Humility

The Inconspicuous Quality of a Master of War

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Henry Knox, the first U.S. secretary of war, once declared, "Officers can never act with confidence until they are masters of their profession."[1] What, then, constitutes mastery? The broad public often references the ten-thousand-hour rule as its understanding of mastery.[2] Yet, others have asserted that mastery is "a function of time and intense focus applied to a particular field of knowledge," in which "the time that leads to mastery is dependent on the intensity of our focus."[3] Whichever description is closer to reality, it seems the underlying theme includes both experience and learning.

What happens, though, when a particular field cannot be learned? In the game of chess, for example, each player abides by a certain set of rules. If the rules changed every time the game was played, could a chess grandmaster continue to achieve mastery? What if the rules changed


Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, supreme Allied commander, Allied Expeditionary Force, intently watches an Allied landing operation 7 June 1944 from the deck of a warship in the English Channel off the coast of France. (Photo courtesy of the Department of Defense/National Archives)

without that player's knowledge? One could argue that there are specific learned skills that a chess grandmaster would possess, making him or her more suitable to adapt to change.[4] Yet, it is almost inevitable that there will be characteristics of change that will be unaccounted for in each player's strategy. Where there are numerous dynamic and adaptive components, such uncertainties exist in complex systems and war.[5] According to the Cynefin Framework, which aims to categorize circumstances to aid in decision-making, war exists in the complex domain as it is ever-evolving and continues to be shaped by factors outside the battlefield.[6] As Carl von Clausewitz noted, "War is the realm of uncertainty; three-quarters of the factors on which action in war is based are wrapped in a fog of greater or lesser uncertainty."[7] Concerning war, no amount of experience can make one a master as the characteristics of warfare change too frequently throughout

the ages and are often influenced by technology and other revolutions in military affairs.[8] One can only hope to mitigate such uncertainties by recognizing that one's knowledge is limited. It is not surprising that the Army holds the quality of a leader's character in such high regard, and it recently added humility as one of its defining attributes.[9] A leader's ability to acknowledge his or her limitations, learn and adapt, and seek others' input and feedback are vital attributes to driving the organizational change needed to succeed in tomorrow's ever-evolving wars.[10] Only through adequate self-awareness and humility can a leader best combat the uncertainties of war by leveraging collective team experience to build mastery, being flexible and prepared for uncertainty, and truly understanding the enemy.

The Team: Leveraging Collective Experience to Build Mastery

War is both violent and unpredictable.[11] It is, therefore, unlikely that any single individual can understand all the intricacies associated with it. Regardless of hours of experience, it
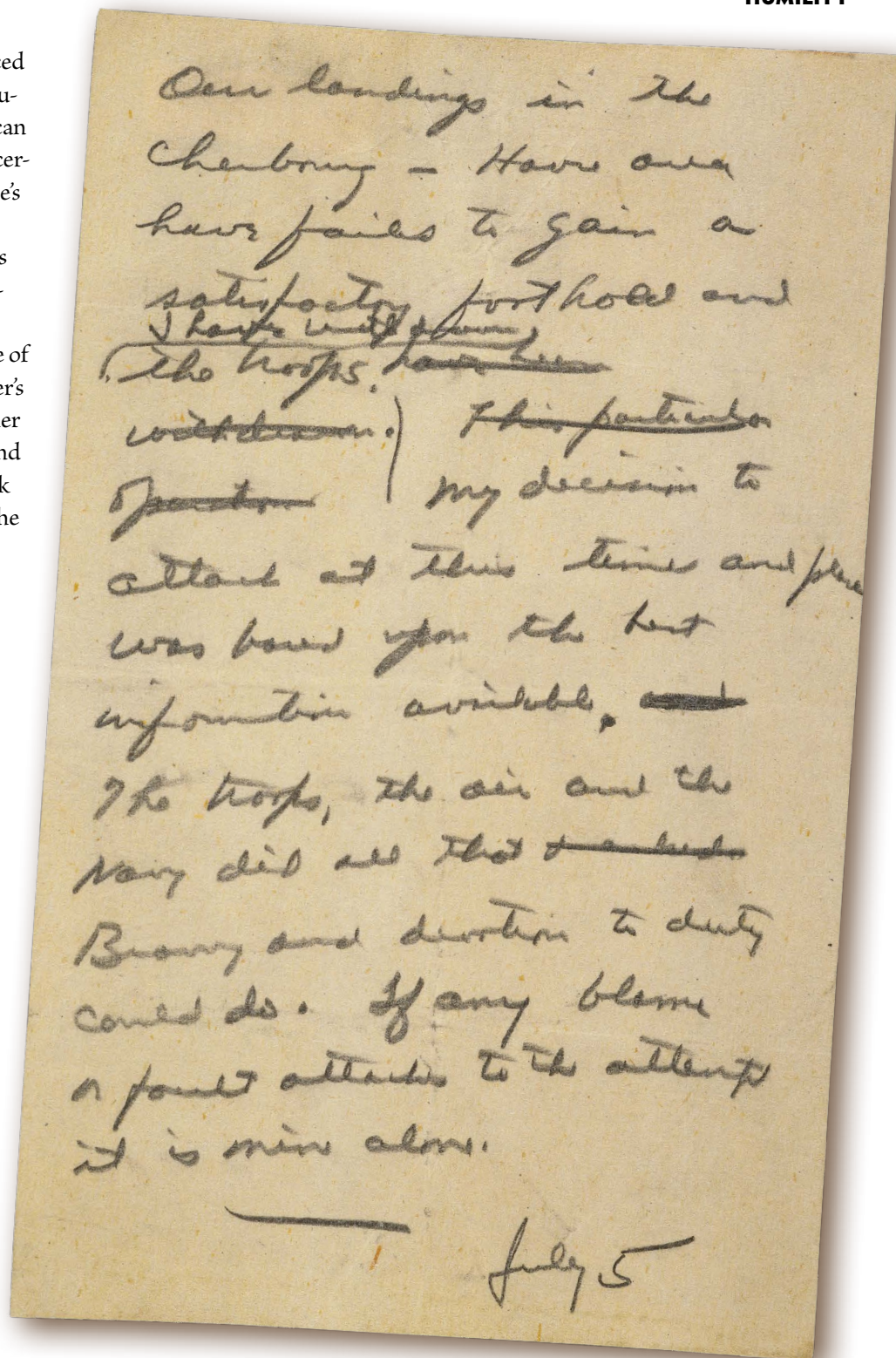
Humility among great commanders has commonly been manifest in a willingness to accept responsibility for the consequences of their actions. "In Case of Failure" was a message for public release drafted by Gen. Dwight Eisenhower 5 June 1944 in case the D-Day invasion was to fail. The message read, "Our landings in the Cherbourg-Havre area have failed to gain a satisfactory foothold and I have withdrawn the troops. My decision to attack at this time and place was based upon 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." (Photo courtesy of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum/National Archives)

Create
a sense of urgency

Build
a guiding coalition

Form
a strategic vision
and initiatives

Enlist
a volunteer army

Enable
action by removing
barriers

Generate
short-term wins

Sustain
acceleration

Institute
change

(Figure based on John P. Kotter's *Leading Change*, 1996; graphic elements courtesy of Freepik, www. freepik.com)

Figure. Kotter's Eight-Step Process for Leading Change

is implausible for one to master war alone. A good leader, thus, must understand his or her limitations and continuously "seek out others' input and feedback," especially in dynamic environments.[12] According to the book *Good to Great*, these leaders who possess the right levels of humility and professional will are the most effective.[13] These are the leaders who can leverage collective team experience to build mastery, essentially adding hours of expertise in various fields of knowledge or the missing puzzle piece that each individual brings. For this to work, however, a leader must first build a reliable team. To leverage collective team experience, a leader must develop a team, create and share a vision, and generate and maintain momentum.

To have all the necessary pieces to the puzzle, a leader must put considerable thought into the team's development. This is analogous to the second step in John P. Kotter's eight-step model for organizational change (see figure). According to Kotter, a leadership professor at Harvard University, organizations often fail after establishing a sense of urgency for change because they do not develop a strong enough guiding coalition.[14] While it is important to motivate an organization toward a specific goal, it is equally important to build a team to help drive the organization into action. Today, commanders use staffs with specialized functions to help interpret pertinent information about the battlefield as it relates to specific knowledge areas. For example, a commander relies heavily on his or her intelligence officers to provide accurate information about enemy capabilities, locations, and expected actions. Only through the integration of these various staff members can a commander better understand the operational environment, as each staff member often represents a different warfighting function. Still, there will always exist some level of ambiguity on the battlefield; therefore, it is imperative that leaders carefully consider their staff members' strengths and weaknesses when building a guiding coalition.

Next, leaders must create and share a vision for the future. This process is representative of steps three and four in Kotter's model.[15] In war, it is impossible for the commander to be at all places at all times; therefore, it is critical that subordinate leaders can make intelligent decisions in the absence of guidance. By providing both command intent and a vision of the end state, commanders can help ensure subordinate leaders perform actions that align with the overall goal. According to Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 5-0, *The Operations Process*, "Commanders are the most important participants in the operations process," and they are ultimately responsible to "drive the operations process through understanding, visualizing, describing, directing, leading, and assessing operations."[16]

Last, to capitalize on collective team experience, a leader must generate and maintain momentum. In war, much success can be attributed to chance; however, great leaders improve their odds by surrounding themselves by smart people and listening to them. Great leaders are ambitious, capitalize on gains, and use momentum to build esprit de corps and future progress. This process is similar to steps six through eight in Kotter's model.[17] After removing obstacles for the team, leaders must generate and reward short-term wins, build on momentum to generate more success,

and solidify gains by instilling change in the organization's culture.[18] Jim Collins, the author of the book *Good to Great*, would call this turning the flywheel. While progress initially requires much effort and time, a continuous effort in the same direction, together with gains that build upon gains will yield a gradual accumulation of momentum that will drive compounding results.[19]

The Plan: Being Flexible and Prepared for Uncertainty

Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower once said, "Plans are worthless, but planning is everything."[20] As much in war is uncertain, the true value of planning is not in the plan itself; rather, it is in the process leading up to the plan, as the information gathered during this time is invaluable to generating both flexibility and future contingency planning efforts. In war, rarely is a single plan sufficient alone as war exists in a fluid environment and will continue to be influenced by enemy actions. It is, therefore, imperative that planners maintain both flexibility and accurate self-understanding.[21] Through the utilization of mission command, contingency planning, and proper risk management, military leaders can best achieve the flexibility and preparedness to succeed in the uncertainties of war.

To achieve flexibility, military leaders should strive for decentralized execution. According to ADP 6-0, *Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces*, "Mission command is the Army's approach to command and control that empowers subordinate decision making and decentralized execution appropriate to the situation."[22] It is impossible for the commander to be present at all operations, so the commander must have trust that his or her subordinate leaders can exercise disciplined initiative and accept prudent risk in the absence of orders.[23] Mission command is indispensable in dynamic environments as it allows subordinate leaders the flexibility to make battlefield decisions within the commander's intent. With the decentralized execution, the guidance focuses on *what to accomplish* rather than the specifics of *how to accomplish a task*. Thus, it affords subordinate leaders the ability to determine the best method of *how to accomplish a task* based on the current operational environment. As Gen. George S. Patton said, "Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity."[24] As war situations are quick to change, it is best for flexibility to allow subordinate leaders to decide how to accomplish a task as they often have the most current battlefield information.

Another way to achieve flexibility is through the use of contingency plans. According to Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Planning*, "Many plans require adjustment beyond the initial stages of the operation. Consequently, joint force commanders build flexibility into plans by developing branches and sequels to preserve freedom of action in rapidly changing conditions."[25] During execution, for example, if the enemy or environment alters the original plan, leaders should be prepared to execute a branch plan, which identifies alternative actions based on potential circumstances.[26] Additionally, leaders should have several sequels prepared at the conclusion of a plan, which identify various future operations that differ depending on the outcome of the current plan.[27] By possessing humility and planning for failure, leaders can ensure maximum flexibility should failure occur. While most contingency plans will never require execution, it only takes one that successfully mitigates tremendous risk to be worth the effort. Again, this illustrates that the true value of planning is in the process and not the plan itself.

Lastly, when creating contingency plans and preparing for uncertainty, leaders must assess risk and build mitigations that are commensurate with severity and probability of occurrence. According to ADP 5-0, "Risk—the exposure of someone or something valued to danger, harm, or loss—is inherent in all operations."[28] Therefore, proper risk management is necessary for all planning efforts and is vital in preparing for uncertainty.

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Risk is identified during mission analysis and can be mitigated by either reducing the likelihood of occurrence or the cost of occurrence.[29] Often, leaders can use tools such as risk matrices to aid decision-making by providing weighted values to risks based on severity, probability of occurrence, and command priorities. Despite even

history, planners can think critically about the enemy and past conflicts and make inferences about the future, which allows them to realistically train for coming battles through live exercises and wargames.

War is often no less a game of chance than cards. While even the most professional card players may

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the best risk mitigations, however, residual risk and the occasional Black Swan will continue to exist in wartime operations as war is a complex endeavor.[30] Therefore, as prescribed by the just war framework, war should only be considered as a last resort, as risks often outweigh potential benefits.[31] If war must occur, however, leaders must acknowledge their shortcomings and subsequently apply proper risk management.

The Opponent: Understanding Your Enemy

Finally, when planning an operation, it is important to remember that the enemy has a vote. While the right level of humility allows leaders to maintain accurate self-understanding, leaders must also learn to understand their enemy to the same degree as they understand themselves. As Sun Tzu describes in *The Art of War*, "Know the enemy and know yourself; in one hundred battles you will never be in peril."[32] Without an accurate understanding of both self and the enemy, the risk of miscalculation in war increases significantly. Of course, one cannot fully know one's enemy until one confronts the enemy. Therefore, staffs must turn to intelligence-gathering methods and the study of military history to gain information about the enemy. Still, there are inconceivable aspects of war during planning as war is a paradoxical trinity comprised of chance, reason, and emotion.[33] Short of physically confronting the enemy, the next best way to comprehend war's chance and emotional aspects is by applying planning analysis to an adaptive opponent in a live military exercise or wargame. Thus, through intelligence collection and the study of military

precisely calculate odds against an opponent, and subsequently apply the most suitable risk mitigations, a fog of war exists with the turning of the next card.[34] Intelligence-gathering is then akin to learning some of the cards an opponent holds or learning of a particular opponent's tell. For example, an opponent on the battlefield may tip his or her hand by moving his or her artillery into a friendly asset range. Information about the capabilities the enemy holds, such as ranges of weapons and the locations of such systems on the battlefield, may help to forecast the enemy's next move. Therefore, it is imperative that staffs utilize all available intelligence-gathering methods to conduct a thorough and continual analysis of enemy capabilities, locations, and historical actions to inform the current plan.

The next step is to understand how this information can inform future operations. With advances in technology, military leaders can expect future conflicts to have deadlier weapons and occur across multiple domains. As precision strikes and increased lethality of conventional munitions were revolutions in military affairs that changed warfare, future weapons will likely have equal or greater range and lethality.[35] With future threats potentially now capable of ranging friendly assets, our strategic posture could change. Additionally, leaders must not discount the possibility of a coming digital war as digital and cyber capabilities continue to grow worldwide.

Last, to truly understand all these possible enemy scenarios, leaders must make several plans for each set of circumstances and test the best of them against an adaptive opponent through wargames or live military exercises. With today's advances in computing,

military planners can simulate certain aspects of war rather effectively. This allows commanders to test new strategies without actual risk, and it reduces the costs of fuel and other resources. Additionally, in the combat training centers, units can also test tactics against a live opponent, experimenting with both historical and novel tactics to see if chance plays any role.

Conclusion

Like many complex endeavors, war is exceedingly involved and difficult to master alone. It is ever-adapting, and it continues to be shaped by factors outside the battlefield.[36] Regardless of experience, uncertainty in war will always endure. Thus, leaders must attempt to mitigate such uncertainty by acknowledging their lack of expertise and by fostering team planning efforts; hence, adding hours of experience to various fields of knowledge and the missing puzzle piece that each team member brings. Only through adequate self-awareness and humility can a leader fully leverage this experience and understand these three things: the team, the plan, and the opponent. A leader's ability to acknowledge his or her limitations, learn and adapt, and seek others' input and feedback are essential attributes to driving the organizational change needed to succeed in tomorrow's rapidly evolving wars.[37] ∎

Notes

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