

Leadership, Versatility and All That Jazz

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Army Chief of Staff General Gordon R. Sullivan wrote several articles for Military Review. This article on leadership presents a unique comparison of General Matthew B. Ridgway and jazz musician Dave Brubeck in addressing professional competency, team building, operational versatility and improvisational genius as necessary leadership elements for our 21st-century Army.

VERSATILITY HAS BECOME the hallmark of America's Army. Our capstone doctrinal manual, US Army Field Manual 100-5, *Operations*, explains that "versatility implies a capacity to be multi-functional, to operate across the full range of military operations, and to perform at the tactical, operational and strategic levels."¹ We consider versatility to be one of the five fundamental tenets of Army operations. It is a recent addition to that short list, but hardly a new concept. It is an attribute that has often been essential in our past, and I expect it to be central to our future.

We strive for versatility in our units. We have designed forces and developed command and control procedures that permit the rapid creation and employment of task-organized units tailored to achieve success under diverse conditions. Employment of those forces also requires leaders with the ability to enter one situation and rapidly adapt to another. We must understand the fundamentals: the capabilities and vulnerabilities of our weapons, our soldiers and our subordinate units. And we must have the ability to read a changing situation and react faster than our opponents. Versatility in leaders, to a large extent, is the ability to improvise solutions in uncertain and changing battlefield conditions.

In battle, versatility allows a commander to act with certainty and decisiveness amid the fog and friction of mortal combat. In training, it spurs us to press the edge of the envelope, to try new ideas, to dare great things

and to grow as individuals and as an army. It is a characteristic that springs from a certain knowledge of the basics of our craft. And that certain knowledge gives great leaders the confidence to improvise solutions—to move well beyond the situations we may foresee today. No one can predict precisely what the Army of the future will look like. But based on what is already happening to us, we can say this: Tomorrow's wars and operations other than war will require leaders versatile in mind and will, their perspectives uncluttered by preconceived notions or cookie-cutter solutions.

As I have contemplated the relationship between versatility and leadership, I have been drawn to a simple metaphor. The skill and talent required of military leaders is in many ways akin to the virtuosity of the best jazz musicians. Our military plans have the complexity of orchestral scores, but the certainty of that sheet music does not parallel the changing conditions under which the military leader performs his tasks. Versatility—the improvisation of the jazzman—has been a hallmark of great leaders in our past and is in even greater demand today. Our challenge today is to build on our traditions and to develop a generation of leaders experienced in their craft, alert to an ambiguous environment and confident in their ability to improvise and win.

We may not yet see clearly the face of future war, but we have seen the face of our future brand

of leaders. As the commissioned and noncommissioned officers of America's Army look ahead toward the 21st century, we would do well to consider the examples of two Americans of this century who demonstrated the versatility to which we all aspire. Their fields of endeavor differed greatly, perhaps as widely as one could imagine. Yet, the two men shared a common approach to their respective pursuits, and it is that style, that disposition, which demands our consideration.

The first man followed in the footsteps of his father. After studying at several of the more notable institutions of higher education that defined his profession, he also had the opportunity to learn from a pair of recognized masters. So schooled, and in consequence of his own noteworthy abilities, he achieved notoriety as a team builder, known for molding uniquely capable groups under stressful situations. Rising to the top ranks of his calling, he achieved his greatest renown for his performance in a novel environment, one about which he had never been taught, and yet one that perhaps only he could resolve. Truly, he was the right person at the right place and the right time, a point often noted by modern historians.

We can say much the same thing about our second subject. He hewed to the strong example of his mother and older brothers. Following formal education in his chosen vocation, he had the opportunity to deepen his understandings in the company of two distinguished elders, both of whom greatly influenced his early professional development. Well-grounded, conscious of his growing talents, he formed several distinctive, highly capable teams that attained remarkable success in all aspects of their efforts. Singled out as one of the key innovators in his field, he demonstrated consistent ingenuity, devising works so unusual that, in many ways, they now define the outer limits of his profession. He directly affected the course of recent American cultural history.

We know these two men as Matthew B. Ridgway and David W. Brubeck, battle commander and jazz impresario, respectively. You might say that this is an unlikely twosome, the soldier and the musician. But that ignores the deeper ties, the pronounced similarities in how the pair have carried out their lives' works. To understand the connection between Ridgway and Brubeck, it helps to measure the difference between the artistic practitioner and the practical artist, between the conventional general and the master of the battlespace, between the classical orchestra musician and the stylings of the dedicated composer, spinning out clear, cool jazz.

Firm Foundations

Everything, especially the creation of great art (whether operational or musical), takes study and work. People come into this world with varying degrees of talent, but few achieve much without a great deal of diligent effort. It is an old truism that you cannot get something for nothing. This is especially true in trying to develop a versatile intellect. It does not "just happen."

The first step in becoming a leader in any walk of life is easy to say but not easy to do—become an expert. In professional life, knowledge is power, and the capacity to gather, interpret, organize and use available information is one of the major features distinguishing the versatile leader from the time-server. Good leaders, real artists, are experts. They know the fundamentals of their craft.

Ridgway certainly measures up in this regard. Raised in a military family, a 1917 graduate of West Point, a good student at Fort Benning's Infantry School, Fort Leavenworth's Command and General Staff College and the Army War College, Ridgway spent nine of his first 46 years in military educational establishments. He knew the theory behind his job very well.²

Brubeck reflects a similar pattern. With his mother teaching piano lessons and his older brothers working as music educators, young Brubeck began playing the piano at the age of 4. By the time he was 13, he was playing regularly in public and earning some money, too. He studied classical music at the College of the Pacific in Stockton, California, and also took music theory courses at nearby Mills College. Brubeck learned the details of classical music, a background unusual among many jazz players.³ But Brubeck would be more than a jazzman. He would be an innovator. And it started with knowing the great classics—cold.

Along with a strong grasp of the nuts and bolts of one's chosen profession, it also helps to learn everything you can from those who have already been there. In the Army, we often discuss this under the concept of mentorship, the idea that a more experienced soldier should share the fruit of experiences with younger professionals. A prudent leader seeks such insight.

Ridgway definitely acknowledged the value of such personal contacts. His two great mentors could not have been more different. Lieutenant Colonel George C. Marshall, the reserved tactical mastermind of General John J. Pershing's World War I American Expeditionary Force, first met Ridgway when they served together in the 15th Infantry Regiment in Tientsin, China. Ridgway later attended the Infantry School, and under Marshall's tutelage, he learned the latest in combined arms tactics and combat leadership from a colonel determined to go well beyond "the school solution."



A baby faced James M. Gavin speaking with a news correspondent shortly before his promotion to major general during Operation Market Garden, September 1944.

[Ridgway] did not allow conventional wisdom to stand in his way. The Army grapevine grumbled that James Gavin was too young to command a division and that Maxwell Taylor was too cerebral. Ridgway thought otherwise, and their superb performance as commanders of the 82d and 101st Airborne divisions in 1944 and 1945 proved him right. In his time, Ridgway selected and trained a generation of Army leaders, most thoroughly imbued with their leader's regard for versatility in action.

If Ridgway perfected his infantry skills under the uncompromising eye of Marshall, he gained invaluable exposure to the political aspects of the warrior's role courtesy of Brigadier General Frank McCoy, who asked Ridgway to accompany him to monitor the 1928 Nicaraguan elections. Fluent in Spanish since his Academy days, Ridgway learned much about the interactions of soldiers and diplomats, the doings of guerrilla chieftains such as Augusto Sandino and the usually porous membrane between politics and military affairs.⁴

Many American generals could claim proudly to be "Marshall Men." Only Ridgway had the benefit Of McCoy's unique political-military insights. Coupled with his military course work and inquiring mind, these experiences laid the foundation for later success in very delicate, dangerous political-military situations.

Brubeck, too, sought the wisdom and counsel of mentors. He attended several presentations by Arnold Schoenberg of Austria, a giant of early 20th-century classical music. Working with Schoenberg, Brubeck learned to discipline himself to read and write complex music, to understand melody, harmony and rhythm, the

basic components of musical construction.

At Mills College, Brubeck also had the good fortune to meet and work with a composer who went beyond purely classical music—Darius Milhaud of France, a contemporary of Maurice Ravel and Igor Stravinsky. Milhaud had been so unimpressed by the American jazz movement that he produced some early works of jazz-classical fusion, and he enthusiastically encouraged Brubeck to continue in this relatively uncharted realm of musical experimentation. Schoenberg honed Brubeck's classical, symphonic instincts, but Milhaud showed him how to build on those ideas, to pioneer the uncharted boundaries that had previously separated American jazz and the likes of Beethoven or Brahms. The Frenchman so impressed Brubeck that the American named one of his sons Darius, a tribute to Milhaud.

Just as Ridgway was both a well-educated infantryman and a budding soldier diplomat, so Brubeck saw himself as "a jazz musician who wanted to learn composition."⁵ Both men refused to be dabblers or dilettantes. Rather, they started at square one, learned their respective trades and sought the advice and assistance of sympathetic older professionals to expand

their horizons. There would be plenty of ingenuity to come, but for these two gentlemen, it all arose from a solid bedrock of expertise. Versatility starts here.

Building Great Teams

It is one thing to be a solo performer, a single man or woman out on the wire or ahead of the pack. It is quite another to translate singular excellence to a group, to impart a vision and a style so completely that, after awhile, the body begins to act in concert with its leader. In the Army, we say such an outfit is cohesive and combat-effective. And in today's difficult world, sure to be at least as challenging tomorrow, all our forces must truly "be all that they can be." Again, Ridgway and Brubeck show us the way.

Ridgway's organizations always showed a character much like his own: driving, tenacious and imaginative. He imparted his way of thinking to America's airborne formations in World War II and on the Eighth Army in Korea. Paratroopers grouched that "there's a right way, a wrong way and a Ridgway," but their combat record demonstrated that the "Ridgway" amounted to applying brain power and aggressiveness, not outdated rule books, to wartime challenges.⁶ Units trained and led by Ridgway from the 82d Airborne Division of 1943 and 1944 to the entire Eighth Army in 1951, consistently displayed a high degree of battlefield savvy. All of that started from the top, with Ridgway's example, the chief team builder of them all.

Ridgway left plenty of room for others with character traits as unusual as his own. Indeed, he sought them out and encouraged them. He did not allow conventional wisdom to stand in his way. The Army grapevine grumbled that James Gavin was too young to command a division and that Maxwell Taylor was too cerebral. Ridgway thought otherwise, and their superb performance as commanders of the 82d and 101st Airborne divisions in 1944 and 1945 proved him right. In his time, Ridgway selected and trained a generation of Army leaders, most thoroughly imbued with their leader's regard for versatility in action.

It might seem strange for soldiers to look at Brubeck as a team builder, but jazz by definition builds around the session, the small collection of musicians who experiment, practice and perform together. No composer can accomplish much if a viable session does not come together. Brubeck, as a pianist, followed in the tradition of Jelly Roll Morton and Duke Ellington, and assembled a series of sessions to pursue his interest in introducing classical elements to jazz. Brubeck's more famous bands include his eight-man Jazz Workshop Ensemble (1946- 1949), his trio of 1949-1951 and his quartet of 1951-1967, usually considered to be the

classic Brubeck-inspired session. He has formed others since, including a partnership with sons Darius, Chris and Danny. But always, the bands featured Brubeck's determination to mix in classical melody and harmony with what he termed "rhythmic experimentation."

Brubeck's sessions emphasized teamwork and team learning, as his scores were always heavily influenced by classical forms and thus not easy to learn. Surely a "Brubeck way" existed, and just as the "Ridgway" sought to maximize the diverse talents of others, the jazz composer encouraged the abilities of his fellows. Brubeck stretched all of the old borders and did so deliberately.

He recruited an African-American, the brilliant double-bass, guitarist Eugene Wright, in the middle 1950s, a move that segregationist diehards claimed would ruin Brubeck, then ascending in popularity. Brubeck stood by his fellow musician, even canceling numerous lucrative dates in Southern states rather than work without his bassist. Wright played bass with the session for a decade, including his work on *Take Five*, the first jazz record to sell a million copies.

Most Americans have heard *Take Five*, in many ways the signature Brubeck piece. Yet, in fact, Brubeck did not compose it. The group's superb alto saxophonist, Paul Desmond, actually wrote the music, yet the work is so essentially Brubeck that only a few aficionados know this.⁷ That is the Brubeck style, to pass the lead as jazz players must do, but to pass on his knowledge and perceptions to others, as well. Today's jazz has a lot of Brubeck in it, and that is no accident. The artist saw to it.

The greatest mark of team building is to create an organization that can continue to function without a hitch when the originator moves onward. Both Ridgway and Brubeck accomplished this repeatedly over their careers. Despite their ambition—and both had it, as do most true artists—neither man inflated his own ultimate importance. Both willingly deferred to others when that made sense, "passing the lead," in jazz technology. To those who inflated their own role, Ridgway offered this advice: "When you are beginning to think you're so important, make a fist and stick your arm into a bucket of water up to your wrist. When you take it out, the hole you left is the measure of how much you'll be missed."⁸

Brubeck might have said much the same thing. Our legacy is not what we do today, but what we teach those who follow us, those who will lead our Army into the future. You know, the battalion commanders of 2010 are today's lieutenants. Like Ridgway and Brubeck, we owe them our most candid, consistent coaching. We must pick the best and not let ourselves be bound

by outmoded ways or “the conventional wisdom.” Building tomorrow’s Army, our future team, is already under way. Ridgway and Brubeck offer us some good ideas on how to get this right.

Improvising on a Theme

At some art schools and in sports, one hears talk of “compulsory figures,” the equivalent of blocking and tackling, of mortar crew drill or of basic arithmetic. Interestingly, many prominent people, including some in uniform, never get beyond the school figures, the approved solution. A decade ago, against a relatively predictable foe in a fairly obvious theater, a soldier could get by with that sort of behavior. Today, tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, pat answers and the “way we have always done things” will not cut it.

Both Ridgway and Brubeck proved to be adept at improvising around a basic theme. Ridgway practically invented modern airborne operations out of whole cloth, building on rumors from hostile Germany and small-scale efforts by the British. Marshall trusted him to carry out his ground-breaking airborne campaigns in company with a galaxy of tremendous subordinates, and Ridgway proved eminently suited for this daunting task. His later service as the commander of Eighth Army in Korea electrified a dispirited multinational force, instituting tactics and techniques to address the specific frustrations which marked that difficult conflict.

In some ways even more deserving of credit, Ridgway left the field of battle to assume overall command in the Far East during a critical period in the Korean War. General of the Army Douglas MacArthur had been removed from command, and American soldiers, citizens and political leaders all looked to Ridgway. Did he, too, favor a wider war against Communist China, a World War II-style insistence on total victory? MacArthur had lost his job over this issue. Now Ridgway stepped up to the plate.

The school solution learned at Forts Benning and Leavenworth and practiced in northwest Europe in 1944-1945 would have argued for a drive to victory or withdrawal. But Ridgway understood that nuclear weaponry made such a finish fight impossible, at least without severe damage to America itself. He recognized the need to prosecute a limited war, a fight to be settled at the truce table, not in the hills of Korea and definitely not in Manchuria. Just as important, he knew he had to limit America’s losses in “this kind of war,” in T.R. Fehrenbach’s memorable phrase.⁹

That Ridgway did so reflected well on his broad-mindedness, his willingness to deal with each new reality as he found it. The same general who had once personally stalked German snipers in the Nor-

mandy hedgerows also arranged armistice talks with his ruthless enemies in Korea. It was a different war and a different time. Ridgway knew that. More important, he was conditioned by years of study, thought and practice to respond that way, to improvise on a theme rather than stick to the same old dirge.

Brubeck, of course, epitomizes the concept of improvising on a theme. As you listen to his music, especially various recordings of the same compositions, you hear subtle nuances and distinctions as Brubeck modifies his musical score to match the audience, the skills of his other players and his own continuing exploration of rhythm, melody and harmony. He knows how to compose and he and his partners know how to play—not *what* to compose, and not *what* to play.

This explains Brubeck’s incredible longevity as an entertainer. Working from his classical repertory and his jazz evolutions, Brubeck has been in the public eye since 1933. His works include two ballets, a musical, an oratorio, four cantatas, a mass and countless jazz pieces. He has made the cover of *Time* (1954), participated in great jazz festivals at Monterey (1962 and 1980) and Newport (1958, 1972 and 1981). He and his session played at the White House in 1964 and 1981. These varied marks of public acclaim tell us something. This artist is no flash in the pan. Even a cursory review of musical literature reinforces Brubeck’s distinctive place in our culture.¹⁰

He earned every bit of his reputation, the same way as Ridgway earned his—by improvising on a theme. The world has changed tremendously since he began playing during the Great Depression, but Brubeck has had the perception to stay current, to adapt, to pay attention to his surroundings. He never does the same thing twice, because situations are never quite the same—yet, his work always displays his own unmistakable style.

Many people think that improvising in the Brubeck way simply means doing something different, whatever that something may be. But a closer look at the examples of Ridgway and Brubeck suggest otherwise. Uneducated improvisation, trying things on a whim, represents gambling, shooting in the dark, which is not wise when American lives are involved. Like all real professionals and genuine artists, soldiers must have the discipline to build on a theme, to work from the known to the unknown. As we improvise solutions in our operations around the world, our goal is constant—not merely to do something, but to do the right thing.

Leaders for a Learning Organization

The Ridgway and Brubeck stories remind us of what can spring from the diverse richness of the Amer-

ican people, an ever-fresh well of vitality, ingenuity and boundless enthusiasm. While Ridgway clearly reflects that part of our populace which serves the Republic in uniform, we should note that Brubeck also answered his country's call as a soldier in 1944. He and his band played in Europe, no doubt entertaining some of Ridgway's paratroopers and glider forces in the process.¹¹ Both have worn Army green, and they and the men and women like them tell us much about the quality of the citizens who served in our ranks in the past, those who serve now and those who will join our Army in the days to come. We have a lot of great talent in America's Army.

Ridgway and Brubeck, of course, are exceptional personalities, historic figures of some prominence. At least in that respect, they are far different from most of us who carry out our duties without any particular public notice, let alone fanfare. While we can rightly attribute part of the pair's performance to the workings of individual chemistries, we should also be clear about some of the things that make them so outstanding among this century's Americans.

Absolute expertise in professional matters, commitment to team building and a preference to improvise based on known concepts—the general and the composer share these three traits. As Margaret J. Wheatley points out, America's Army is a learning organization, "rich in connections and relationships that make it possible to *know* what it knows."¹² Ridgway and Brubeck showed that degree of situational awareness; they developed it over years of study and effort. They

understood themselves, their professions and the world around them. Equally important, they knew how to translate those insights into positive action.

When you think about it, that is what Army leaders strive to do every day as they meet the challenges of our volatile world. Without doubt, we are already making great strides in creating a leadership climate that nurtures organizational and personal growth. When we sent American soldiers into Kurdistan in 1991 and when we deployed the 10th Mountain Division into Somalia in 1992, we asked them to function in very ambiguous, dangerous and difficult environments. Our leaders in these operations, and many others, reinvented their forces to meet changing situations. We call that "tailoring" or "task-organizing based on METT-T (mission, enemy, troops, terrain and weather, and time available)." It is a fundamental aspect of our current professional education.

That kind of approach would be very familiar to Ridgway or Brubeck. It reflects the Army's institutional, doctrinal manifestation of versatility. Our Army teaches this concept in our schools, practices it in our training centers and encourages it in our leader development process. We are working to inculcate versatility, endeavoring to infuse all of our men and women, all potential leaders, with the characteristics that made Ridgway and Brubeck so effective. Their examples light the way to our 21st-century force, an Army characterized by a commitment to learning leadership, with a premium on operational versatility and the improvisational genius that defines our military equivalent of jazz artistry. **MR**

NOTES

1. US Army Field Manual 100-5, *Operations* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 14 June 1993), 2.
2. Clay Blair, *Ridgway's Paratroopers: The American Airborne in World War II* (Garden City, NY: The Dial Press, 1985), 4.
3. George T. Simon, et al., *The Best of the Music Makers: From Acuff to Ellington to Sinatra to Zappa and 279 More of the Most Popular Performers of the Last Fifty Years* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co. Inc., 1979), 91-92.
4. GEN Matthew B. Ridgway with Harold H. Martin, *Soldier: The Memoirs of Matthew B. Ridgway* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), 35-38.
5. Stanley Sadie, editor, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London: MacMillan Publishers; Washington, DC: Grove's Dictionaries of Music, 1980), 20 vols., Volume 3: *Bolliud-Mermet to Castro*, 349; Volume 12: *Mearns to Mutis*, 305-6; Volume 16: *Riegel to Schusterleck*, 701-6, cover Brubeck, Milhaud and Schoenberg, respectively.
6. Blair, 5.
7. Gunter Schuller, *Early Jazz* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1968), 134-35.
8. Blair, 6.
9. T.R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War: A Study in Unpreparedness* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1963), 419. On 439, Fehrenbach pays this tribute: "No man who saw Lieutenant General Matt Ridgway in operation doubts the sometime greatness of men."
10. W. Wiley Hitchcock and Stanley Sadie, *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1986), Volume 1: A-D, 313-14.
11. *Ibid.*, 313.
12. Margaret J. Wheatley, "Can the US Army Become a Learning Organization?" *Journal for Quality and Participation* (March 1994), 3.

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