

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 40
Number 4 *Parameters Winter 2010*

Article 20

11-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Tuchman, Barbara W.. "Generalship." *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 40, 4 (2010).
<https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol40/iss4/20>

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Generalship

BARBARA W. TUCHMAN

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This article was first published in the 1972 issue of Parameters.

(Editor's Note: On 3 April 1972, Mrs. Barbara W. Tuchman spoke at the US Army War College as part of the evening lecture program. In her remarks she made some very astute observations on the qualities and characteristics required of high military leaders. She extended her remarks by explaining her views on the role and influence of the military in our society. Her thoughtful observations served to broaden the horizons of all who heard her by exposing them to a clearly expressed point of view which varies from that held by many military officers. We found her presentation to be stimulating, enlightening, and provocative, and we are pleased to publish her remarks in Parameters.)

My subject tonight was suggested by your Commandant with no accompanying explanation; just the word "Generalship," unadorned. No doubt he could safely assume that the subject in itself would automatically interest this audience in the same way that motherhood would interest an audience of pregnant ladies. I do not know whether General Davis thought the subject would be appropriate for me because I am the biographer of a general who vividly illustrated certain qualities of generalship, both in their presence and their absence, or whether he had something of larger scope in mind.

In any event, as I considered the subject I became intrigued for several reasons: because it is important, because it is elusive, and because it is undergoing, I think, as a result of developments of the past 25 years, a radical transformation which may make irrelevant much of what we now know about it. I will come to that aspect later.

I should begin by saying that I have no greater qualification in this matter than if you had asked Tennyson to lecture on generalship because he wrote "The Charge of the Light Brigade." I did not write the biography of Stilwell in his capacity as a focal figure and extraordinarily apt representative of the American relation to China. I did not write *The Guns of August* as a study of how war plans go wrong—at least I did not know I was doing that until it was all over. I am not primarily a military historian, and to the degree that I am one at all, it is more or less by accident. However, since life is only

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fun when you attempt something a little beyond your reach, I will proceed with the assignment.

The Importance of Generalship

In Colonel Heinl's Dictionary of Military Quotations, the subject headings "Generals" and "Generalship" together take up more space than any other entry. If the closely related headings "Command" and "Leadership" are added, the subject as a whole takes up twice as many pages as any other. Why is it so important? The answer is, I suppose, because the qualities that enter into the exercise of generalship in action have the power, in a very condensed period of time, to determine the life or death of thousands, and sometimes the fate of nations. The general's qualities become, then, of absorbing interest not only to the military but to citizens at large, and it is obviously vital to the state to determine what the qualities are, to locate them in the candidates for generalship, and to ensure that the possessors and the positions meet.

I have also seen it said that senior command in battle is the only total human activity because it requires equal exercise of the physical, intellectual, and moral faculties at the same time. I tried to take this dictum apart (being by nature, or perhaps by profession, given to challenging all generalizations) and to think of rivals for the claim, but in fact no others will do. Generalship in combat does uniquely possess that distinction.

Qualities Generalship Requires

The qualities it requires divide themselves into two categories as I see it: those of character, that is, personal leadership, and those of professional capacity. When it comes to command in the field, the first category is probably more important than the second, although it is useless, of course, if separated from the second, and vice versa. The most brilliant master of tactics cannot win a battle if, like General Boulanger, he has the soul of a subaltern. Neither can the most magnetic and dashing soldier carry the day if, like General Custer, he is a nincompoop in deployment.

Courage, according to the Marchale de Saxe, is the first of all qualities. "Without it," as he says undeniably, "the others are of little value since they cannot be used." I think courage is too simple a word. The concept must include both physical and moral courage, for there are some people who have the former without the latter, and that is not enough for generalship. Indeed, physical courage must also be joined by intelligence, for as a Chinese proverb puts it, "A general who is courageous and stupid is a calamity." Physical, combined with moral, courage makes the possessor resolute, and I would take issue with De Saxe and say that the primary quality is resolution. That is what enables a man to prevail—over circumstances, over subordinates, over allies, and eventually over the enemy. It is the determination to win through, whether in the worst circumstance merely to survive or in a limited situation to complete the mission, but whatever the circumstance, to prevail. It is this will to prevail, I think that is the *sine qua non* of military action. If a man has it, he will also

have, or he will summon from somewhere, the courage to support it. But he could be brave as a lion and still fail if he lacks the necessary will.

Will was what Stilwell had, the absolute, unbreakable, unbendable determination to fulfill the mission no matter what the obstacles, the antagonists, or the frustrations. When the road that he fought to cut through Burma at last reached China, after his recall, a message from his successor recognized that the first convoy to make the overland passage, though Stilwell wasn't there to see it, was the product of "your indomitable will."

Sensible men will say that will must be schooled by judgment lest it lead to greater investment of effort or greater sacrifice than the object is worth, or to blind persistence in an objective whose very difficulties suggest it was a mistake from the start. That is true enough; good judgment is certainly one among the essentials of generalship, perhaps the most essential, according to the naval historian Raymond O'Conner. He quotes C. P. Snow's definition of judgment as "the ability to think of many matters at once, in their interdependence, their related importance, and their consequences." Judgment may not always be that rational, but more intuitive, based on a feel of the situation combined with experience.

Sometimes judgment will counsel boldness, as when Admiral Nimitz, against the advice of every admiral and general in his command, insisted on assaulting Kwajalein, site of the Japanese Headquarters at the very heart of the Marshall archipelago, although this meant leaving the enemy-held outer islands on the American line of communications. In the event, American planes were able to keep the outer islands pounded down while Kwajalein proved relatively undefended because the Japanese, thinking along the same lines as Nimitz's subordinates, had convinced themselves the Americans would not attempt to assault it.

More often than not, however, judgment counsels "Cannot" while will says "Can." In extremity the great results are gained when will overrides judgment. Will alone carried Washington through the winter of Valley Forge, that nadir of misery and neglect, and only his extraordinary will kept the freezing, half-starved, shoeless army, unpaid and unprovisioned by the Continental Congress, from deserting. Judgment would have said, "Go home." I suppose it was will that dragged Hannibal over the Alps although judgment might have asked what would happen after he gained his goal, just as judgment might have advised Stilwell that his mission—the mobilizing of an effective Chinese army under the regime of Chiang Kai-shek—was unachievable. Hannibal too failed in his objective: he never took Rome, but he has been called the greatest soldier of all time.

Sometimes the situation calls for will that simply says, "I will not be beaten"—and here too; in extremity, it must override judgment. After the awful debacle of four battles lost one after the other on the French frontiers in August 1914, and with the French Army streaming back in chaotic retreat and the enemy invading, judgment might have raised the question whether France was not beaten. That never occurred to the Commander-in-Chief, General Joffre, who possessed in unsurpassed degree a quality of great importance for generals—he was unflappable. Steadiness of temperament in a general is an asset at

any time and the crown of steadiness is the calm that can be maintained amid disaster. It may be that Joffre's immunity to panic was lack of imagination, or he may have suffered all the time from what Stilwell called "that sinking feeling," and concealed it. We do not know because he kept no diary. Whatever the source of his imperturbability, France was fortunate to have it in the right man at the right time. Certainly it was Gallieni who saw and seized the opportunity to retrieve disaster, and Foch and Franchet d'Esperey who supplied the elan to carry it through, but it was Joffre's ponderous, pink-cheeked, immovable assurance that held the army in being. Without him there might have been no army to make a stand at the Marne.

High on the list of a general's essentials is what I call the "Do this" factor. It is taken from the statement which Shakespeare put in the mouth of Mark Anthony: "When Caesar says, 'Do this,' it is performed." This quality of command rests not only on the general's knowledge of tactics and terrain and resources and enemy deployment in a specific situation, but on the degree of faith that his subordinates have in his knowledge. "When Stilwell told you what to do in Burma," said an officer, "you had confidence that was the right thing to do. That is what a soldier wants to know." If officers and men believe a general knows what he is talking about and that what he orders is the right thing to do in the circumstances, they will do it, because most people are relieved to find a superior on whose judgment they can rest. That indeed is the difference between most people and generals.

I come now to the second category; that is, professional ability. This encompasses the capacity to decide the objective, to plan, to organize, to direct, to draw on experience and to deploy all the knowledge and techniques in which the professional has been trained. For me to go further into this aspect and enter on a discussion of the professional principles of generalship does not, I think, make much sense; first, because if you do not know more about them than I do, you oughtn't to be here, and second, because it seems to me very difficult to select absolutes. The principles depend to a great extent on time, place, and history, and the nature of the belligerents. I will only say that the bridge that joins the two categories—that connects personal leadership to professional ability—is intelligence, which is the quality De Saxe put second on his list after courage.

The kind of intelligence varies, I suppose, according to occupation: in a doctor it must be sympathetic; in a lawyer it is invariably pessimistic; in a historian it should be accurate, investigative, and synthesizing. In a military man, according to De Saxe's fine phrase, it should be "strong and fertile in devices." I like that; it is a requirement which you can tell has been drawn from a soldier's experience. It closely fits, I think, the most nearly perfect, or at any rate the least-snafued, professional military performance of our time that of the Israelis in the Six-Day War of 1967.

In that microcosm, caught for us within the visible limits of six days, the qualities of resolution and nerve, the "Do this" factor, the deployment of expert skills, and a governing intelligence "strong and fertile in devices," all meshed and functioned together like the oiled parts of an engine. I need not go into the circumstances that made this happen, of which the chief one

perhaps was that no retreat or defeat was possible—either would have meant annihilation in that sliver of a country the size of the state of Massachusetts. The Israelis' concept of generalship, however, does contain principles that can apply beyond their borders. To anticipate is one. "To be a general is to lead," as the commander of the Jerusalem district put it to me, "and to lead one must be ahead, ahead, too, of what occurs." A general, he said, must be skeptical, critical, flexible, and finally obstinate in the execution of his mission.

This quality, which I have already mentioned in connection with Stilwell, seemed to be the requirement which the Israelis most emphasized in an officer. Youth in generals was another. There are no active Israeli generals over the age of 46, and the General Staff is on an average probably the youngest in the world. This is deliberate policy reflecting the military leaders' tense consciousness that on them may depend at any moment their nation's actual existence, in a sense not true of a country like ours which is spread over a continent and walled by two oceans. In Israel they cannot afford to maintain generalship at less than a peak of alertness, never satisfied, constantly improving.

The principle I found stressed above all others, although more on the planning level than in the field, was knowledge of the enemy—of his capabilities, his training, his psychology—as complete and precise as prolonged study, familiarity, and every means of intelligence-gathering could make it. In this realm the Israelis have the advantage of knowing in advance the identity of the enemy: he lives next door. Yet it seems to me that Americans could learn from this lesson.

If we paid more attention to the nature, motivation, and capabilities, especially in Asia, of the opponent whom we undertake so confidently to smash—not to mention of the allies whom we support—we would not have made such a mess, such an *unexpected* mess in Vietnam. We would not have found ourselves, to our confusion and dismay, investing more and more unavailing effort against a continually baffling capacity for resistance, and not only resistance, but initiative. In the arrogance of our size, wealth, and superior technology, we tend to overlook the need to examine what may be different sources of strength in others. If in 1917 Edith Cavell could say "Patriotism is not enough," we now need another voice of wisdom to tell us, "Technology is not enough." War is not one big engineering project. There are people on the other side—with strengths and will that we never bothered to measure. As a result of that omission we have been drawn into a greater, and certainly more ruinous, belligerent action than we intended. To fight without understanding the opponent ultimately serves neither the repute of the military nor the repute of the nation.

Generalship in Terms of the Present

Having brought myself down to the present with a rush, I would like to examine generalship from here on in terms of the present. I know that military subjects are generally studied and taught by examples from the past, and I could go on with an agreeable talk about the qualities of the Great Captains with suitable maxims from Napoleon, and references to General Grant, and anecdotes about how King George, when told that General Wolfe was mad,

replied “I wish he would bit some other of my generals”—all of which you already know. Besides, it might well be an exercise in the obsolete, for which the change in war that has occurred since mid-Twentieth Century, there must necessarily follow a change in generalship.

The concept of total war that came in with our century—the Terrible Twentieth, Churchill called it—has already, I think, had its day. It has been backed off the stage by the advent of the total weapon, nuclear explosion, with its uncritical capacity for overkill. since, regardless of first strike, there is enough nuclear power around to be mutually devastating to both sides, it becomes the weapon that can't be used, thus creating a new situation. If war, as we have all been taught, is the pursuit of policy by means of force, we are now faced by the fact that there can be no policy or political object which can be secured with benefit by opening a nuclear war that wrecks all parties. Consequently, limited wars with limited objectives must henceforth be the only resort when policy requires support by military means. Upon investigation I find that this was perceived by some alert minds almost as soon as it happened; by former Ambassador George Kennan for one, who wrote in 1954, when everyone else was bemused by the Bomb, that nuclear weapons had not enlarged the scope of war but exactly the opposite, that “the day of total wars has passed, and that from now on limited military operations are the only ones that could conceivably serve any coherent purpose.”

The significance of this development for the military man is profound. It means that he will be used more for political or ideological ends than he was in the past, as least in the American past. The effect is bound to be disturbing because, as the British General, Sir John Winthrop Hackett, recently said in a talk to our Air Force Academy, “Limited wars for political ends are far more likely to be productive of moral strains. . . than the great wars of the past.” The United States, it is hardly necessary to remark, is already suffering from the truth of that principle.

The change has been taking place over the past twenty years, while we lived through it without really noticing—at least I as a civilian didn't notice. One needs to step outside a phenomenon in order to see its shape and one needs perspective to be able to look back and say “*There* was the turning point.” As you can now see, Korea was our first political war. The train of events since then indicates that the role of the military is coming to be, as exhibited by the Russians in Egypt and ourselves in Southeast Asia, one of intervention in underdeveloped countries on a so-called “advisory” or “assistance” level with the object of molding the affairs of the client country to suit the adviser's purpose. The role has already developed its task force and training program in the Military Assistance Officers Program at Fort Bragg. According to its formulation, the task is to “assist foreign countries with internal security problems”—a nice euphemism for counterinsurgency—“and perform functions having sociopolitical impact on military operations.”

In short, the mission of the military in this sociopolitical era is to be counterrevolution, otherwise the thwarting of communism, or if euphemism is preferred, nation-building, Vietnamizing, or perhaps Pakistanizing or Africanizing some willing or unwilling client. This is quite a change from

defense of the continental United States which the founders intended should be our only military function.

Implications of Change

What does the change imply for generalship? “Has the Army seen the last of its great combat leaders of senior rank?” I quote that question from the recent book *Military Men* by Ward Just, correspondent of *The Washington Post*. Will there still be scope for those qualities of personal leadership that once made the difference? In the past it was the man who counted: Clove who conquered India with 1,100 men; Cortez who took Mexico with fewer; Charles Martel who turned back the Moslems at Tours; Nelson who turned back Napoleon at Trafalgar (and incidentally evaluated one source of his prowess when he said, “If there were more Lady Hamiltons there would be more Nelsons”). Though that might be thought to please the Women’s Lib people who are down on me already, I am afraid it won’t because from their point of view it’s the wrong kind of influence. Anyway, that factor too may vanish, for I doubt if love or amorous triumph will play much role in inspiring generals to greater feats on the advisory or Vietnamizing level.

Above all, among the men of character who as individuals made a historic difference, there was Washington. When, on his white horse he plunged into the midst of panicked men and with the “terrific eloquence of unprintable scorn” stopped the retreat from Monmouth, he evoked from Lafayette the tribute, “Never have I seen so superb a man.”

Is he needed in the new army of today whose most desired postgraduate course, after this one, it has been said, is a term at the Harvard Business School? To fill today’s needs, the general must be part diplomat, part personnel manager, part weapons analyst, part sales and purchasing agent. Already General Creighton Abrams has been described by a reporter as *two* generals: one a “hell-for-leather, jut-jawed battlefield commander and the other a subtle and infinitely patient diplomat.” For his successors, the second role is likely soon to outweigh the first.

Out of that total human activity, physical, intellectual, and moral, how much will be left for the general to do? Given chemical detectors and people-sniffers, defoliators and biological weapons, infrared radar and electronic communication by satellite, not to mention, as once conceived by Mr. McNamara, an invisible electric fence to keep out the enemy, the scope for decision-making in the field must inevitably be reduced. Artillery and even infantry fire, I understand, will be targeted by computers, extending from pocket size models in the soldier’s pack all the way to the console at headquarters. This is supposed to raise the dazzling prospect of eliminating human error, like Professor Skinner’s vision of eliminating human evil by the teaching machine. The realization of either of those prospects, I can guarantee you as a historian, has about the same degree of probability as the return of the dinosaur.

The change that could be the most momentous would be a change in the relation of the military to the state. This is sensitive territory with potential for trouble, and I am entering here into an area of speculation which you may find refutable, and certainly arguable.

Traditionally, the American Army has been, and consciously has considered itself, the neutral instrument of state policy. It exists to carry out the orders of the Government. In order to do so without hesitation or question, the officer corps has maintained, on the whole, a habit of nonpartisanship, at least skin-deep, whatever individual ideological passions may rumble beneath the surface. When it is ordered into action, the Army does not ask “Why?” or “What for?” In the past that has been a fundamental presumption. But can it last when the military find themselves being sent to fight for purposes so speculative or so blurred that they cannot support a legal state of war? You may say that it is a matter of semantics, but semantics make a good test. As a writer, I can tell you that trouble in writing clearly invariably reflects troubled thinking, usually an incomplete grasp of the facts or of their meaning.

One wonders what proportion of officers in Southeast Asia today get through a tour of duty without asking themselves “Why?” or “What for?” As they make their sociopolitical rounds in the future, will that number uncomfortably grow? That is why the defunct principle that a nation should go to war only in self-defense or for vital and immediate national interest was a sound one. The nation that abides by it will have a better case with its own citizens and certainly with history. No one could misunderstand Pearl Harbor or have difficulty explaining or defining the need for a response. War which spends lives is too serious a business to do without definition. It requires definition—and declaration. No citizen, I believe, whether military or civilian, should be required to stake his life for what some uncertain men in Washington think is a good idea in gamesmanship or deterrence or containment or whatever is the governing idea of the moment.

If the military is to be used for political ends, can it continue to be the innocent automaton? Will the time come when this position is abandoned, and the Army or members of it will question and judge the purpose of what they are called upon to do? Not that they will necessarily be out of sympathy with government policy. Generally speaking, American policy since the onset of the Cold War has been the containment of communism with which, one may presume, the Army agrees. But the questions grow complex. What about Russia vis-à-vis China? What about India vis-à-vis Pakistan where recently we skirted the consequences of folly by a hair. What about the Middle East? Suppose we decide that unless we rescue Syria from Russian influence, Iraq will fall? Or suppose we transpose that principle to South America? You can play dominoes on any continent. What happens if we blunder again into a war on the wrong side of history?

That is not the military’s fault, the military will reply. It is a civilian decision. The military arm remains under civilian control. Did not Truman fire MacArthur?

It is true that in America the military has never seriously challenged civilian rule, but in late years it hardly needs to. With a third of the national budget absorbed by military spending, with the cost of producing nuclear and other modern weapons having evidently no limits, with 22,000 defense contractors and 100,000 subcontractors operating in the United States, with defense plants or installations located in 363 out of 435 Congressional districts,

the interlocking of military-industrial interests grips the economy and pervades every agency of government.

The new budget of \$83.4 billion for defense represents five times the amount allotted to education and nearly forty times the amount for control of pollution (our Government having failed to notice that pollution by now is a graver threat to us than the Russians). It costs an annual average of about \$10,000 to maintain each man in uniform compared to a national expenditure of \$1,172.86 for each person in the United States; in other words, the man in uniform absorbs ten times as much. The Pentagon, where lies the pulse of all this energy and activity, spends annually \$140,000,000 on public relations *alone*, nearly twice as much as the entire budget of the National Endowment for Arts and Humanities. When military and military-connected interests penetrate government to that extent, the government becomes more or less the prisoner of the Pentagon.

In this situation, the location of ultimate responsibility for policy-making is no longer clearly discernible. What *is* clear is that while the military exerts that much influence in government, it cannot at the same time retain the stance of innocence.

It used to be that any difficulty of assignment could be taken care of under the sheltering umbrella of Duty, Honor, Country. As long as you had a *casus belli* like the *Maine* or the Alamo, you could get through any dubious expedition without agony. The West Point formula may no longer suffice. Country is clear enough, but what is Duty in a wrong war? What is Honor when fighting is reduced to “wasting” the living space—not to mention the lives—of a people that never did us any harm? The simple West Point answer is that Duty and Honor consist in carrying out the orders of the government. That is what the Nazis said in their defense, and we tried them for war crimes nevertheless. We undercut our own claim at Nuremberg and Tokyo.

When fighting reaches the classic formula recently voiced by a soldier in the act of setting fire to a hamlet in Vietnam, “We must destroy it in order to save it,” one must go further than duty and honor and ask “Where is common sense?” I am aware that common sense does not figure in the West Point motto; nevertheless, soldiers are no less subject to Descartes’ law, “I think, therefore I am,” than other mortals. Thinking will keep breaking in. That is the penalty of abandoning the purity of self-defense as *casus belli*. When a soldier starts thinking, according to the good soldier Schweik, “he is no longer a soldier but a lousy civilian.” I do not know if it will come to that but it serves to bring in the civilian point of view.

Does civilian society really want the Army to start thinking for itself? Does this not raise all sorts of dread potentials for right-wing coups or left-wing mutinies? While the military normally tends to the right, there *have* been other cases: Cromwell’s New Model Army overturned the King, the naval mutiny at Kronstadt and desertions from the front brought on the Russian Revolution. Already we have a dangerously undisciplined enlisted force in Vietnam, which admittedly does not come so much from thinking as from general disgust. While this development is not political, from what one can tell, it is certainly not healthy.

Final Problem

A final problem is the question of the military's cherished separateness from civilian society. America has never encouraged the evolution of a military caste, yet a certain sense of a special calling has developed, as it is bound to do among men who have chosen a profession involving risk of life. That choice sets them apart, gives them a sense of mission, unites them in a feeling of belonging to a special band. They *want* to feel separate, I believe; they want the distinction that compensates to some extent for the risk of the profession, just as the glitter and pomp and brilliant uniforms and social prestige compensated the armies of Europe. Yet if the military man must now begin to ask himself the same questions and face the same moral decisions as the civilian, can his separateness long endure?

Conclusion

I know that I have wandered far from my assignment, but I raise these questions because it seems to me that generalship will have to cope with them from now on. The trouble with this talk, as I imagine will not have become visible, is that I have none of the answers. That will take another breed of thinker. I can only say that it has always been a challenge to be a general; his role, like that of the citizen, is growing no easier.