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Commentary & Reply

Beware of Boldness

To the Editor:

Conrad Crane's article "Beware of Boldness" (*Parameters*, Summer 2006) profoundly illustrates that the devil, is in deed, in the definition. The author urges the reader to contest the Army's use of the word boldness as a positive character trait as it encourages a culture of daring risk-taking, especially, at the senior level. He uses his personal dictionary and a decidedly subjective analysis of American military history to put forth his case.

Generally, defining a word and historical research would work well to establish meaning. Unfortunately, as in this case, we also know that dictionaries differ and history has a way of censoring contemporary values if not applied appropriately. Continuing the author's analytical process by taking into account definition variances and by applying a more circumspect application of history will bring us closer to the correct answer.

To determine whether boldness is a positive or negative trait, one must take into account how the institution in question supports its application. The US Army War College takes a historical teaching approach. Unquestionably, one of the most studied military personages within the higher levels of the US Army education system is General Carl Von Clausewitz.

In *On War*, Von Clausewitz writes that boldness "from the train-driver and the drummer up to the general, is the noblest of virtues, the true steel which gives the weapon its edge and brilliancy." However, we also learn from him that it must be tempered with "a reflective mind, that it may not be a mere blind outburst of passion to no purpose; for with increase of rank it becomes always less a matter of self-sacrifice and more a matter of the preservation of others, and the good of the whole." To the Army, therefore, boldness is a positive trait as a creative power "that only when it encounters cautious foresight that it is at a disadvantage. . . ."

Next, consider the definition of "boldness." Numerous references in book form and over the Internet vary significantly. The author defines the word using the *Webster's New World Dictionary*. He cites the definition as "daring, fearless." He then cross-references "daring" which his dictionary defines as "having or showing a bold willingness to take risks." A quick review of other civilian dictionaries confirms that there are assorted definitions for both words. For example, the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* defines "bold" as "fearless before danger" and "daring" as to have the "courage to contend against. . . ." In addition, boldness has been historically defined with synonyms such as courage, bravery, intrepidity, dauntlessness, hardihood, and assurance. The word, "daring," is also a decidedly positive historic military trait when defined as "fearlessness and adventurousness."

The determination must be made as to which of the definitions most closely represents the general understanding of the terms when used in the context presented. To accomplish this, exchange the author's definition of "bold" with one from a rival source. Case in point, the author cites Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld addressing units at Fort Carson in October 2003 extolling them to be "bold, courageous, and innovative." By using "bold" as the author suggests, it would have the Secretary of Defense urging soldiers to be "reckless." However, if one uses a different dictionary, the statement could just as well mean, "to be fearless before danger."

Moreover, by applying the latter, the Secretary's words are well in line with the author's portrayal of Christopher "Kit" Carson's legacy as a brave, yet not reckless, leader. One should have little trouble determining which definition Secretary Rumsfeld wanted the audience to understand.

That argument can be taken further. What would a reasonable person, notwithstanding a particular definition, presume the statement to illustrate? For this scrutiny, we can use General Tommy Frank's first slide for his field commanders. The author tells us it read, "Take as much risk coming out as you took going in." The author implies that General Franks, with that one slide, sought to change the focus of the war from deliberate yet daring planning to accepting a great deal more risk as the military objective was met. Unfortunately, for the reader, there is little evidence provided to support such an assertion. On its face, it appears instead that the commanding general was actually harkening his troops not to accept additional risks.

General George S. Patton, Jr. is reported to have suggested that a good plan, violently executed, now, is better than a perfect plan next week. To many, those words are a decidedly bold choice from a very bold leader. However, using the author's dictionary and history, Patton was not a bold leader at all. Furthermore, in the article, MacArthur was bold, Eisenhower was not, but Pershing was, sort of. Nevertheless, all were successful in battle. This diminishes the author's argument that boldness in leaders produces negative results.

The author suggests that without bold leaders we would have leaders with better decisionmaking skills. However, soldiers having served under such leaders might disagree. If we consider the antonym of "boldness" we would have instead leaders who are doubtful, insecure, distrustful, and uncertain.

Words have differing meanings as determined by the context in which they are used. We should not engage in dueling dictionaries and histories to conclude what the Army intended when it adopted "boldness" as one of the key traits desirable in senior leaders. We should keep an open mind and thoughtfully analyze the information from different perspectives.

Army leaders need to continue fostering creative thought by "challenging inflexible ways of thinking, removing impediments to institutional innovation, and underwriting the risks associated with bold change." For the word, "bold" is only as negative as one makes it out to be.

Colonel Brian D. Perry
Stuttgart, Germany

The Author Replies:

My main purpose in writing “Beware of Boldness” was to foster debate about the accepted definition of the term and to get military practitioners to consider its implications. From the many communications I have received, mostly in favor of my arguments, but some against, I think I have been successful in achieving those goals. Critics are correct that there are various definitions in dictionaries, though I contend that a high element of risk is implied in the majority of those definitions. And there is still no doctrinal military definition, though the word often appears in field manuals. The lines between “reckless,” “daring,” and “bold” are not clearly defined. In a recent presentation on leadership, General Peter Schoomaker, Chief of Staff of the Army, declared his desire to develop “prudent risk-takers.” To this author, that phrasing is right on the mark. I wish I could take credit for helping to inspire it. If General Schoomaker’s definition becomes the accepted interpretation for “boldness,” I think the military and American society will be well served. The concept also captures the need for judgment that Colonel Perry quotes from Clausewitz.

My overall argument is subtler than Colonel Perry gives me credit. I did not state that boldness always produces negative results. Generals MacArthur, Eisenhower, and Pershing all were great soldiers who made significant contributions to the nation’s defense. I consider MacArthur the most brilliant soldier the nation has ever produced. But for both he and Pershing, once they reached the highest levels of command their penchant for boldness, eventually contributed to major policy failures that reverberated for decades in the international arena. The author Max Boot recently wrote an opinion piece about Iraq decrying the dangers of “bold ideas, badly executed.” I think that description could also cover events at the Chosin Reservoir and Meuse-Argonne. As for the interpretation of General Tommy Franks’ slide that I referred to in my article, all those who viewed it knew exactly what the general was saying about risk, especially the postwar planners who realized that dangers were being assumed away.

Colonel Perry is correct about the importance of leadership in setting a command climate that encourages innovation in subordinates and avoids a “zero-defect” mentality that discourages risk. The equation requires a delicate balance, ensuring that subordinates feel they have the “freedom to fail” at lower levels, while avoiding the significant costs associated with overreaching at the more senior levels of command. General Marshall did indeed give a great deal of latitude to subordinates, but their performance could almost universally be described as “prudent risk-taking” or even conservative, based primarily on shared values related to leadership and risk. If there had been significant failures resultant of his style of leadership, I feel certain he would have modified his approach. But that was not necessary since the war generally was conducted well, though not boldly.

Many have argued that boldness means being willing to take great personal risk by displaying the moral courage to advocate politically unpopular positions. That may be true, though I hearken back to Clausewitz’s cautions cited by Colonel Perry. With “increase of rank” and responsibility comes an appreciation

for “the good of the whole.” That is why equating risk in the civilian sector to that in the military is fallacious. At worst, excessive risk-taking by a chief executive officer might cost workers their jobs and perhaps cause a business to fail. For senior military leaders, the same behavior could cost lives, and perhaps even lead to a nation’s decline or demise.

Conrad C. Crane

The Most Professional Military

To the Editor:

In his article “Outfitting a Big-War Military with Small-War Capabilities” (*Parameters*, Autumn 2006), Colonel Melillo repeats a contentious assertion that I sometimes encounter in US military writing. He refers to the current US military as the “most highly skilled, best equipped, and most professional military in history” as well as “the most powerful, best equipped, and most highly trained fighting force in the world.” While few would deny that the US armed forces today are the most powerful or best equipped, it is surely difficult to claim that the US military is more professional or better trained than any other in the world, let alone in history.

There have been and are today many other standing armies made of volunteers or long-service veterans. Among contemporary ones, some train as continuously and thoroughly as US forces. Again, many have wholly professional officer and noncommissioned officer corps. All of these characteristics represent the upper limit of quality in their dimension. It is not possible to train more than continuously, or study one’s profession for more than a lifetime. With the important exception of the combat veteran, it is not possible to be more experienced than a career soldier. (Indeed, if one considers seasoned veterans to be professionals then there have been hundreds of more professional armies throughout history.) It follows, therefore, that all armies which are able to attain this peak of training and professionalism are equally trained and professional. My own observations have convinced me that this is the case. It seems to me that the officers of any NATO army, for example, are more or less completely professional. At the collective level, and among nations with continuously training and deploying volunteer armies, there is little to choose between them.

To be sure, not all professional armies are equally good at everything. Armies reflect the strengths and weaknesses of their societies, and their abilities are shaped by doctrine. Colonel Melillo has noted that the US armed forces have often shown a proficiency at mass war, a proficiency that has been less apparent in so-called small wars. One could argue that the British Army has had the opposite set of talents. It would be bold indeed, however, to assert that one army is more professional than the other.

American forces are genuinely well trained and led. To imagine that there are not other equally expert forces out there would be unimaginative and parochial-characteristics unworthy of a professional army.

Major Raymond Farrell
Canadian Army

The Author Replies:

I appreciate Major Farrell's inquiry into my description of the US military as "the most highly skilled, best equipped, and most professional military in history." My intent was certainly not to imply that this point is unarguable or that other militaries are not also exceptionally professional. I can also understand that my comments may have been perceived as American arrogance or parochialism. While I regret the false implication, I do believe that pride in one's country and service is one of the intangibles that motivate each of us to selflessly serve our nations with professionalism in whatever type of conflict we might face.

Colonel Michael Melillo

Commentary & Reply Submissions

We invite reader commentaries of up to 1,000 words on articles appearing in *Parameters*. Not all commentaries can be published. For those that are, the author of the article will be invited to provide a reply. Commentaries may be edited to meet style and space constraints. Send to US Army War College, ATTN: *Parameters*, 122 Forbes Ave., Carlisle, PA 17013, or by e-mail to Parameters@carlisle.army.mil.
