The Future of Strategic Leadership

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ABSTRACT: In the coming years a number of factors will expand and accelerate changes to the character of strategic leadership—shifts in the nature of armed conflict, the weaponization of everything, the development and utilization of new technologies, the decline of authority structures, political hyperpartisanship, and the coalescence of new ethical structures. Strategic military leaders must, therefore, transcend the twentieth-century industrial-style leadership model and embrace a model based on entrepreneurship.

Clausewitz famously noted that war has an enduring nature and a changing character. The same holds for strategic military leadership—it intermixes both consistency and change. The changing character of strategic leadership implies traditional methods for developing strategic leaders and exercising strategic leadership may no longer be adequate. Like their forebears, tomorrow's strategic leaders must assure their organizations are effective at core warfighting functions, whether defeating enemies, maintaining security, or supporting other organizations. They must create and sustain effective, ethical organizational cultures. And they must think horizontally—integrating diverse activities and organizations—and vertically—planning for the long-term future and considering second- and third-order effects—while addressing near-term issues and challenges. These are the components of the enduring nature of strategic leadership.

But much is changing. The evolutionary forces shaping strategic leadership are powerful, intense, and complex, suggesting traditional methods for developing strategic leaders and exercising strategic leadership may no longer be adequate. It is impossible to predict precisely what attributes and capabilities will be most important in the coming decades but it is possible—and important—to identify likely ones. One way to do this is to take the major trends underway in the strategic environment and assess how they might require changes to the character of strategic leadership, conceptualizing this in the three interconnected realms of sustainment of security (strategic leadership's outward-looking function), organizational design, and organizational culture and ethic.

Entrepreneurship and the Changing Character of Security

Imagine the commander of a future combatant command—or whatever integrated, multinational, dispersed, networked, public/private security organization replaces today's combatant commands. She or he must deal with conventional enemies and the need to deter or defeat

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them in combat but also face nonstate adversaries exploiting what is called the "weaponization of everything."[1] "Modern technology," as Benjamin Wittes and Gabriella Blum write, "enables individuals to wield the destructive power of states."[2] Multidimensional attacks and disruption are increasingly easy; creating and maintaining security, difficult. According to strategic futurist Sean McFate: "in the coming decades . . . wars will be fought mostly in the shadows by covert means, and plausible deniability will prove more effective than firepower in the information age. If there are traditional battles, they will not prove decisive. Winning will change, and victory will be achieved not on the battlefield but elsewhere."[3]

As the essence of security changes, so too must strategy. The architects of strategy—strategic leaders—must think in multiple dimensions involving a diverse range of adversaries or potential adversaries. Being able to defeat enemies will be necessary but not sufficient; security will be holistic. And once security is created, it will immediately erode as the forces of instability innovate and proliferate. Sustaining it will truly be a Sisyphean task.

This future commander will be surrounded by and part of revolutionary advancements in biology and bioengineering, neurologic enhancement, nanotechnology, advanced material sciences, quantum computing, artificial intelligence, robotics, and additive manufacturing.[4] Artificial intelligence in particular is likely to fuel extensive change in armed conflict particularly in the realm of decision-making.[5] As Thomas Adams put it, "the military systems (including weapons) now on the horizon will be too fast, too small, too numerous, and will create an environment too complex for humans to direct."[6]

Judgment alone will no longer be adequate for effective decision-making, particularly against adversaries using artificial intelligence and technology-enhanced decision systems. While this will be most stark at the tactical level, it will also play out at the strategic level, forcing future leaders to identify the optimal blend of human judgment and artificial

1.   Yonah Jeremy Bob, "Ex-CIA Director Petraeus: Everything Can Be Hijacked, Weaponized," *Jerusalem Post*, January 30, 2018, https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Ex-CIA-Director-Petraeus-Everything-can-be-hijacked-weaponized-540235; Steven Metz, "America Isn't Ready for the 'Weaponization Of Everything'," *World Politics Review*, June 8, 2018, https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/24846/america-isn-t-ready-for-the-weaponization-of-everything; and Rosa Brooks, *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales From the Pentagon* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016).

2.   Benjamin Wittes and Gabriella Blum, *The Future of Violence – Robots and Germs, Hackers and Drones: Confronting the New Age of Threat* (Stroud, UK: Amberley Publishing, 2015), 131–37, Kindle.

3.   Sean McFate, *The New Rules of War: Victory in the Age of Durable Disorder* (New York: William Morrow, 2019), 8–9, 67.

4.   US Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), *The Operational Environment and the Changing Character of Warfare,* TRADOC Pamphlet 525-92 (Fort Eustis, VA: TRADOC, October 2019), 9.

5.   TRADOC, *Changing Character of Warfare*, 18.

6.   Thomas K. Adams, "Future Warfare and the Decline of Human Decisionmaking," *Parameters* 31, no. 4 (Winter 2001–2002): 58; Zach Hughes, "Fog, Friction and Thinking Machines," War on the Rocks, March 11, 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2020/03/fog-friction-and-thinking-machines/; and Yuna Huh Wong et al., *Deterrence in the Age of Thinking Machines* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2020).

intelligence then constantly reassessing and revising it. The skill to do this will be vital, perhaps even decisive.

Dynamic narrative shaping will be critically important for future strategic leaders. Since war is waged for political objectives, it is ultimately psychological; what matters most is not how many of the enemy are killed or how many targets destroyed but how audiences understand and react to military actions. In a strategic environment characterized by a profusion of information, highly fluid ideas and beliefs, intricate connectivity, and intense, global transparency, the psychological component of military action will be even more important than in the past. "The only outcome of military action that ultimately matters," Brad Dewees wrote, "occurs at the cognitive level—at the level where adversaries perceive and give meaning to actions taken against them."[7] Or as P. W. Singer and Emerson Brookings put it: "What determines the outcome is not mastery of the facts, but rather a back-and-forth battle of psychological, political and (increasingly) algorithmic manipulation. Everything is now transparent, yet the truth can be easily obscured."[8] Thus future conflicts and future strategy will largely be a "clash of narratives."[9]

Traditional methods of narrative shaping that rely on the transmission of information through formal media will no longer be sufficient. "These are not the kinds of battles that a plodding, uninventive bureaucracy can win," as Singer and Brookings note.[10] Having public affairs officers pass information to traditional media— being the stewards of information—will be woefully inadequate. Dynamic narrative shaping will require strategic leaders who are psychologically astute and understand how beliefs and ideas form, spread, merge, mutate, die, and are reborn across national, subnational, and organizational cultures. And they must communicate in an information environment where it is difficult to distinguish truth from deepfakes or "fake news," where the authoritativeness of information no longer determines its impact.[11] But however difficult, dynamic narrative shaping to create desired psychological effects may be the sine qua non of future strategic leadership—cross-cultural communication to attain desired psychological effects may be more important than enterprise management.

Entrepreneurship and Organizational Design

In the past most strategic military leaders—at least American ones— were the stewards of the organizations they commanded rather than their

7.   Brad Dewees, "Measuring War: Cognitive Effects in the Age of AI," War on the Rocks, October 3, 2019, https://warontherocks.com/2019/10/measuring-war-cognitive-effects-in-the-age-of-ai/.

8.   P. W. Singer and Emerson T. Brookings, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), 262.

9.   David Patrikarakos, *War in 140 Characters: How Social Media is Reshaping Conflict in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 260.

10.   Singer and Brookings, *LikeWar*, 161.

11.   See also Donie O'Sullivan, "What Is a Deepfake, Explained," CNN Business Video, 1:37, 2019, https://www.cnn.com/videos/business/2019/02/01/deepfakes-interactive-what-is-a-deepfake-intro-orig.cnn.

creators. They might make some incremental changes or improvements but in most cases did not have to create new organizations from scratch or totally rebuild an existing organization. The pace and extent of change suggests those days are past: future strategic leaders will need to be the creators and revolutionizers of organizations, entrepreneurs rather than simply stewards. As with many aspects of life, technology will be the locomotive, defining the possible.

For instance, strategic military leaders have long relied on staff work and their own judgment to make decisions. But as information expands, leaders of all kinds increasingly will use data-based, technologically enhanced analytics. Effective strategic leaders cannot simply depend on staff to tell them what they need to know but must have a working knowledge of the analytical processes and the information that feeds decisions. While strategic leaders may not themselves be experts on the design of artificial intelligence, they must be "aware of the significance, capabilities, and risks associated with algorithms."[12] Put differently, strategic leaders must understand the gestalt of artificial intelligence and analytics-based decision-making even if not its architecture.

Future strategic leaders will no longer face a shortage of vital information but will struggle with its profusion. As James Mancillas writes: "One of the principal challenges of today's military leader is managing the ever-increasing flow of information available to them. The ease and low cost of collecting, storing, and communicating has resulted in a supply of data that exceeds the cognitive capacity of most humans."[13] Accordingly, strategic leaders must help develop and learn to use a constantly shifting and evolving array of analytical tools so they can identify what is important in an ocean of information. They must adapt analytical tools to their organization's needs instead of automatically taking what is readily available or provided to them. Analytical and decision tools will not only be tailored to an organization, but will change over time. Rather than simply making decisions, future strategic leaders must understand and shape the process of decision-making.

"Nothing breeds complacency like success," writes Charles O'Reilly of the Stanford Graduate School of Business, "the point for maximum strategic paranoia is when you are at the top of your game."[14] Effectiveness has a definitive lifespan, and in the future it will become shorter and shorter. Future strategic leaders must be constant disrupters and innovators.[15] In an environment of deep, rapid, and expansive

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12. TRADOC, *Changing Character of Warfare,* 10; and Michael C. Horowitz and Lauren Kahn, "The AI Literacy Gap Hobbling American Officialdom," War on the Rocks, January 14, 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2020/01/the-ai-literacy-gap-hobbling-american-officialdom/.

13. James Mancillas, "Integrating Artificial Intelligence into Military Operations," *Mad Scientist Laboratory* (blog), December 16, 2019, https://madsciblog.tradoc.army .mil/198-integrating-artificial-intelligence-into-military-operations/.

14. Charles A. O'Reilly, *Lead and Disrupt: How to Solve the Innovator's Dilemma* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 219, Kindle.

15. Clayton Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma: When New Technologies Cause Great Firms to Fail* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 1997).

change, incremental adaptation and improvement will be necessary but not sufficient.

There is a saying that in war "speed kills." Soon this dictum will apply not only to the maneuver of forces but also to organizational adaptation. Admittedly, innovation has long been a component of strategic leadership from the redesign of tactical formations by Alexander the Great, Maurice of Nassau, Gustavus Adolphus and Napoleon, to the nineteenth-century development of general staffs and professional military education, through the twentieth century's combined arms warfare on both land and sea. But most often innovation was a response to failure or defeat or to a fear of failure or defeat. In the future, disruption, innovation, and entrepreneurship must be constant and preemptive rather than reactive. As soon as an organization is functioning at a high level, strategic leaders must begin redesign.

Entrepreneurship and Organizational Ethics

Traditionally, strategic leaders in the US military also approached culture and ethics from the perspective of stewardship rather than entrepreneurship. Rarely were organizations completely broken, so strategic leaders focused on sustaining what worked and fixing what was not. As with organizational design, future strategic leaders will need to be disrupters of culture and ethics, innovators and entrepreneurs, "empathetic crafter[s] of culture" as General Stanley McChrystal, US Army retired put it.[16] This disruption must happen even when organizations are not yet broken: future strategic leaders will know that every highly functioning organization is on the precipice of decline, even failure.

It is to impossible know exactly what ethical challenges will be most pressing in the coming decades, but is possible to identify candidates. Take, for instance, the political and informational context of strategy. In previous decades there were only a few authoritative sources of information for the public—three television networks, a few major news magazines, a handful of major newspapers, and an array of influential journals of opinion. Reliance on a limited number of carefully edited information sources pushed political discourse and ideas toward the middle; this allowed compromise and consensus building.

Now the information environment is very different. There are thousands, perhaps millions, of sources but few indicators of reliability. Young people in particular do not rely on traditional media sources for information so the traditional media, with its emphasis on balance, fact-checking, and careful editorial control, does not reach them.[17] Everyone can tailor information to their own biases and proclivities. And it is hard to attract attention in this environment. The result is a

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16.   Stanley McChrystal, *Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2015), 222, Kindle.

17.   "In the Age of Memes, How Are Young People Getting Their News?," PBS, January 23, 2020, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/in-the-age-of-memes-how-are-young-people-getting-their-news.

kluge of political discourse and entertainment. How an idea is packaged matters as much, sometimes more, than its content. Infotainers shape the national narrative as much as professional journalists, policy experts, or elected officials.

The profusion of information also contributes to the fracturing of consensus and hyperpartisanship, pushing political positions away from the middle and toward the ideological poles. It increases hostility toward people and organizations on a different end of the partisan spectrum, creating a climate of intense political tribalism. Politics today is treated less like a process for reconciling diverse positions and reaching consensus than war by other means. Compromise is treated as a loss and no one wants to lose.

Hyperpartisanship and the politicization of security policy already create intense ethical dilemmas for military strategic leaders and are shaking the foundation of American civil-military relations. This situation is likely to escalate. Will it be incumbent on future military strategic leaders to tailor their advice to the ideological biases and proclivities of the political leader they are presenting it to? Must strategic advice be shaped by political tribalism? Can military strategic leaders be above or outside of this tribalism? Will uniformed leaders have to propose military options they know can be completed in one presidential administration since the next one is likely to reverse it? Must future strategic advice be entertaining so political leaders will remember it?

Future strategic leaders will also face immense ethical challenges deciding how to use new technology like artificial intelligence and the human-technology interface. Even now movements to limit or ban things like "killer robots" are gaining strength.[18] Linking brains to technology and adapting neurotechnology will raise difficult and complex ethical issues for the military.[19] Could a technologically enhanced super soldier (or sailor, airman, marine, or space warrior) easily integrate back into civilian society once their service is complete? These challenges will affect the use of technology by the military, particularly the integration of humans and technology. And the more human-enhancement technology proliferates and matures, the greater the political resistance to it will become. Strategic leaders will have to navigate this complex ethical terrain. And every balance they reach will be precarious and temporary.

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18.   Paul Scharre, *Army of None: Autonomous Weapons and the Future of War* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018), 251–318.

19.   See also Joseph DeFranco and James Giordano, "Linking Brains to Machines, and Use of Neurotechnology to the Cultural and Ethical Perspectives of the Current Global Stage," *Mad Scientist Laboratory* (blog), August 8, 2019, https://madsciblog.tradoc.army.mil/168-linking-brains-to-machines-and-use-of-neurotechnology-to-the-cultural-and-ethical-perspectives-of-the-current-global-stage/.

Conclusion

In the twentieth century, successful strategic leaders were like the titans of industry, managing increasingly large enterprises and increasingly complex endeavors. Winning often meant bringing the most resources to bear at the appropriate time and place. Particularly in the American way of war, logistics were decisive. Henry Ford or John D. Rockefeller probably would have been good strategic leaders while George Catlett Marshall or Dwight D. Eisenhower could have founded or led massive corporations. But future strategic leaders will need to be more like cutting-edge entrepreneurs, out-innovating and out-adapting adversaries.

Defeating the armed forces of enemies may be necessary but not sufficient as future strategic leaders struggle to sustain security in an interconnected environment with the weaponization of everything, where destroying and destabilizing are easy but sustaining security, hard. Building an organizational culture that is both effective and ethical will be challenging; success, short-lived. The process of reinvention and innovation will be constant. What works today, whether an organization, an ethic, a process, or a concept, may not work tomorrow.

To prepare for this future, the US military must institutionalize disruption, innovation, and entrepreneurship, creating organizational cultures based on rapid, persistent adaptation. It must develop campaigns of learning to identify both best practices and potential pitfalls in organizational disruption, innovation, and entrepreneurship. The military must integrate disruption, innovation, and entrepreneurship deep into its educational systems, teaching and testing for them, failing those who cannot thrive. It must constantly experiment with new strategic concepts and organizational forms.

As the military develops and promotes strategic leaders, it must test and select for skill at dynamic narrative-shaping. And the military must undertake even more robust partnerships and exchanges with the private sector, possibly even making such exchanges a requirement for leadership positions much like joint assignments. The US military's method for identifying, developing, and empowering strategic leaders has not adjusted to the onrushing change in the strategic, political, and informational environment, nor has it focused on the skill sets strategic leaders will need in coming decades. Now it must—time is short.