

# The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

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Manuscript 3155

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## Character Traits Strategic Leaders Need

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## Character Traits Strategic Leaders Need

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**ABSTRACT:** Strategic leaders must possess a range of skills to work successfully in complex environments. To use those skills to best effect, they rely on character traits that enhance the likelihood of their effectiveness as leaders and maximize their success when working in teams. Certain character traits facilitate work in demanding settings that rely heavily on communication, integration, and cooperation. Programs designed to educate senior leaders must help future national security professionals identify these character traits and then practice and hone them. Highlighting individuals with challenging roles in World War II, this essay analyzes the character traits that enabled them to succeed in their work.

**Keywords:** character, leadership, self-awareness, effectiveness, self-development

**W**hen national security professionals develop and implement strategy, they are engaged in an intensely analytical and human activity. While a strategist's successful practice requires an understanding of logistics and geography, for instance, it also requires a sound grasp of human perception and decision making. Strategists must be broadly educated; they must be able, in particular, to grasp and analyze readily the complex environments in which they work. However, as they look outward, they must also look inward to develop a sense of themselves—including their strengths and weaknesses and ability to work in groups, among allies, and across key networks. Since strategy demands cooperation and coordination among many actors, its success depends heavily on leadership and communication. Yet undergirding these—and the skills they require—are important elements of character.<sup>1</sup>

Any curriculum designed to teach national security professionals to be successful strategic leaders should incorporate lessons that heighten their self-awareness and give them time to understand and appreciate the elements of character that have served them well so far in their careers. They must also be given opportunities to reinforce these attributes and develop the new ones they will need in the future. This article identifies the most essential elements of character needed by strategists. Working at the senior level of the American professional military education system for 20 years, I developed a strong sense of the skills and abilities my students would

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1. On strategic leadership, see *Strategic Leadership: Primer for Senior Leaders*, 4th ed., Department of Command, Leadership, and Management, US Army War College (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2019). For material related to ideas in this essay, see chapter 7, "Senior Leader Character," by Maurice L. Sipos, Nate Hunsinger, and Peter R. Sniffin.

need for success. These skills were supported and facilitated by personal attributes and qualities that might be thought of as “character.”

Many individual elements of character, including honesty and integrity, are moral and ethical in nature; they support an individual’s leadership ability by building a foundation upon which subordinates can place their trust. Other qualities, such as a willingness to accept responsibility, have an important ethical component but are not strictly ethical in nature. A third set of attributes is most closely related to perception, analytical skill, and cognitive ability. These elements can be highlighted, discussed, and reinforced in the classrooms so that students hone and refine the strengths they will rely upon when facing challenging tasks in the future.

Using historical case studies can be beneficial since they help national security professionals recognize the elements of character that influence a senior leader’s likelihood of success in a given situation. Once the positive qualities are recognized and understood, they can be embraced and practiced. Additionally, the development of these elements of character will help these individuals successfully frame complex issues as members of strategy and planning teams. Drawing on the rich history of World War II, I identify several key leaders and highlight the character traits that helped them achieve success in the challenging roles they performed. By providing specific examples drawn from the not-so-distant past, I hope to offer future strategists a way to grasp and retain the information more readily than if it were presented solely in general or theoretical terms.

The first quality a strategist needs is the ability to discern what is salient in a given situation. In a complex scenario, where many problems are intertwined and competing for attention, it is difficult to see right to the heart of the matter and then discern how to make ways and means match desired ends. Yet, this is an essential skill for creating, articulating, and implementing strategy. While more instinctive for some than others, this ability can be learned and developed with practice. It demands focus and a keen analytical sensibility. An able strategist will help others to stay fixed on the core elements of the problem at hand.

Harry Hopkins, the closest adviser and confidant of President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR), was noted for his qualities of discernment, and FDR gave Hopkins a central role in the “New Deal” program aimed at coping with the worst effects of the Great Depression. As war engulfed the world, Hopkins took a leading role in US national security, and the US relationship with its World War II allies. Traveling often to meet with key leaders, he became the eyes and ears of a president with limited mobility. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill formed a bond with Hopkins that helped facilitate

Anglo-American relations throughout World War II. In tribute to Hopkins' bird-dog ability to find the objective and stay fixed on it, Churchill named him "Lord Root of the Matter."

While chief lend-lease administrator in the early years of the war, Hopkins was responsible for ascertaining the most urgent needs of the allied leaders fighting Hitler, to include weapons, equipment, and materials. After discerning these needs, often in face-to-face talks with leaders, Hopkins had to make the case for them in the highest councils in Washington, DC. In addition, Hopkins helped prepare the president for summit meetings and wartime conferences, and, while attending those with the president, would ensure the most pressing and consequential issues were prioritized and given full attention by senior decisionmakers. When Hopkins was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal after the war, the citation noted the "piercing understanding" he had displayed in tackling the many strategic problems posed by the war.<sup>2</sup>

Two other qualities Hopkins possessed in abundance were determination and commitment. Strategists need these qualities to initiate and sustain all-consuming projects that will be buffeted by many winds and subject to frequent change due to adaptive enemies, contingencies, and forces that strategists cannot wholly control. Hopkins, plagued by poor health and the acute aftereffects of surgery for stomach cancer in 1937, carried out his weighty tasks with a determination that belied his physical condition. Indeed, the greater the burden upon him, the more he seemed able to transcend the limits of his frail body.<sup>3</sup> General George C. Marshall remarked that Hopkins, through his energy, determination, and unflagging commitment to the way forward, "rendered a service to his country which will never even vaguely be appreciated."<sup>4</sup> In a deft sketch, Churchill said Hopkins was "a crumbling lighthouse from which there shown the beams that led great fleets to harbor."<sup>5</sup>

Strategists work within complex networks of actors, agencies, and stakeholders; they must win and hold the trust of others. This trust, in turn, enables them to influence others and develop successful initiatives. Marshall, who served as Chief of Staff of the Army during World War II, had impeccable integrity that earned him the respect and trust of those with whom he worked. No one who knew Marshall ever believed his judgments or actions were self-serving, publicity-seeking, or narrowly-conceived.

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2. For Churchill's characterization, see David Roll, *The Hopkins Touch* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 87, 406 (quoted material on 406). The citation for Hopkins' Distinguished Service Medal is quoted in Robert Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History* (rev. ed., New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1950), 4.

3. Roll, *Hopkins Touch*, 43, 81.

4. Marshall quoted in Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins*, 1.

5. Churchill quoted in Roll, *Hopkins Touch*, 409.

Marshall could speak with frankness and authority in the highest councils and win broad support for his decisions. His colleagues had faith his behavior was motivated only by pursuit of the nation's good.<sup>6</sup> He was able to tell the president hard truths about the need to improve the functioning of the military services rapidly by giving them the resources they needed to defend the nation. Additionally, he dramatically restructured a stale, bureaucratic interwar army by pulling in talented new leaders and relieving those who had outlasted their usefulness. As a senior leader in the newly formed Joint Chiefs of Staff, Marshall made key decisions about the allocation of resources among competing services and commanders who often fought over those resources.

A successful strategist must have self-confidence, since this quality enables decisiveness in times of trial and crisis; however, it must be tempered by humility. If self-confidence errs toward arrogance, it becomes suspect—even poisonous. Born into wealth and high social standing, Roosevelt had the confidence and shrewdness possessed by most successful politicians.<sup>7</sup> He also bore an acute physical burden brought on by polio in young adulthood. Illness strengthened his determination, but it also humbled him and helped inoculate him against overweening arrogance, even while he served as president of the United States. It also enabled him to feel empathy for others who suffered. This capacity for empathy, in turn, helped FDR during the Great Depression when he battled vast unemployment and mass misery. The New Deal, designed to relieve national suffering, and restore confidence in the nation's financial system, was a jolt to Americans who believed the national government should play only a very small role in the lives of citizens. Roosevelt, therefore, had to contend with numerous critics in Congress and the press—and among businesses, local politicians, and local government agencies opposed to change. As fire tempers steel, these experiences prepared him for the even greater challenges he faced during World War II.<sup>8</sup>

An ability to overcome hardship also builds courage, another essential quality for the strategist. In one of the most powerful statements in *On War*,

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6. On Marshall, see the multiple volumes by his biographer: Forrest C. Pogue, *George C. Marshall: Education of a General, 1880–1939* (New York: Viking Adult, 1963); Forrest C. Pogue, *George C. Marshall: Ordeal and Hope, 1939–1942* (New York: Viking Press, 1967); and Forrest C. Pogue, *George C. Marshall: Organizer of Victory, 1943–1945* (New York: Viking Press, 1973). See also Mark Stoler, *George C. Marshall: Soldier–Statesman of the American Century* (Farmington Hills, MI: Twayne Publishers, 1989); Ed Cray, *General of the Army: George C. Marshall, Soldier and Statesman* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990); and Eric Larrabee, “Marshall” in *Commander in Chief: Franklin Delano Roosevelt, His Lieutenants and Their War* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1987), 96–115.

7. Robert Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: A Political Life* (New York: Viking/Penguin Random House LLC, 2017).

8. See Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, 74–100, which discusses his polio. On FDR during the Great Depression and World War II, see David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, The Home Front in World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1994).

Clausewitz observed that courage was of two kinds: “courage in the face of personal danger, and courage to accept responsibility, either before the tribunal of some outside power or before the court of one’s own conscience.”<sup>9</sup> Those who serve successfully in the military learn quickly that great leaders need both physical courage and the courage to accept responsibility. Courage enables leaders to make and live with choices that involve the highest possible stakes and allows them to handle and even thrive in fraught and dangerous environments while inspiring others to do the same.

Before troops landed in Normandy in June 1944, Supreme Allied Commander Dwight D. Eisenhower drafted a letter to be sent if the assault failed. It read:

Our landings in the Cherbourg-Havre area have failed to gain a satisfactory foothold. I have withdrawn the troops. My decision to attack at this time and place was based on the best information available. The troops, the Air and the Navy, did all that bravery and devotion to duty could do. If any blame or fault attaches to the attempt, it is mine alone.

He revised the first draft of his second sentence, changing it from “the troops have been withdrawn” to “I have withdrawn the troops.” This change from the passive to the active voice highlights his willingness to carry the full weight of responsibility on his shoulders. The brief statement is a marvelous example of leadership that jumps off the page and wins instant respect. Words matter, and in a situation with the highest possible stakes, the individual in charge had the courage to accept responsibility fully.<sup>10</sup>

The strategist, whether military or civilian, must be constantly aware that each strategic decision, particularly in crisis and/or war, may involve life and death and affect the lives of others for generations to come. Field Marshal Sir William Slim, Britain’s talented World War II commander who took on a nearly hopeless situation in Burma and turned it around, also divided courage into two types: physical courage and moral courage. Of the latter, he wrote: “Moral courage simply means that you do what you think is right without bothering too much about the effect on yourself. . . . You must be as big as your job and you must not be afraid of losing it.”<sup>11</sup>

Leaders entrusted with weighty decisions must also have the humility to adjust course or change direction if new information and evidence require it.

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9. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 101.

10. Dwight D. Eisenhower, “‘In Case of Failure’ Message, 6/5/1944,” US National Archives Docs Teach (website), accessed December 10, 2021, <https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/in-case-of-failure>.

11. For the quote, William Slim, “Higher Command in War” (speech, Army Command and General Staff College, April 1952) reprinted in *Military Review* (May 1990), 13.

Here humility facilitates and pairs with a particular kind of courage. Those who dig so deeply into a position that they never change their minds will be a liability in the fluid and dynamic world of strategy, where leaders must constantly reassess their assumptions, and weigh outcomes against expectations. In a speech delivered at the US Army Command and General Staff College, Slim argued that where events develop and change quickly, as in war, one must possess an openness to new information. He explained, “What you have to cultivate is imagination, but a controlled imagination, and a flexibility of mind. There is an obvious conflict between flexibility of mind and strength of will. You have to be very careful to see that your strength of will does not become just obstinacy, and your flexibility of mind does not become mere vacillation.”<sup>12</sup> Slim understood the challenge here: on the one hand, leaders are told they must commit themselves fully to what they believe is the best course of action; on the other hand, they must be adroit and adaptive. Despite this seeming paradox, Slim believed leaders at the highest levels must cultivate a willingness to tack in a new direction if the wind changes. Inflexibility or brittleness when clear evidence warrants change is a sign of insecurity. Genuinely self-confident leaders are willing to adjust when sound and sufficient information tells them to do so.

Slim also realized that when leaders cloud the truth, their subordinates will see through them. Military leaders feel this especially keenly, because soldiers will quickly sense any attempt to mask or manipulate reality. Drawing on his extensive experience, he argued that “when you are in command and things have gone wrong, there always comes a pause when your men stop . . . They don’t say anything—they just look at you. It’s a rather awful moment for the commander because then he knows that their courage is ebbing, their will is fading, and he has got to pull up out of himself the courage and the willpower that will stiffen them and make them go on.” Slim insisted that no commander “would ever get over that moment unless he has the confidence of his men.” This confidence derived from a “massive and simple honesty.” He added: “All the really great commanders who have held their men have had it because the only foundations under man which will stand under great stress are the moral ones.”<sup>13</sup> Those trying to pick their way through wickedly difficult problems will face moments like this. They may not be as acute or consequential as they are on the battlefield, but they will occur nonetheless. In these moments, strategists will require the stores of honesty and integrity they have earned among those around them.

Slim’s stress on moral foundations takes us back to honesty and integrity. Truth is the bedrock upon which rests all the moral and legal codes supporting

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12. Slim, “Higher Command in War,” 15.

13. Slim, “Higher Command in War,” 16–17.

advanced societies. Attesting to the truth of a statement, either by giving one's word or by signing one's name to a document, has moral and legal standing. Both adherence and enforcement of laws make possible predictability and thus social advancement. Based on collective, widely supported interpretations of justice, codified standards and practices offer progress and security for political communities. Foundational documents such as the Magna Carta, and singularly important practices as habeas corpus, reflect the core principles that were the foundation stones of later democratic societies in Britain and the United States.

In early May 1940, Britain faced an existential crisis. With Germany in control of most of Europe, many British leaders felt there was no option but to seek terms with Hitler—even though they understood by then how little they could rely on any agreement with him. Soon-to-be British Prime Minister Churchill argued otherwise. Facing his fears of what lay ahead, he rallied the British people on behalf of a noble cause, arousing in his countrymen an instinctive desire for justice, independence, and self-determination—even if these would require great personal sacrifice. Remarking on Churchill's speech of May 13, 1940, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* observed on its editorial page: "He proved in this one short speech that he was not afraid to face the truth and tell it. He proved himself an honest man as well as a man of action. Britain has reason to be enheartened by his brevity, his bluntness, and his courage."<sup>14</sup> Above all, Churchill persuaded his countrymen that even if the fight proved to be long and hard, fighting for these principles was the only choice that would rest easily on the British conscience. By accepting Churchill's arguments, the British people could steel themselves and embrace a necessary battle.

Early on, a handful of others shared this courage and forthrightness in the face of the Nazi threat. Though she is not a household name, American writer Dorothy Thompson should be remembered for her clear-eyed and fearless writing about Nazism, which predated Churchill's speeches. In her outspoken, prescient columns and radio speeches of the 1930s, Thompson sounded the klaxon about Hitler and the threat he posed to the world. She argued Nazism placed will above reason and appealed unremittingly "to totem and taboo; elevating tribal fetishes; subjugating and destroying the common sense that grows out of human experience." She explained that both lying and bullying were central to the movement Hitler had created in Germany; the Nazis would erode Enlightenment principles and moral values and would be a direct threat to democracy. For National Socialists, she explained, "the Lie is openly accepted

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14. Editorial quoted in Max Hastings, *Finest Years: Churchill as Warlord, 1940-1945* (London: HarperPress, 2009), 13; see also Jon Lukacs, *The Duel: The Eighty-Day Struggle between Churchill and Hitler* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990); and on effective communication, see Tom Galvin, *Communication Campaigning: Primer for Senior Leaders* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, Department of Command, Leadership and Management), <https://publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/3675.pdf>.

as a useful means to an end.” Nazism, she argued emphatically, could not be appeased—only opposed—since appeasement “would only strengthen it, never satisfy it, and breed in it an enormous mocking contempt for the world it would destroy.”<sup>15</sup>

Thompson forced herself to face things others at the time refused to countenance. Her biographer Peter Kurth noted that in early 1933 in Germany, she had “with unbelieving eyes” witnessed the seduction of a nation, the triumph of “hatred, envy, greed, vanity, and cheap heroics.” She said what others would not say, that “post-war Europe was finished, and pre-war Europe had begun . . . the boiling kettle had exploded.”<sup>16</sup> Yet, Thompson avoided despair: “To be conscious of serious danger, and to be ready to look it in the eye, is not pessimism. It is the way one gathers one’s strength. For when one looks it in the eye, it becomes, interestingly enough, less ominous.” She was forthright and powerful, too, in her arguments against American isolationism, insisting the United States was “not a forgotten Elysian island.” She argued:

Our two oceans connect us with the rest of the world; they do not separate us. . . . They protect us, still, from armed attack upon our soil, but they do not protect us from assaults upon our economy or upon the public mind. They in no way relieve us of the responsibility of doing everything that a great nation can do to maintain a world order in which the interests of its people, and the values they cherish, can survive and improve.<sup>17</sup>

Implementing strategy requires immense energy, determination, and resiliency in the face of setbacks. Despite the many doubts he faced privately during World War II, Churchill found courage in himself, and gave it a voice. His speeches moved a nation, instilling in the British people the grit, cohesion, and moral strength they needed to commit to an immense project requiring great and continuing sacrifice. They needed all of these in a harrowing war characterized by immense risks and (in the early years) aerial threats, and daunting land and naval defeats. In the realm of strategy, the stakes are rarely so high as they were for Britain in the first years of World War II, but every successful strategy will require the ability to cope with setbacks and nasty surprises.

In late 1943, during and after the Tehran Conference, where all three Allied leaders met for the first time, Churchill was burdened by two concerns: his acute fear a cross-Channel attack into France might fail and his worry over the looming threat of German “secret weapons.” These burdens taxed his body, and,

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15. Dorothy Thompson, *Let the Record Speak* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Company, 1939), 3, 4.

16. Peter Kurth, *American Cassandra: The Life of Dorothy Thompson* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1990), 164.

17. Thompson, *Let the Record Speak*, 9.

in the wake of the summit, he succumbed to pneumonia and heart arrhythmia so acute he nearly died. Indeed, Lord Moran, Churchill's personal physician, noticed the physical impacts of stress on all three Allied leaders at that time. Nevertheless, each one rallied repeatedly throughout the war, finding the strength to lead their nations forward.<sup>18</sup> Determination and a strong commitment to a cause can undergird physical strength and resiliency. In today's environment, with the relentless 24-hour news cycle, senior leaders must learn how to take care of themselves physically and emotionally, so they will have the endurance they need in crises and wars.

An able strategist will not only cultivate a broad worldview, but will seek advice from those who have knowledge and expertise on alternative perspectives. That expert knowledge, which comes through study and, if possible, the experience of living in a foreign culture, is invaluable. Some of the worst mistakes in the history of American national security occurred because decisionmakers did not take the time to understand what drove an adversary's behavior or chose to ignore those who had such insights. Indeed, a frequent cause of strategic setback is a propensity to "mirror image," to assume an adversary has a frame of mind similar to one's own. All actors in the international system, even close allies, have unique interests and priorities and will assess stakes and risks in unique ways. If strategists can see only their perspective, they are likely doomed to strategic failure. Moving beyond one's perspective is vital, but it requires a combination of broadmindedness, agile thought, and empathy. The latter, in particular, is crucial.

Field Marshal Sir John Dill, who headed Britain's wartime Joint Staff Mission to the Combined Chiefs of Staff in Washington, DC, is not well known today—but he ought to be. Dill had been Chief of the Imperial General Staff during the first years of Britain's battle against Hitler, when the situation was relentlessly grim. During the interwar years, the British, unwilling to countenance another fight with Germany so soon after World War I, had not prepared themselves adequately to face the Nazi threat. Dill's job, therefore, had been exhausting and frustrating. In December 1941, as he was about to be replaced and sent to India as the governor-designate of Bombay, he was asked to travel to the United States with Churchill. The prime minister was anxious to hasten to Washington, DC, in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor to gain early influence on the Americans with

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18. See Lord Moran, *Churchill at War, 1940-1945* (1966; repr. New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2003), 170–91; on Roosevelt's health, see Rose McDermott, *Presidential Leadership, Illness, and Decision Making* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), especially 83–117; and Tami Davis Biddle, "On the Crest of Fear: V-Weapons, the Battle of the Bulge, and the Last Stages of World War II in Europe," *Journal of Military History* 83, no. 1 (January 2019): 157–94.

respect to the grand strategy of the war. This last-minute decision to include Dill among the traveling party was contingent and providential.<sup>19</sup>

A mechanism for ongoing strategic cooperation between the British and the Americans would be required, and it made sense to set up a permanent mission in Washington, DC, to represent British views. The individual at the helm would need experience, wisdom, diplomatic instincts, impeccable integrity, and the ability to speak for the prime minister himself. Dill was selected for the position and stayed in Washington after Churchill sailed back to London in early 1942. Both Harry Hopkins and Marshall had met Dill on previous occasions and had formed a high opinion of him. Their enthusiasm and Hopkins's endorsement no doubt influenced Churchill's thinking on the matter. As it turned out, the role suited Dill's personality exactly and leveraged his greatest strengths, enabling him to become an immense and irreplaceable asset not only to the British but to the Americans as well.

Among Dill's talents were empathy and broadmindedness. Working closely with Marshall, he transmitted and translated British interests to the Americans and American interests to the British. Marshall found a kindred spirit in Dill—a man who equaled him in integrity, loved and understood armies and army life, and could serve as the kind of sympathetic confidant those in elevated positions are rarely fortunate enough to find. Dill had overseen the British military in the difficult early years of the war and understood the great pressures and the challenging, consequential choices and tradeoffs that Marshall faced.

Dill also assisted his American colleagues in coping with FDR's less-than-ideal administrative instincts. When the president would convey information to Churchill he had not shared with his own chiefs, Dill's colleagues in London could relay the information to Dill, who could then share it with Marshall—giving the latter insight into the thinking of the US president he otherwise would not have had. In the view of one astute historian, Dill was the “fulcrum” of the combined machinery giving central direction to the war effort.<sup>20</sup>

Dill died of aplastic anemia on November 4, 1944, despite the most energetic efforts of the best American doctors available. On the day of Dill's memorial service, flags flew at half-mast throughout Washington, DC. The US Joint Chiefs of Staff were his pallbearers, and Dill was one of only a few foreign nationals to be buried in Arlington National Cemetery. The US Joint Chiefs of Staff

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19. Alex Danchev, *Very Special Relationship: Field Marshal Sir John Dill and the Anglo-American Alliance, 1941–44* (London: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1986); and Alex Danchev, “Being Friends: the Combined Chiefs of Staff and the Making of Allied Strategy in the Second World War,” in Lawrence Freedman, Paul Hayes, and Robert O'Neill, eds., *War, Strategy, and International Politics: Essays in Honour of Sir Michael Howard* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press/Oxford University Press, 1992), 195–210.

20. Danchev, *Very Special Relationship*, 11.

told their British counterparts they “shared equally with you the loss to our combined war effort resulting from the death of Field Marshal Sir John Dill,” and added: “His character and wisdom, his selfless devotion to the allied cause made his contribution to the combined British-American war effort of outstanding importance. It is not too much to say that probably no other individual was more responsible for the achievement of complete cooperation in the work of the Combined Chiefs of Staff.”<sup>21</sup>

Six years later, an equestrian statue of Dill, meticulously overseen by Marshall, was erected on a beautiful site in the Arlington National Cemetery. On that occasion, Marshall, then-secretary of state, said in his dedication speech: “Here before us in Arlington, among our hallowed dead, lies a great hero, Field Marshall Sir John Dill. He was my friend, I am proud to say, and he was my intimate associate through most of the war years. I have never known a man whose high character showed so clearly in the honest directness of his every action. He was an inspiration to all of us.”<sup>22</sup> During the war, Marshall worked at the highest levels of grand strategic planning and implementation. Dill not only helped Marshall bear the weight of enormously consequential decisions but, through his “honest directness,” he could help shape those decisions—and also serve as a model for those around him.

Finally, a strategic leader can benefit from a sense of humor, or simply an appreciation of humor. A sense of humor will not only support resiliency but can help create hope and sustain morale in challenging times.<sup>23</sup> Writing in 1944, E. E. Reynolds argued that FDR’s “good fellowship, cheerful spirits, and ready laugh are great assets.”<sup>24</sup> In addition, those blessed with a sense of humor can help foster cohesion and loyalty within groups. The two exceptionally able men who, under Dill, initially ran the Secretariat of the Washington-based Combined Chiefs of Staff in World War II, US Brigadier General Walter Bedell Smith, and UK Brigadier Vivian Dykes, formed a close bond for many reasons, but one of them was a shared appreciation for humor. Dykes, in particular, had a sparkling wit, an easy and likable manner, and a talent for winning the loyalty of those around him. One colleague noted he was, “a grand man in a tight place.”<sup>25</sup> He also possessed a remarkable talent for benign comic impersonation of some of the more irascible senior officers on the Combined Chiefs of Staff. Bedell Smith

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21. Joint Chiefs of Staff to Chiefs of Staff, November 5, 1944, printed in the *New York Times* (November 19, 1944) and quoted in Danchev, *Very Special Relationship*, 3.

22. Marshall’s Speech, November 1, 1950, printed in the *New York Times* (November 2, 1950) and quoted in Danchev, *Very Special Relationship*, 1.

23. There is extensive scientific and medical literature supporting the claim that humor and laughter are important for stress management. See “Stress Relief from Laughter? It’s No Joke,” <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/stress-relief/art-20044456>.

24. E. E. Reynolds, *Four Modern Statesmen* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1944), 47.

25. Alex Danchev, *Establishing the Anglo-American Alliance: The Second World War Diaries of Brigadier Vivian Dykes* (London: Brassey’s, 1990), 3.

and Dykes, “who worked at the very epicenter of Anglo-American decision making . . . swiftly established one of the keynote relationships of the military alliance.”<sup>26</sup> Dykes’ conviviality, perceptiveness, and wit injected energy into long hours of stressful and often delicate work. Wit and humor became the lubricant that allowed smooth operations between Dykes, representing British interests, and Smith, representing American interests. Moreover, humor created a close tie between them. Their relationship proved crucial to moving the Anglo-American alliance onto a sound footing, thus facilitating the successful prosecution of the war in the longer term.

Qualities of character matter: integrity, honesty, determination, self-confidence, and the ability to see beyond one’s own perspective are the core qualities that a strategist needs above all others. These qualities, along with an unfailing instinct for the most salient, relevant, and pressing elements of a complex problem, give the strategist a powerful tool kit. Strong communication skills are essential, but so too is the ability to build trust among subordinates, superiors, and peers. Great ideas brilliantly articulated will not be accepted unless their advocate is respected and trusted by those who will share and implement those ideas. Great administrative and planning skills are hollow unless they are accompanied by a capacity for empathy and broadmindedness.

It is rare to see all these abilities and qualities present equally in a single individual. However, strategy is never a solo endeavor. As the vignettes above illustrate, the character of successful strategists contributed to their individual effectiveness and served as a catalyst for strategy formulation among diverse stakeholders. Today, careful team-building can help ensure that personnel entrusted with vital matters in the life of a state—including developing strategies for its long-term security and prosperity—will possess the array of strengths they need for success.

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Tami Davis Biddle

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26. Danchev, *Establishing the Anglo-American Alliance*, 7–8.

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