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## To Win Wars, Correct the Army's Political Blind Spot

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Joseph Roger Clark

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**ABSTRACT:** Within increasingly complex operational environments, the Army's apolitical approach to war represents a political blind spot. This condition undermines the Army's ability to match military means to political objectives and to set the conditions for victory. To correct this blind spot, the Army must leverage reflective conversations about the political aspects of conflict. To develop this ability in its soldiers, the Army should increase its use of mentoring.

As part of the post-Iraq-post-Afghanistan reset, much has been written about how the US Army fights and whether its current doctrine is capable of producing victory. In response to these discussions, and the wars themselves, much has also been written about the need for the Army to become a learning organization, one capable of innovating in the face of increasingly complex operational environments. Most of these debates are insightful, yet miss the mark. They fail to identify the central cause that underlies the unsatisfying outcomes in Afghanistan and Iraq and that risks future failures—the Army's political blind spot.

The problem is not how the Army fights nor how it learns to fight. The problem is how the Army understands the fight. Often, it does not. Too often, the Army fails to consider and develop a tailored understanding of the political context, that is, specific political conditions, the range of desired ends sought by actual or potential belligerents or other strategic foreign audiences, associated with a given conflict. This failure makes it difficult, if not impossible, for the Army to effectively apply its doctrine in pursuit of victory. This blind spot springs from an apolitical approach to warfare. It leaves the Army unable to appreciate the political conditions in which conflicts occur.

This situation cannot be remedied through the Army's formal educational systems. Organizational and budgetary constraints make such remedies impossible. Formal educational programs must focus first on the delivery of formative skill sets and knowledge, rather than transformative understandings of theory, critical thinking, and the causal logic necessary to assess political conditions.

To correct the Army's political blind spot, informal methods must be leveraged. Army-wide reflective conversations about the political aspects of past and potential conflicts are needed. Such conversations should be undertaken in the spirit of the Army's process for crafting strategic leadership. They should be an open dialogue of alternative points of view, seeking to explore the recursive effects of political

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conditions and military action.<sup>1</sup> These discussions should be carried out via professional publications, The Army Press, and social media—and facilitated through personal mentoring. The increased use of such reflective conversations will increase the Army's ability to appreciate the political context within which wars occur—and enhance its ability to set the conditions for victory in the twenty-first century.

### Political Roots of Recent, and Potentially Future, Failure

Over the last two years, counter-insurgency debates have given way to discussions of why the Army failed—or in Lieutenant General Daniel Bolger's view, lost—in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>2</sup> In "Learning from the Past, Looking to the Future," Colonel Matthew Morton highlights the importance of this dialogue: "[c]onclusions about the recent era of conflict will affect US officers as they ascend to higher ranks..." He notes how future senior officers understand their experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq will affect the advice they give civilian leaders.<sup>3</sup> It will also affect how they fight future conflicts, and even their understanding of modern war. Major Jason Warren notes that the Army's exceptional tactical prowess has paradoxically led to strategic impotence. Warren cites the rise of a "centurion mindset" as the principal reason the Army has repeatedly failed to achieve national objectives. To develop strategic leaders, Warren calls for a broadening of educational opportunities and duty assignments.<sup>4</sup> The arguments put forth by Morton and Warren are critically insightful, but incomplete and in some ways impractical.

Morton is correct in his assertion that knowledge of past events informs contemporary understandings of what is possible. More specifically, he is correct that during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq there was a failure to appreciate the limits of US power, a lesson easily drawn from history.<sup>5</sup> Morton notes that the Army's history offers a multitude of lessons to enrich our understanding of current or expected future events and hone the advice officers provide civilian leaders.<sup>6</sup> I agree. Yet, the challenge is knowing from which past events one ought to draw such lessons, and which lessons ought to be learnt. Determining which historic examples best inform current or future cases requires one to have the ability to compare the political conditions in question. An understanding of the similarity or dissimilarity of political conditions provides a criteria for determining which lessons of history ought to be learnt.

Similarly, Warren's contention the "lack of military success during a time of American technological and training advantages indicates shortcomings of US Army Culture" is correct. His contention that the centurion mindset produced an Army that wins firefights but loses wars, is also correct. Yet, his solution, to increase and broaden

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1 US Department of the Army, *Army Leadership: Competent, Confident, Agile*, Field Manual 6-22 (Washington, DC: US Department of the Army, 2006), chapter 12.

2 Daniel Bolger, *Why We Lost: A General's Inside Account of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014).

3 Matthew Morton, "Learning from the Past, Looking to the Future," *Parameters* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 55-67.

4 Jason W. Warren, "The Centurion Mindset and the Army's Strategic Leader Paradigm," *Parameters* 45, no. 3 (Autumn 2015): 27-38.

5 Morton, "Learning from the Past, Looking to the Future," 58-61.

6 *Ibid.*, 66.

educational opportunities for officers, is insufficient (though necessary).<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, funding to send every mid-grade officer to graduate school is unlikely, given current budget constraints.<sup>8</sup> Even if funding was available, graduate education itself would fail to bring about the desired outcome—an Army that excels tactically and wins strategically. Improved critical thinking skills are not enough.

What is needed is improvement in the Army's political skill sets.<sup>9</sup> The Army's operational and strategic failures resulted from the fact that its leadership lost sight of the central tenet of war: the aims are political, and the means are carried out within a specific political context.

Wars are political. Victory is ultimately defined in political terms. Clausewitz did not invent these tenets. He observed the world around him, then provided arguments about what was necessary to fight and win.<sup>10</sup> Two hundred years later, the political nature of war has not changed. The political conditions under which it occurs, however, are rapidly evolving. To set the conditions for victory in the twenty-first century, the Army must get better at observing the political conditions of a conflict, and question how well its doctrine fits those conditions, and when necessary innovate how it fights.

### A Changed World, Changing Conflicts

Successful armies are products of their environments. The logic and core assumptions of their doctrines are fitted to specific circumstances. The US Army is no different. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Army could expect to fight within a constrained set of political conditions. War was the exclusive realm of nation-states. US national security objectives were primarily defined as homeland defense and the protection of free commerce with other nation-states. The political objectives of a conflict could be secured by defeating the military forces with which a foreign power threatened US national security. War had a sequential nature. Military success preceded political victory. Military doctrine based on Jomini's assumption that the destruction of the enemy's military forces precedes, and opens space for, a political settlement was well-fitted to the political conditions of most conflicts.<sup>11</sup> The world has changed.

In the twenty-first century, war is primarily—but not exclusively—the realm of nation-states. Access to global resource and financial markets, decreased transportation costs and travel times, the ubiquity of the internet and World Wide Web, the diffusion of technology, and social media, endow non-state actors with the potential to generate capabilities once reserved to national governments. Non-state actors now have the ability to participate in, if not wage, war. Non-state actors

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7 Warren, "The Centurion Mindset and the Army's Strategic Leader Paradigm," 35-38.

8 Ibid., 36-37.

9 By political skills, I mean the epistemological capabilities that fall within the domain of political science.

10 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

11 Antoine Henri Jomini, *Art of War*, ed. James Donald Hittle (Harrisburg: Stackpole Books, 1965).

can shape the political conditions by shaping the narrative of the conflict and activating or deactivating strategic audiences.<sup>12</sup>

Globalization, diffused technology, and social media similarly increase the ability of conventionally weaker nation-states to shape the political conditions of a given conflict. These factors enhance the ability of weaker states to shape the narrative and influence strategic audiences, potentially expanding the number of combatants or fronts. Globalization, technology, and social media allow weaker nation-states to short-circuit, circumvent, or reduce the military and political advantages of great powers—including the United States.<sup>13</sup>

Within these increasingly complex conditions, conflicts become more dynamic. The range of potential adversaries increases. As the number of combatants evolves, the range of capabilities and political objectives the Army may confront becomes more fluid. A multitude of state and non-state combatant and non-combatant actors may enter and exit the conflict, changing the number and nature of strategic audiences. This situation undermines the sequential nature of war observed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the twenty-first century, Jomini's assumption may be less valid.<sup>14</sup> The defeat of enemy forces may not be tightly bound to victory.

Modern warfare requires the Army assess political conditions and evaluate how well existing military doctrine fits. If Army doctrine is ill-fitted to the political conditions, setting the military conditions for victory requires innovation in military doctrine and/or strategy.

### **The Paradox of Adaptation—Political Blindness**

No army is better at finding, fixing, and finishing the enemy than the US Army. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries this capability overwhelmingly produced the desired political objective(s). The Army's tactical prowess is a product of its adaptive ability.

Adaptation is catalyzed by a desire to increase efficiency or capabilities. It is also catalyzed by changes in operational terrain or technology. It requires new techniques or procedures to accomplish an accepted task. Adaptive learning builds on the foundations of conventional wisdom. New techniques or procedures (even if radically different) are based on accepted assumptions about the logic and utility of a given task.<sup>15</sup> Adaptation changes behavior, but not beliefs about the utility of the behavior in regard to the objective(s).<sup>16</sup> For example: over the last hundred years, cavalry has adapted to the industrial revolution and other changes in technology—yet, the logic and utility of continuous reconnaissance to develop the situation and identify, create, and preserve options to seize, retain, and exploit the initiative remains unchanged.<sup>17</sup>

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12 Emile Simpson, *War from the Ground Up* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 15-109.

13 Robert A. Johnson, "Predicting Future War," *Parameters* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 65-76.

14 Jomini.

15 Andrew Hill, "Military Innovation and Military Culture," *Parameters* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 85-98.

16 Chris Argyris, "Double-Loop Learning and Implementable Validity," in *Organizations as Knowledge Systems: Knowledge, Learning and Dynamic Capabilities*, eds. Haridimos Tsoukas and Nikolaos Mylonopoulos (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

17 US Department of the Army, *Reconnaissance and Cavalry Squadron*, Field Manual 3-20.96 (Washington, DC: US Department of the Army, 2010), Chapter 3.

The Army's excellence in adaptation is a product of its formal educational systems. They stress adaptive learning. From Basic Training to the Command and General Staff College, the Army's educational systems produce soldiers who are increasingly efficient and effective at accomplishing accepted tasks—maneuver to contact, accurate delivery of direct and indirect fire, identifying and locating enemy forces, etc. Soldiers become experts at adapting new tools, technologies, and weapons to such tasks. They also become experts at adapting the accomplishment of these tasks to different physical environments.

Herein lies the root of the Army's strategic problem. As adaptation reinforces existing assumptions and validates the perceived utility of established behaviors, it undermines innovation.<sup>18</sup> Innovative learning questions not just how something is done, but why it is done. Innovative learning does this by examining the utility of existing behaviors in reference to the stated objective(s) and specific conditions.<sup>19</sup>

Because the Army's educational systems and adaptive skills developed during a period in which military success preceded political victory, Jomini's central assumption came to be unquestioned. The destruction of enemy forces became the Army's *raison d'être*.

As the Army became accustomed to overlooking the political conditions of a conflict, it stopped evaluating such. Eventually the Army's ability to appreciate and respond to the political conditions within which a war occurs atrophied. The Army developed a political blind spot. As a result, military operations often came to be viewed myopically, untethered to the nation's political objectives.

Correcting this requires soldiers capable of considering the political conditions of a given conflict. They must also become aware of the potential disconnect between established military doctrine and the political conditions and political objectives of said conflict.

Yet, this must be done without sacrificing tactical prowess. It is still possible to lose a war on the battlefield. It makes no sense to become better strategically, at the expense of tactical ability. The Army's formal educational systems ought to continue to focus on adaptive ability.

Innovative ability and an appreciation of political context ought to be honed via Army-wide reflective conversations and mentoring that explore how the political conditions of a given conflict and US national security objectives challenge the utility of existing doctrine. The Army's experiences in Vietnam and Iraq illustrate the importance of such.

### **Reflective Conversation: Vietnam, Iraq, and Innovation**

When faced with the inability to secure the political objective(s) of a war, the military forces of great powers have three choices: quit, try harder, or try something else. Predominately, the second option is chosen. Perversely, it normally raises the costs of failure—without altering the outcome.

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18 Chris Argyris, *Reasons and Rationalizations: The Limits to Organizational Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

19 Ibid.

The reason for this is simple. For great power militaries, failure is rarely the result of the poor execution of well-fitted doctrine. Failure is more often a product of doctrine that is ill-fitted to the conflict's political conditions. Trying harder will not fix this problem.

This was the Army's experience in the wars in Vietnam and Iraq. During the Vietnam War, efforts at an Army-wide reflective conversation were blocked by the Army's hierarchy. During the 2003-2011 Iraq War, efforts at an Army-wide reflective conversation were facilitated by the Army's organizational structure.

In June 1965, Army Chief of Staff General Harold Johnson commissioned a study of the war in Vietnam. General Johnson had questions about the nature of the conflict and the appropriateness of the growing US military mission. Concerned the Army did not understand the challenges it would face, General Johnson hoped an examination of the political conditions might yield new courses of action to "accomplish US aims and objectives."<sup>20</sup>

General Creighton Abrams, the Vice Chief of Staff, was tasked with overseeing the study. Abrams and the study's ten field-grade authors became convinced existing doctrine was ill-fitted to the political conditions of the war—and was therefore unlikely to produce victory. Their findings were published in March 1966 as "A Program for the Pacification and Long-term Development of South Vietnam" (PROVN).<sup>21</sup>

PROVN questioned how well core doctrinal assumptions fit the political conditions of the war in Vietnam. It maintained the political conditions of the war were such that: "Victory' can only be achieved through bringing the individual Vietnamese, typically a rural peasant, to support willingly the Government of South Vietnam (GVN). The critical actions are those that occur at the village, district and provincial levels. This is where the war must be fought; this is where that war and the object which lies beyond it must be won."<sup>22</sup> The officers working under Abram's leadership had access to battlefield information, professional experience with existing doctrine, access to academic resources and histories regarding insurgencies, and sought out expert opinions in the United States and Asia about the political conditions of the war. They had a wealth of information with which to launch an organization-wide conversation about the war. Yet, they did not have access to the Army (as an organization).

PROVN did not result in an Army-wide reflective conversation. There was no internal dialogue about the political conditions of the war or the appropriateness of existing doctrine. Such was blocked by the organization's hierarchy. General Johnson was concerned about PROVN's potentially divisive effects on the Army. General William Westmoreland, the Commander of Military Assistance Command-Vietnam, and General Earle Wheeler, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, disagreed with the authors' findings. As a result, PROVN's classification rating was elevated and distribution restricted. PROVN

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20 *The Pentagon Papers: The Senator Gravel Edition*, Volume II (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 501.

21 US Department of the Army, Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Military Operations, *A Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of South Vietnam*, Volume 1 (Washington, DC: US Department of the Army, 1966).

22 *Ibid.*, 1.

was effectively locked away, and with it any organization-wide attempt to evaluate how well the Army's military means fit the nation's political ends.<sup>23</sup>

In November 2005, the Commander of the Army's Combined Arms Center (then) Lieutenant General David Petraeus announced the Army would completely rewrite its manual on counterinsurgency. His public announcement, occurring at a Washington conference hosted by the Carr Center for Human Rights, came as a shock. The Army's existing counterinsurgency manual had been issued just thirteen months earlier.<sup>24</sup> What Petraeus' announcement did, however, was decrease the likelihood the Army's contemporary hierarchy would be able to stifle such an evaluation in regard to Iraq. The military-means-political-ends question was now in the public sphere.

After the 2003 invasion, Petraeus worried existing doctrine was ill-fitted to the political conditions of the war in Iraq. He questioned its ability to produce victory. By 2005, at the end of his second tour, Petraeus was convinced the Army's core doctrinal assumptions were ill-fitted to the political conditions of the war.<sup>25</sup> Newly assigned to the Combined Arms Center, Petraeus launched an Army-wide reflective conversation—the counter-insurgency debates. The professional journals under his control became the forum for discussion and debate about the political conditions of the conflict, Army doctrine, and the best path forward. To fuel the conversation, Petraeus pulled in information from Iraq, expanded the Army's Lessons Learned program, and used the Command and General Staff College and the seventeen other Army schools and training programs under his command as vehicles for modeling and studying the war.<sup>26</sup>

The organization's reflective conversation about counter-insurgency operations drew attention to the Army's performance gap and the need for innovation.<sup>27</sup> This increased awareness and the search for solutions, made the organization ripe for leaning. These conversations increased the Army's absorptive capacity—its capacity to absorb and act upon

23 Robert Gallucci, *Neither Peace nor Honor: the Politics of American Military Policy in Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 37-39; Philip Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History 1946-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 410; Lewis Sorley, "To Change a War: General Harold K. Johnson and the PROVN Study," *Parameters* 28, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 93-109; John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 160; Jeffrey Record, *The American Way of War: Cultural Barriers to Successful Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: CATO Institute, 2006), 11; and Andrew Birtle, "PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians: A Reappraisal," *The Journal of Military History* 72, no. 4 (October 2008): 1244. It is worth noting that PROVN was even withheld from the White House and National Security Council. John Tierney, *Chasing Ghosts: Unconventional Warfare in American History* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2006), 242-243.

24 Linda Robinson, *Tell Me How This Ends: General David Petraeus and the Search for a Way Out of Iraq* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), 77; and Conrad Crane, *Avoiding Vietnam: The US Army's Response to Defeat in Southeast Asia* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2010), 59-60.

25 David Petraeus, "Learning Counterinsurgency: Observations for Soldiering in Iraq," *Military Review* 86, no. 1 (January-February 2006): 45-55; and Thomas Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), 165, 228-232. Robinson, *Tell Me How This Ends*, 67-70.

26 Robinson, *Tell Me How This Ends*, 76; David Cloud and Greg Jaffe, *The Fourth Star: Four Generals and the Epic Struggle for the Future of the United States Army* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2009), 216-217; Thomas Ricks, *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 17-18; and David Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era: Transforming the US Military for Modern Wars* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 75.

27 Richard Downie, *Learning from Conflict: The US Military in Vietnam, El Salvador, and the Drug War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), 2.

new knowledge.<sup>28</sup> Critically, they forged a community of like minded individuals with a different understanding of the fight and the best means for achieving victory. As this community grew, it reshaped the organization's understanding of the war in Iraq.<sup>29</sup>

In a relatively short period of time, the Army reevaluated the political conditions of the war in Iraq and revised doctrine to fit them better. By January 2008, the means through which the Army sought victory in Iraq changed. The speed of innovation was facilitated by the Army-wide reflective conversations that preceded it. Yet, organizational change did not occur fast enough to secure US political objectives, that is, to secure victory. The process started too late, beginning after the Army entered the conflict.

Army-wide reflective conversations about the political conditions of past, current, and potential conflicts are critical. As a form of inquiry and learning, such conversations are part of evaluating the organization's performance in setting the military conditions for victory. The counter-insurgency debates of the last decade illustrate this process. Yet, what is needed is a process for reflective conversation that is more expansive and more routine—and less defensive on the part of the participants and the Army as an institution.

At the core of such Army-wide reflective conversation must be the written works of soldiers, works produced through the soldier's self-study of given past, present, or potential conflicts. In a January 2016 article for *The Army Press*, Captain Philip Neri argued for the encouragement of such self-study activities as part of the professional military education of individual soldiers.<sup>30</sup> Neri's suggestion should be implemented and leveraged to foster organization-wide conversations. This aim could be accomplished by encouraging the publication of self-study works via the Army's professional publications, *The Army Press*, and social media. Senior leaders should incentivize participation in self-study activities and publication by favorably highlighting such on evaluation reports and promotion decisions.

Back-and-forth, open, conversations visible to the entire organization could challenge the Army to consider the political conditions of modern conflicts. Could, however, does not equate to would.

For Army-wide conversations to generate a better appreciation of the political conditions of modern war, two additional traits must be present. First, they must have a reflective nature. They must go beyond histories of what happened or post hoc defenses of poor outcomes. Instead, these conversations must compare expected outcomes with actual outcomes and question the role political conditions played in diverting the two.<sup>31</sup> Second, within the context of these conversations,

28 Haridimos Tsoukas and Nikolaos Mylonopoulos, *Organizations as Knowledge Systems: Knowledge, Learning and Dynamic Capabilities* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

29 Frederic Bergerson, *The Army Gets an Air Force: Tactics of Insurgent Bureaucratic Politics* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

30 Phillip Neri, "Rethinking How to Develop Leaders for Complex Environments, Part 2," *The Army Press*, January 2016, <http://armypress.dodlive.mil/2016/01/07/rethinking-how-to-develop-leaders-for-complex-environments-pt-2/>.

31 Isabelle Walsh, Judith Holton, Lotte Bailyn, Walter Fernandez, Natalia Levina, and Barney Glaser, "What Grounded Theory Is...A Critically Reflective Conversation Among Scholars," *Organizational Research Methods* 18, no. 4 (October 2015): 581-599

dissent from the conventional wisdom of existing doctrine must be appreciated. Such dissent ought to be challenged, it is as dangerous to assume the validity of the novel insight as it is to assume the validity of the status quo. Yet, to encourage true explorations and dialogue, those who raise and offer contradictory views must be encouraged, engaged, but not punished. This process offers the best method for fostering organization-wide reflective conversations about the types of political conditions in which the Army may have to fight.

Currently, the organization's professional publications, The Army Press, and social media are devoid of such. Articles appear about the importance of strategic thinking and about strategic conditions, but little discussion is given to how political context is likely to affect how the Army will (or should) set the conditions for victory. Now, before the next conflict, is the time for discussions that marry the abstract with the practical. For example, the Army ought to consider how it would affect the fight if civilian leaders decided the political objective of a major war with a peer-competitor was simply to raise the cost of the enemy's victory, rather than forestall it. Similarly, the Army ought to consider how a social media campaign to undermine the legitimacy of an allied government might affect the political conditions of a conflict, potentially altering the means employed by the Army, and perhaps even the objectives sought by the United States. Now, before the next conflict, is the time to consider how political conditions affect not just the aims of war, but its means.

Such reflective conversations, however, do not happen on their own. Few individuals within the Army are prepared to engage in such self-study. To hone the skills necessary for such abstract consideration and reflective conversations, personal mentoring is needed. Mentoring will facilitate the individual political skills necessary to foster organizational capability.

### **Mentorship: Fox Conner and Innovation**

Major General Fox Conner is an important, yet little known, Army officer who served as General John Pershing's Chief of Operations during World War I. Conner had a penchant for taking on the role of personal mentor to junior officers—including George Marshall and Dwight Eisenhower.<sup>32</sup> His mentorship of Marshall and Eisenhower illustrates how to foster an appreciation of the political conditions within which wars occur and endow leaders with the ability to set the military conditions for victory.

Fox Conner met George Marshall in July 1918. Marshall was serving as the operations officer for the 1st American Division. In Major Marshall, Major General Conner recognized a keen ability for operational planning and strategy. Conner devoted one day a week to working with Marshall. The two worked together to plan the offensive at Saint-Mihiel. Conner's investment quickly paid dividends. By October, Conner had Marshall detailed to the First Army operations staff.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Edward Cox, *Grey Eminence: Fox Conner and the Art of Mentorship* (Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press, 2011).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 69-79.

Conner would continue to provide mentorship and opportunities for Marshall to hone his skills at planning and strategy. From his staff position with the First Army, Marshall observed how intra-alliance politics and political objectives drove military operations. At the end of the war, Marshall and Conner discussed how the political conditions of the peace practically guaranteed another European war.<sup>34</sup> Conner's tutelage endowed Marshall with the skills and experiences he would call upon as Army Chief of Staff, Secretary of Defense, and Secretary of State to help the US emerge from that Second World War victorious.

Fox Conner met Dwight Eisenhower in October 1920, at a dinner hosted by George Patton. Conner liked the young major and accepted Patton's recommendation that Eisenhower be selected as Conner's executive officer at Camp Gaillard in Panama. Although Eisenhower was unable to accept the posting until January 1922, a mentor-mentee relationship quickly developed between the two.<sup>35</sup>

Conner was unsatisfied with Eisenhower's knowledge and appreciation for military history. He pushed Ike to study both. During rides through the jungle and weekend fishing trips, the two discussed past battles and campaigns. Conner encouraged Eisenhower to go beyond memorization of decisions made and actions taken. He challenged Ike to consider why key decisions were made and how the actions that stemmed from them affected the outcome. In time, Conner led Eisenhower from purely historic accounts of war to more theoretical works — including Shakespeare, Nietzsche, and Clausewitz. Conner's penultimate lesson, drawn from his own experiences, was political. He encouraged Eisenhower to learn all he could about waging allied warfare.<sup>36</sup> Given Ike's future role as Supreme Allied Commander, Conner's lessons were prescient. Reflecting on the victory in World War II, Eisenhower himself credited "two miracles" for bringing about Germany's surrender in 1945: "America's transformation, in three years, from a situation of appalling danger to unparalleled might in battle..." and "...the development, over the same period, of near perfection in allied conduct of war operations."<sup>37</sup>

Two recent articles, one by Colonel Jim Thomas and Lieutenant Colonel Ted Thomas, the other by Colonels Thomas Galvin and Charles Allen, highlight the important role mentorship plays in developing leaders. The authors note that such voluntary relationships between individuals of greater experience and lesser experience, based on mutual trust and respect, facilitate cognitive development.<sup>38</sup> Fox Conner, George Marshall, and Dwight Eisenhower illustrate this process, and how it can be leveraged to develop strategic leaders cognizant of the political conditions of war.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid., 81-94.

36 Ibid.

37 Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1948), 4.

38 Jim Thomas and Ted Thomas, "Mentoring, Coaching, and Counseling: Toward a Common Understanding," *Military Review* 95, no. 4 (July-August 2015): 50-57; and Thomas Galvin and Charles Allen, "Professional Military Education: Mentoring Has Value When Your Soldiers Want for Experience," *Army* 65, no. 7 (July 2015): 37-39.

Those with the talent and skills to do so, should look for opportunities to serve as mentors. As such, they should guide their mentees in the study of the military actions and political conditions of past wars and battles (US and foreign) and discuss the factors that defined victory and the factors that enabled one side or the other to achieve it. They should also challenge their mentees to consider counter-factuals in regard to the military actions and political conditions and how differences in such might have altered the outcome.

Still, the Army is too large to rely on personal mentorship to develop an appreciation for the political conditions of war. Mentorship remains a critical start point. It must lead to, not replace, reflective, Army-wide conversations via the professional journals and social media necessary to anticipate and observe the political conditions of a given conflict, evaluate how well existing doctrine fits, and (when necessary) innovate how the Army seeks to set the military conditions for victory.

### **Skill and Ability Precede Outcome**

The Army's experiences in Vietnam and Iraq demonstrate the critical importance of organization-wide reflective conversations about the political conditions of a war. Understanding political conditions can precondition the Army's ability not only to fight effectively, but to secure the political objectives of a war as well.

Fox Conner's mentorship of George Marshall and Dwight Eisenhower illustrates how an appreciation of the political conditions of a given conflict is critical to the development of strategic leaders. The ability to consider the political conditions of war is critical to the ability to question accepted assumptions and to think about the potential scenarios the Army might face.

In the twenty-first century, the Army will fight within a wider, more dynamic set of political conditions than was the historic norm of the second half of the twentieth century. Fighting well tactically will not be enough. Achieving victory will require an appreciation of the political conditions and an ability to innovate to meet them. In short, political awareness will be at the core of mission command. The ability to think critically, creatively, and seize the initiative will be predicated on a solid understanding of the fight. That cannot be achieved without an appreciation of the political conditions of modern conflicts.