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Reflections on Leadership

ROBERT GATES

Last year I read *Partners in Command*, a book by Mark Perry. It is an account of the unique relationship between General Dwight D. Eisenhower and General George Marshall, and how they played a significant role in the American victory in World War II and laid the foundations for future success in the earliest years of the Cold War. Eisenhower and Marshall are, of course, icons, legends etched in granite. Their portraits hang in my office.

One of the things I found compelling in *Partners in Command* is how they were both influenced by another senior Army officer who is not nearly as well-known and in fact, as a reader of history, I had never heard of. His name is General Fox Conner, a tutor and mentor to both Eisenhower and Marshall. Conner and Marshall first became friends when they served together on the staff of General “Black Jack” Pershing during World War I. In the 1920s, Eisenhower served as staff assistant under Brigadier General Conner in the Panama Canal Zone.

Three Axioms

From Conner, Marshall and Eisenhower learned much about leadership and the conduct of war. Conner had three principles of war for a democracy that he imparted to Eisenhower and Marshall. They were:

- Never fight unless you have to.
- Never fight alone.
- And never fight for long.

All things being equal, these principles are pretty straightforward and strategically sound. We have heard variants of them in the decades since, captured perhaps most recently in the Powell Doctrine. Of course, all things are not equal, particularly considering the range and complexity of the threats facing America today, from the wars we are currently in to the conflicts we are most

likely to fight. So I would like to suggest how we should think about applying Fox Conner's three axioms to the security challenges of the twenty-first century.

"Never fight unless you have to." That one should only go to war as a last resort has long been a principle of civilized people. We know its horrors and costs. War is, by its nature, unpredictable and uncontrollable. Winston Churchill wrote in January 1942: "Let us learn our lessons. Never, never believe that any war will be smooth and easy, or that anyone who embarks on the strange voyage can measure the tides and hurricanes he will encounter Once the signal is given, the statesman is no longer the master of policy but the slave of unforeseeable and uncontrollable events."

In a dictatorship, the government can force the population to fall in behind the war effort, at least for a time. The nature of democracy, however, limits a country's ability to wage war, and that is not necessarily a bad thing. Indeed with perhaps the exception of World War II, every conflict in America's history has been divisive and controversial here at home. Contrary to what General George Patton said in his pep talks, most real Americans do not like to fight.

Consider the conflicts today. Afghanistan is widely viewed as a war of necessity—striking back at the staging ground of the perpetrators of the September 11th attack. The Iraq campaign, while justified in my view, is viewed differently by many people. In testimony in front of the Congress on the Iraq war, I observed that we were attacked at home in 2001 from Afghanistan. We are at war in Afghanistan today, in no small measure, because we mistakenly turned our backs on Afghanistan after the Soviet forces left in the late 1980s. We made a strategic mistake in the end game of that war. If we get the end game wrong in Iraq, I told the Congress, the consequences will be far worse.

Truth to tell, it is a hard sell to say we must sustain the fight in Iraq right now and continue to absorb the high financial and human cost of the struggle, in order to avoid an even uglier fight or even greater danger to our country in the future. We have Afghanistan to remind us that these are not just hypothetical risks.

Conner's axiom—never fight unless you have to—looms over policy discussions today regarding rogue nations like Iran that support terrorism; that is a destabilizing force throughout the Middle East and Southwest Asia and, in my judgment, is hell-bent on acquiring nuclear weapons. Another war

Dr. Robert M. Gates was sworn in on 18 December 2006, as the 22d Secretary of Defense. This article is based on remarks delivered 21 April 2008 at the US Military Academy.

in the Middle East is the last thing we need. In fact, I believe it would be disastrous on a number of levels. The military option must be kept on the table, given the destabilizing policies of the regime and the risks inherent in a future Iranian nuclear threat, either directly or through nuclear proliferation.

Then there is the threat posed by violent jihadist networks. The doctrine of preemption has been criticized in many quarters, but it is an answer to legitimate questions. With the possibility of proliferation of nuclear, biological, and chemical materials, and the willingness of terrorists to use them without warning, can we wait to respond until after a catastrophic attack is either imminent or has already occurred? Given the importance of public opinion and public support, how does one justify military action to prevent something that might happen tomorrow or several years down the road? While “never fight unless you have to” does not preclude preemption, after our experience with flawed information regarding Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, how high must the threshold of confidence in our intelligence have to be to justify at home and abroad a preemptive or preventive war?

Conner’s second axiom was “Never fight alone.” He recognized from the onset that the way World War I ended—and particularly the terms of the Versailles Treaty—made another major conflict with Germany almost inevitable. Victory would require a strong partnership of the Anglo-American democracies, and the most successful Army officers would have to adapt to working with allies and partners. Eisenhower and Marshall executed this concept brilliantly in World War II, despite the fact that, as one historian wrote about Allied generals, Eisenhower had to deal with “as fractious and dysfunctional a group of egomaniacs as any war had ever seen.”

Nonetheless, as Perry writes, “Eisenhower was a commander who believed that building and maintaining an international coalition of democracies was not a political nicety . . . but a matter of national survival.” He brought this concept to the founding of NATO.

But what do we do when, as is the case today with NATO in Afghanistan, some of our allies do not want to fight; or they impose caveats on where, when, and how their forces may be used; or their defense budgets are too small as a share of national wealth to provide a substantial contribution? Not counting the United States, NATO has more than two million men and women under arms, and yet we struggle to sustain a deployment of less than 30,000 non-US forces in Afghanistan, and we are forced to scrounge, hat in hand, for a handful of helicopters.

In August 1998, after the terrorist bombings of our embassies in Tanzania and Kenya, I wrote an op-ed in *The New York Times* about terrorism and national priorities, and noted that taking a more aggressive approach to terrorism would, in virtually all cases, require America “to act violently and

alone.” Even after September 11th and a string of attacks in Europe and elsewhere, the publics of many of our democratic allies view the terror threat in a fundamentally different way than we do, and this continues to be a major obstacle with respect to Afghanistan and other issues.

As Churchill said, the only thing worse than having allies is not having them at all. They provide balance, credibility, and legitimacy in the eyes of much of the world. In the case of Afghanistan, one should never discount the power of the world’s wealthiest and most powerful democracies coming together—as they recently did in Bucharest—to reaffirm publicly their commitment to this mission. Nor, above all, should we forget the superb performance in combat and the sacrifices of allies like the British, Canadians, Australians, Danes, Dutch, and others.

Just about every threat to our security in the years ahead will require working with or through other nations. Success in the war on terror will depend less on the fighting we do ourselves and more on how well we support our allies and partners in the moderate Muslim world and elsewhere. In fact, from the standpoint of America’s national security, the most important assignment in an officer’s military career may not necessarily be commanding US soldiers, but advising or mentoring the troops of other nations as they battle the forces of terror and instability within their own borders.

Finally, Fox Conner said, “Never fight for long.” According to Perry, General Conner believed that “American lives were precious, and no democracy, no matter how pressed, could afford to try the patience of its people.” Early on, Conner instilled the idea in both Eisenhower and Marshall, on finding the enemy, fighting the enemy, and defeating the enemy all within a short period of time. In World War II, the American people had already begun to lose patience by the fall of 1944, when the lightning dash across the plains of France following D-Day gave way to a soggy, bloody stalemate along Germany’s western border. That was only two-and-a-half years following Pearl Harbor.

Eisenhower no doubt had this in mind when he became President during the third year of the Korean War. He believed that the United States and the American people could not tolerate being bogged down in a bloody, interminable stalemate in Northeast Asia while the Soviets menaced elsewhere, especially in Europe. Eisenhower was even willing to threaten the nuclear option to bring that conflict to a close.

It has been six-and-a-half years since the attacks on September 11th, and we just marked the fifth anniversary of the start of the Iraq war. For America, this has been the second-longest war since the Revolution, and the first since then to be fought throughout with an all-volunteer force. In Iraq and Afghanistan, initial, quick military success has led to protracted stability and reconstruction campaigns against a brutal and adaptive insurgency and terrorists.

This has tested the mettle of our military and the patience of our people in a way we have not seen in a generation.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the US armed forces were still organized, trained, and equipped to fight large-scale conventional wars, not the long, messy, unconventional operations that proliferated following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The same traditional orientation was true of our procurement procedures, military health care, and more. The current campaign has gone on longer and has been more difficult than anyone expected or prepared for at the start, and so we have had to scramble to position ourselves for success over the long haul, which I believe we are doing.

A drawdown of American forces in Iraq is inevitable over time; the debate in Washington is largely about pacing. But the kind of enemy we face today—violent jihadist networks—will not allow us to remain at peace. What has been called the Long War is likely to be many years of persistent, engaged combat all around the world in differing degrees of size and intensity. This generational campaign cannot be wished away or put on a timetable. There are no exit strategies. To paraphrase the Bolshevik Leon Trotsky, we may not be interested in the Long War, but the Long War is interested in us.

How America's military and civilian leadership grapples with these transcendent issues and dilemmas will determine how, where, and when our forces may be sent into the battle in the years ahead. In discussing Fox Conner's three axioms, I hopefully have raised questions and provided few, if any, answers, and that is precisely the point. It is important that Americans think about these issues and come to their own conclusions.

Candor, Credibility, and Dissent

In order to succeed in the asymmetric battlefields of the twenty-first century—the dominant combat environment in the decades to come, in my view—our Army will require leaders of uncommon agility, resourcefulness, and imagination; leaders willing and able to think and act creatively and decisively in a different kind of world, in a different kind of conflict than we have prepared for the last six decades.

One thing will remain the same. We will still need men and women in uniform to call things as they see them and tell their subordinates and their superiors alike what they need to hear, not what they want to hear.

Here General Marshall in particular is a worthy role model. In late 1917, during World War I, US military staff in France was conducting a combat exercise for the American Expeditionary Force. General Pershing was in a foul mood. He dismissed critiques from one subordinate after another and stalked off. But then-Captain Marshall took the arm of the four-star general, turned him around, and told him how the problems they were having resulted from not

receiving a necessary manual from the American headquarters—Pershing’s headquarters. The commander said, “Well, you know, we have our problems.” Marshall replied, “Yes, I know you do, General, but ours are immediate and every day and have to be solved before night.”

After the meeting, Marshall was approached by other officers offering condolences for the fact he was sure to be fired and sent off to the front line. Instead Marshall became a valued adviser to Pershing, and Pershing a valued mentor to Marshall.

Twenty years later, then-General Marshall was sitting in the White House with President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his top advisers and Cabinet secretaries. War in Europe was looming but still a distant possibility for an isolated America. In that meeting, President Roosevelt proposed that the US Army, which at that time was ranked in size somewhere between that of Switzerland and Portugal, should be the lowest priority for funding. FDR’s advisers all nodded. Building an army could wait.

President Roosevelt, looking for the military’s imprimatur to his decision, said, “Don’t you think so, George?” General Marshall, who hated being called by his first name, said, “I’m sorry, Mr. President, I don’t agree with that at all.” The room went silent. The Treasury Secretary told General Marshall afterwards, “Well, it’s been nice knowing you.” It was not too much later that General Marshall was named Army Chief of Staff.

There are other, more recent examples of senior officers speaking frankly to their superiors. Just before the ground war started against Iraq, in February 1991, General Colin Powell, then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, met with the first President Bush. I was there in the Oval Office. General Powell looked the President in the eye and said words to the effect: “We are about to go to war. We may suffer thousands of casualties. If we do, are you prepared to drive on to victory? Will you stay the course?” He wanted the President to face reality. The President gave the right answer.

I should note at this point that in my time as Secretary of Defense, I have changed several important decisions because of general officers disagreeing with me and persuading me of a better course of action. For example, at one point I had decided to shake up a particular command by appointing a commander from a different service than had ever held the post. A senior service chief persuaded me to change my mind.

On trips to the front, I have also made it a priority to meet and hear from small groups of soldiers ranging from junior enlisted to field-grade officers, and their input has been invaluable and has shaped my thinking and decisions. All in senior positions would be well-advised to listen to enlisted soldiers, noncommissioned officers, and company- and field-grade officers. They are the ones on the front line, and they know the real story.

“In the military, as at every university or company in America, there is a focus on teamwork, consensus-building, and collaboration.”

More broadly, if as an officer one does not tell blunt truths or create an environment where candor is encouraged, then they have done themselves and the institution a disservice. This admonition goes back beyond the roots of our own republic. Sir Francis Bacon was a seventeenth-century jurist and philosopher as well as a confidante of the senior minister of England’s King James. He gave this advice to a protégé looking to follow in his steps at court: “Remember well the great trust you have undertaken; you are as a continual sentinel, always to stand upon your watch to give [the king] true intelligence. If you flatter him, you betray him.”

In General Marshall’s case, he was able to forge a bond of trust with President Roosevelt not only because his civilian boss could count on his candor, but also because once a decision was made, FDR could count on Marshall to do his utmost to carry out a policy—even if he disagreed with it—and make it work. This is important because the two men clashed time and again in the years that followed, ranging from yet more matters of war production to whether the Allies should defer an invasion on the mainland of Europe.

Consider the situation in mid-1940. The Germans had just overrun France, and the Battle of Britain was about to begin. FDR believed that rushing arms and equipment to Britain, including half of America’s bomber production, should be the top priority in order to save our ally. General Marshall believed that rearming America should come first. President Roosevelt overruled him and others, and made what most historians believe was the correct decision—to do what was necessary to keep England alive.

The significant thing is what did not happen next. There was a powerful domestic constituency for General Marshall’s position among a whole host of newspapers and congressmen and lobbies, and yet General Marshall did not exploit and use them. There were no overtures to friendly congressional committee chairmen, no leaks to sympathetic reporters, no ghostwritten editorials in newspapers, and no coalition-building with advocacy groups. General Marshall and his colleagues made the policy work and kept England alive.

In the ensuing decades, a large permanent military establishment emerged as a result of the Cold War, an establishment that forged deep ties to the Congress and to industry. Over the years, senior officers have from time to time been tempted to use these ties to do end-runs around the civilian leadership, particularly during disputes over the purchase of major weapon systems. This temptation should and must be resisted.

General Marshall has been recognized as a textbook model for the way military officers should handle disagreements with superiors and in particular with the civilians vested with control of the armed forces under our Constitution. In these situations, an officer's duties are:

- To provide blunt and candid advice always.
- To keep disagreements private.
- And to implement faithfully decisions that go against you.

As with Fox Conner's lessons of war, these principles are a solid starting point for dealing with issues of candor, dissent, and duty. Like Conner's axioms, applying these principles to the situations military leaders face today and in the future is a good deal more complicated.

World War II was America's last straightforward conventional conflict that ended in the unconditional surrender of the other side. The military campaigns since—from Korea to Vietnam, Somalia, and Iraq today—have been frustrating, controversial efforts for the American public and for American armed forces. Each conflict has prompted debate over whether senior military officers were being too deferential or not deferential enough to civilian leaders, and whether civilians, in turn, were too receptive or not receptive enough to military advice.

In the absence of clear lines of advance or retreat on the battlefield, each conflict has prompted our nation's senior civilian and military leadership to seek the support of an increasingly skeptical American public, using a variety of criteria and metrics—from enemy body counts to voter turnout. Then as now, the American people especially relied on the candor and the credibility of military officers in order to judge how well a campaign is going and whether the effort should continue.

Candor and credibility remain indispensable, because we will see yet more irregular and difficult conflicts, of varying types, in the years ahead; conflicts where the traditional duties of an officer are accompanied by real dilemmas—dilemmas posed by a nonlinear environment made up of civilians, detainees, contractors, embedded media, and an adversary that does not wear uniforms or obey the laws of war; an adversary that could be an enemy on one day or, as we have seen in Iraq's Anbar province, a partner the next.

Many young officers and cadets examine these scenarios in ethics classes or hear the accounts from returning veterans; take for example a situa-

tion where a beloved platoon sergeant is killed by a sniper shot believed fired from a house by the side of a road. When the combat forces arrive, the sniper is gone. But the elderly woman, who lives in the house, is still there. The battalion and brigade commanders pass down orders to demolish the house, to teach the enemy's sympathizers a lesson and take away a possible sniper position. The young platoon leader conducts an investigation and concludes this course of action is counterproductive. So the lieutenant makes the call not to destroy the house, and his commanding officer stands by him. This is a true story from Iraq, a campaign that has been dubbed the "Captain's War" because, as in any counterinsurgency, so much of the decisive edge is provided by the initiative and the judgment of junior officers.

Speaking of lessons learned, I should note that during my time as Secretary, I have been impressed by the way the Army's professional journals allow some of our brightest and most innovative officers to critique—sometimes bluntly—the way the service does business; to include judgments about senior leadership, both military and civilian. I believe this is a sign of institutional vitality and health and strength. I encourage every member of the military to take on the mantle of fearless, thoughtful, but loyal dissent when the situation calls for it. Agree with the articles or not, senior officers should embrace such dissent as healthy dialogue and protect and advance those considerably more junior who are taking on that mantle.

I wrote my first and far from last critique of the Central Intelligence Agency in a professional journal in 1970, four years into my career. Without the support of several senior agency officers, my career would have quickly been over.

In the military, as at every university or company in America, there is a focus on teamwork, consensus-building, and collaboration. Yet make no mistake, the time will come when a leader in today's military must stand alone and make a difficult, unpopular decision, or challenge the opinion of superiors and tell them that they cannot get the job done with the time and the resources available—a difficult charge in an organization built on a "can-do" ethos like America's Army; or a time when a member of the military will know that what superiors are telling the press or the Congress or the American people is inaccurate. These are the moments when an officer's entire career may be at risk. What will they do? These are difficult questions that require serious thought over the course of any officer's career. There are no easy answers.

If they will follow the dictates of their conscience and maintain the courage of their convictions while being respectfully candid with superiors and encouraging candor in others, they will be in good stead to meet the challenges facing them as officers and leaders in the years ahead.