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STRATEGIC VISION AND STRENGTH OF WILL: IMPERATIVES FOR THEATER COMMAND

by

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While virtual libraries of material have been written on the topic of leadership, nearly all this literature tends to assume that the qualities and attributes which are required for success are the same irrespective of organizational level. Thus, one is left to presume that the most successful battalion or brigade commanders will necessarily perform most effectively at higher levels of command such as corps or army group. It is not the purpose of this essay to debate that premise. It assumes from the start that the reader readily recognizes the fallacy of this argument and accepts as axiomatic the assertion of Clausewitz that

Every level of command has its own intellectual standard; its own prerequisites for fame and honor There are commanders-in-chief who could not have led a cavalry regiment with distinction, and cavalry commanders who could not have led armies.¹

In spite of Clausewitz's observation, little has been written concerning the prerequisites, the qualities and attributes required for the leading of armies. In fact, there is no US Army doctrine, statement of philosophy, or any other document which specifies the necessary attributes of our most senior commanders.

In light of this deficiency, this essay will argue that there are at least two qualities which are essential for the most senior commanders, specifically, theater commanders during wartime. This list is not all-inclusive; the cited attributes merely constitute minimum essential conditions for successful wartime theater command.

Further, it is not the intent of this article to prove that the characteristics required in war differ from those required in peace or that the most effective peacetime commanders are not necessarily the best warrior leaders. The reader is presumed to agree with Frank Knox, Secretary of the Navy during World War II, who, in advocating the promotion of aggressive fighters, not peacetime stars, offered the following observation to Admiral Chester W. Nimitz concerning the differences between senior commanders in war and peace:

Most of us, if we had been required to choose at the beginning of the war between the brilliant, polished, socially attractive McClellan and the rough, rather uncouth, unsocial Grant, would have chosen McClellan, just as Lincoln did.²

In essence, Knox was simply stating that the qualities required of wartime commanders differ from those valued in peacetime.

Accepting the preceding premises, I would suggest that the two qualities of the wartime theater commander that are most critical can be termed *strategic vision* and *strength of will*.

STRATEGIC VISION

Strategic vision is the first essential requirement for the theater commander. It constitutes the ability to discern the means for the attainment of the ultimate political objective through the employment of military force. For example, Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr., in his book *On Strategy*, argues that it was precisely the lack of this strategic vision that led to the ultimate defeat of US forces in South Vietnam.³ Strategic vision is the single factor that enables the theater commander to act in accordance with national policy to direct the efforts of military force to obtain national goals. If one accepts Clausewitz's dictum that "war is merely the continuation of policy by other means,"⁴ then clearly the theater commander must understand the political goals of his government and possess a strategic vision of how those goals might best be attained. For the theater commander, political ends and military means are joined inextricably.

The requirement for strategic vision was, in Clausewitz's eyes, the most important single attribute of the senior or theater commander. He said,

The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the . . . commander [has] to make is to establish . . . the kind of war on which [he is] embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.⁵

In other words, it is strategic vision which enables the commander to judge the true nature of the war he is fighting and to link the political goals of that conflict to the military means at his disposal. Clausewitz concluded that in directing wars, "*What is required is a sense of unity and power of judgment raised to a marvelous pitch of vision.*"⁶

Many contemporary writers have observed the importance of vision in directing the activities of large numbers of men undertaking great enterprises. Thomas E. Cronin, writing in *Military Leadership: In Pursuit of Excellence*, discussed the importance of strategic vision. It is the vision of the senior leader or commander, he said, which provides an organization and its members "a clear sense of direction, a sense of mission." This sense of direction and mission, then, serves to "clarify problems and choices, . . . build morale . . . , and provide a vision of the possibilities and promise."⁷ Similarly, Robert Mueller, Chairman of the Board of Arthur D. Little, Inc., saw that "the leader is the visionary providing immanence to the present and a transcendental drive into the future."⁸ It is this vision which engages the enthusiasms and energy of subordinates as they strive to make the theater commander's vision a reality.

The theater commander's strategic vision includes the ways and means of obtaining military victory. Both Ridgway and Slim, in writing about their campaigns in Korea and Burma, respectively, described the vital importance of imparting to all their subordinates their personal visions of victory and the conditions and methods for obtaining it.⁹

Some would argue that tactical or operational genius is a requirement for the successful theater commander in wartime.

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But this is not entirely the case. At the theater level of war, strategic vision constitutes the essential level of military competence. The theater commander must merely have sufficient understanding of operations and tactics to know generally what lies within the realm of the possible. He can rely upon subordinates to translate his strategic vision into operational and tactical concepts. For example, General Eisenhower's direction of the European Theater of Operations exemplifies this principle.

As General Omar Bradley noted, Eisenhower's tactical and operational abilities were generally judged to be rather limited. In Bradley's assessment, "Ike was a political general of rare and valuable gifts, but . . . he did not know how to manage a battlefield."¹⁰ Bradley suggested that General Marshall shared the same view of Eisenhower's tactical and operational capabilities. When Bradley was posted by Marshall to serve on Eisenhower's staff in North Africa, Bradley felt that "Perhaps Marshall was tactfully seeking a way of reinforcing Ike on the battlefield with professional generals skilled in infantry tactics, without actually saying so."¹¹ General Patton held a similar opinion, as Martin Blumenson's *The Patton Papers* revealed.¹² But it did not matter that Eisenhower was unskilled in tactics and operations, for he possessed the strategic vision of the requirements for victory and understood the importance of maintaining a solid alliance for its attainment. Also, Eisenhower coupled his strategic vision with the second imperative for the theater commander, strength of will.

STRENGTH OF WILL

It is the commander's strength of will which enables him to impart his vision to his subordinates and to ensure that they adopt his vision as their own. In other words, a strategic vision that exists only in the mind of the commander or his close associates is of no use. His vision must be transferred down through many layers of military organization. This can be accomplished only if the theater commander possesses the necessary strength of will to overcome obstacles to the

transmission of his vision and to dominate the wills of those who would obstruct its attainment. In the face of setbacks, casualties, battle losses, and all the vicissitudes of war, there is ample opportunity for subordinates to lose faith, lose enthusiasm, and lose sight of the commander's vision. Strength of will enables the theater commander to maintain his vision as the foremost objective of his subordinates when weaker men around him have cause to abandon hope.

This strength of will has been variously called energy, firmness, staunchness, and strength of character. It is the force which, according to Clausewitz, resists

the ebbing of moral and physical strength, . . . the heart-rending spectacle of the dead and wounded, that the commander has to withstand—first in himself, and then in all those who, directly or indirectly, have entrusted him with their thoughts and feelings, hopes and fears. As each man's strength gives out, as it no longer responds to his will, the inertia of the whole gradually comes to rest on the commander's will alone. The ardor of his spirit must rekindle the flame of purpose in all others; his inward fire must revive their hope. Only to the extent that he can do this will he retain his hold on his men and keep control . . . The burdens increase with the number of men in his command, and therefore the higher his position, the greater the strength of character he needs to bear the mounting load.¹³

Other military writers have expressed the same idea, that strength of will is an essential ingredient of the senior commander, particularly the theater commander. Ferdinand Foch, the French theater commander of World War I, shared this view. In his book *Precepts*, he said,

No victory is possible unless the commander be energetic . . . ; unless he possess and can impart to all the resolute will of seeing things through; unless he be capable of exerting a personal action, composed of will, . . . in the midst of danger.¹⁴

General Sir Archibald P. Wavell, the British theater commander of the Middle East Command in North Africa during World War II, also believed that strength of will was indispensable. He claimed that the "most vital of all" qualities of the commander is "what we call the fighting spirit, the will to win."¹⁵ A related view has been expressed by John Keegan, professor of military history at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, in his landmark work, *The Face of Battle*. According to Keegan, "Mere hardness of character of the sort demonstrated by Zhukov or Model, rather than any particular strategic or tactical flair, increasingly became the principal military virtue as the Second World War dragged on."¹⁶ Similarly, in his article "Leadership as an Art," James L. Stokesbury points out, "Military history is littered with the names of great and good men who were not quite hard enough, and whose disinclination to get their men killed caused only more suffering in the long run."¹⁷ General Hooker's vacillation and timidity at Chancellorsville is a prime example.¹⁸ In essence, what all of these authors are saying, in one way or another, is that strength of will is imperative if the senior commander is to impose his strategic vision on his subordinates.

CONCLUSION

Others might argue that different traits, abilities, or characteristics are imperative for the theater commander. Some might suggest that communications skills, or charisma, or any number of other qualities are critical. However, for every example one can find a counter. For every charismatic giant, great orator, or master writer, one can find a theater commander of average ability in these areas. General Grant was a virtual failure at every endeavor he attempted until he assumed command of the Union Army. S. L. A. Marshall reached the same conclusion regarding the limited number of requirements for theater command. Writing in *The Armed Forces Officer* on "Leaders and Leadership," he said,

There have been great and distinguished leaders in our military Services at all levels who had no particular gifts for administration and little for organizing the detail of decisive action either within battle or without. They excelled because of a superior ability to make use of the brains and command the loyalty of well chosen subordinates.¹⁹

Likewise, Cronin reached the exact conclusion. In his lucid essay, "Thinking About Leadership," he notes that an essential requirement for the leader is "having excellent ideas or a clear sense of direction, a sense of mission. But such ideas or vision are useless unless the would-be leader can communicate them to his followers."²⁰

Much of the discussion in the current military leadership debate concerns the ethical and moral requirements of our senior leadership. The historical evidence shows, however, that while many theater commanders have been men of high moral character, others, equally successful, have been ruthless, egocentric, inclined to drink too much, or libertine. As Robert Taylor and William Rosenbach remind us in their book *Military Leadership: In Pursuit of Excellence*, "Biographers err in attributing success to what we *want* leaders to be rather than to the realities of the person in time and place."²¹ If we look at successful theater commanders of the past as they truly were, and not as we wish them to be, we will find that they possessed a wide assortment of strengths and weaknesses, personalities and temperaments, and skills and abilities. Strategic vision and strength of will seem to be the only attributes which consistently characterize the best theater commanders; it follows that these two attributes, above all others, can be considered imperatives for theater command.

NOTES

1. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 111, 146.

2. Edwin P. Hoyt, *How They Won the War in the Pacific: Admiral Nimitz and His Admirals* (New York: Weybright & Tally, 1971), p. 168.
3. Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, Calif: Presidio Press, 1982).
4. Clausewitz, p. 87.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 112. Emphasis added.
7. Thomas E. Cronin, "Thinking About Leadership," in *Military Leadership: In Pursuit of Excellence*, ed. Robert L. Taylor and William E. Rosenbach (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1984), pp. 195, 197.
8. Robert K. Mueller, "Leading Edge Leadership," in *Military Leadership: In Pursuit of Excellence*, p. 146.
9. See Matthew B. Ridgway, *The Korean War* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967); and William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory* (London: Cassell and Company, 1961).
10. Omar N. Bradley and Clay Blair, *A General's Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), p. 130.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 131.
12. Martin Blumenson, *The Patton Papers: 1940-1945* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), pp. 139, 418, 537.
13. Clausewitz, pp. 104-05.
14. Quoted in Robert D. Heini, Jr., *Dictionary of Military and Naval Quotations* (Annapolis, Md.: United States Naval Institute, 1966), p. 132.
15. Archibald Wavell, *Generals and Generalship: The Lee Knowles Lectures Delivered at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1939*, reprinted with other works for The Art of War Colloquium, US Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pa., February 1983, p. 43. (Originally printed in *The Times* [London] and subsequently published by the MacMillan Company, New York, 1941.)
16. John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), p. 331.
17. James L. Stokesbury, "Leadership as an Art," in *Military Leadership: In Pursuit of Excellence*, p. 17.
18. Bruce Catton, *Never Call Retreat* (New York: Pocket Books, 1967), pp. 138-49.
19. S. L. A. Marshall, "Leaders and Leadership," in *The Armed Forces Officer* (Washington: GPO, 1975), reprinted in *Military Leadership: In Pursuit of Excellence*, p. 44.
20. Cronin, p. 195.
21. *Military Leadership: In Pursuit of Excellence*, p. 1.

