority figures and virtues. One cannot deny that it works for them.

*Observation 19:* Delegation of authority, chain of command and giving and receiving orders are commonplace in many civilian organizations which are in many ways as bureaucratic and hierarchical as the military. Most public and private organizations pass through four stages: creating, building, maintaining and changing.<sup>8</sup> Where is the U.S. Military in 1999? Most of the military in the NWC Class of 1999 would probably argue that their institutions are in the maintaining mode. They may even go so far as to say that they are also in a defensive mode. They are trying to defend their force structure and at least hold on to what they have.

Despite repeated references to a purported Revolution in Military Affairs driven by technology, there is almost no evidence of any serious organizational change proceeding from the so-called "revolution." Even with an "Evolution in Military affairs (EMA), one would expect some signs of organizational change.

*Observation 20:* A typical military member of the NWC Class of 1999 would likely be comfortable with the following:

- discussing ethics and integrity,
- following a spectrum of orders,
- sacrificing for the greater good,
- handling change,
- assessing personal responsibility for national failures,
- displaying (but not discussing) physical courage,
- being obsessively mission-oriented,
- accepting civilian control,
- facing chaos, irrationality and even death,
- acknowledging that leadership is basically situational,
- demonstrating technical expertise,
- defending his or her culture and

seeking responsibility.

*Observation 21:* A typical military member of the NWC Class of 1999 would likely be uncomfortable with the following:

- working with extreme pragmatists and hedonists,
- participating in self-directed work groups,
- interacting with incompetents at any level,
- creating change,
- tolerating digressions and distractions,
- attending open-ended meetings and
- accepting the authority of physical and/or moral cowards.

*Observation 22:* The mentor who said that "Relationships are only worthwhile if both parties are better people, intellectually, emotionally and morally, when the relationship is over" was a wise man indeed. The worthwhile relationships that form between the civilians and the military who attend the NWC are successful on many levels especially in educating each other about our cultures and our leaders and how they contribute to the life, liberty and pursuit of happiness in our nation.

*Conclusion:* Leadership is clearly a crucial issue for the civilian and military institutions of the future and is a serious subject for those who will be responsible for influencing human behavior to attain our national security goals. As one examines critical National Security Strategy (NSS) decision points in our nation's history, it is clear that the leadership qualities of certain individuals influenced the final outcome--sometimes positively and sometimes tragically. Leadership is one of the determinants that influences the development of NSS and is an integral part of the framework that shapes it.

There is no question that leadership is a topic for informal discussion and self-directed learning around the halls of the National War College. The civilian and military senior leaders of the future recognize that soon they will be expected to guide those who serve with them towards achieving difficult goals and hard-to-reach objectives. They will need qualities of intellect and temperament, of vision and character, of dedication and commitment--all attributes they can examine, study and share in an academic setting. Accordingly, strategic leadership should become a more formal and more dominant aspect of the NWC curriculum. The question is not whether leaders are born or made but whether they continue to learn. Incorporating the study of strategic leadership more fully into the NWC curriculum would demonstrate that NWC graduates are intended not only to be strategists but also to be leaders.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> David D. Van Fleet, and Gary A. Yukl. Military Leadership: An Organizational Behavior Perspective. (Greenwich, Conn: Jai Press Inc., 1986), 17.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> William A. Knowlton. "Integrity is Among the Most Necessary Qualities," . Four-Star Leadership for Leaders, Charles T Jones and R. Manning Ancell, eds (Mechanicsburg, Pa: Executive Books, 1997), 68.

<sup>4</sup> Katherine McIntire Peters. "A Matter of Trust," GcvExec.Com. (January 1999), 13.

<sup>5</sup> Malham M. Wakin. "Ethics of Leadership," Military Leadership, James H. Buck and Lawrence J. Korb, eds. (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1981), 107

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 102

<sup>7</sup> Elliott Jaques and Stephen D. Clement. Executive Leadership A Practical Guide to Managing Complexity. (Arlington, Va: Cason Hall & Co. Publishers Ltd., 1991), 14.

<sup>8</sup> Edgar H. Schein. "Leadership and Organizational Culture," The Leader of the Future, Frances Hesselbein, Marshall Goldsmith and Richard Beckhard, eds. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996), 62

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