

# Classical Methods of Influence Applied to Contemporary Military Leadership



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*The key to successful leadership is influence, not authority.*  
—Kenneth Blanchard

Army leadership is defined as “the activity of influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation to accomplish the mission and improve the organization.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, think of an individual’s ability to influence as dependent upon his or her skill at either articulating or exemplifying purpose, direction, and motivation. In this way, the leader’s ability to influence becomes the independent variable that acts upon the three later dependent variables of subordinate purpose, direction, and motivation. And yet, how does one improve the ability to influence others?

Numerous scholars have leveraged various lenses while exploring this point of inquiry. For example, Gerald Sewell asserts that those leaders who

leverage emotional intelligence and empathy are better equipped to intuit how team members will both receive and interpret tailored messages.<sup>2</sup> These types of leaders directly influence others primarily through empathy. Conversely, Col. Joseph Escandon focuses on gaining and maintaining an exceptional unit culture that champions “trust, cohesion, and teamwork.”<sup>3</sup> In this way, leaders influence indirectly by building a culture in which team members feel comfortable operating. Both Sewell and Escandon’s modern theories have provided valuable insight into the present point of inquiry. However, their ideas reside squarely in the realm of modern theory. This article proposes an altogether different approach.

I argue modern military leaders can significantly augment their ability to influence others by returning to the ideas expressed in classical Greek and Roman philosophy. Ancient texts such as Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and Marcus Aurelius’s *Meditations* both contain methods of direct or indirect influence that contemporary military leaders can and should put into practice. Consequently, this article aims to summarize these classical techniques and explain how direct and organizational leaders can use them to provide clear and concise purpose, direction, and motivation.



Aristotle (Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)



*Pericles as Orator Addressing the Athenian Assembly*, by Philipp von Foltz, 1852. (Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

## Aristotelian Rhetoric

First, consider how Aristotle differentiates among ethos, pathos, and logos while discussing the art of direct rhetorical persuasion.<sup>4</sup> Ethos denotes a method of influence that originates in individuals of recognized expertise. Pathos refers to influencing individuals through tailored emotional statements crafted to evoke a compelling response. Lastly, logos leverages logic and rationality to illustrate the inevitability of the orator's argument; or a complete proof. In classical times, orators such as Pericles would travel to the Agora and give an oration in the hopes of influencing the minds of the audience. These speakers would leverage all three methods of influence (ethos, pathos, and logos) in an attempt to sway listeners.

Those who leverage ethos undergird their message with the weight of their own credibility. For example,

Michael Halloran interprets ethos as “what we might call the argument from authority, the argument that says in effect, ‘believe me because I am the sort of person whose word you can believe.’”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, ethos would be used by orators in classical Greece who embodied the polis's most prized moral values whether courage, cunning, or liberality. Furthermore, the orator's audience would be more likely to be swayed by their arguments if the orator had a reputation of expertise in the subject under discussion. In this way, perceived expertise, authority, and credibility all augment a leader's ability to exude ethos while attempting to steer the minds of large bodies of citizens.

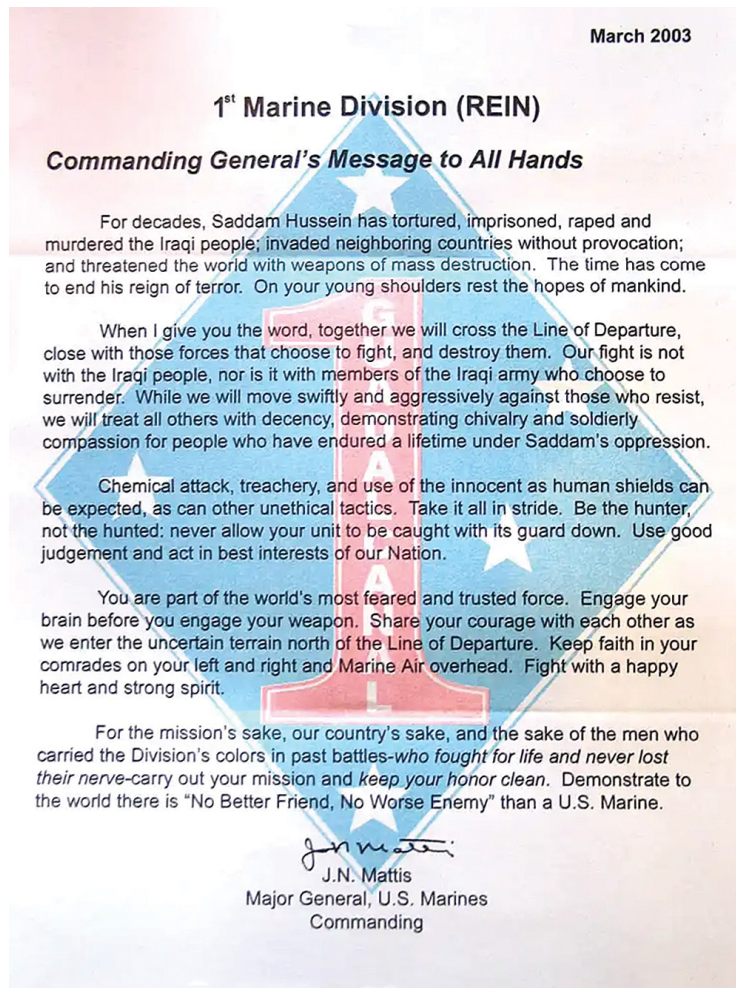
Numerous historical examples illustrate how leaders successfully enact ethos. For example, in 1940, during World War II, Winston Churchill asserted,



We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.<sup>6</sup>

From the British population's perspective, the credibility of this message was magnified because Churchill had gained a reputation as a staunch opponent of appeasement. For example, even when Churchill failed to win a seat in the Commons during the interwar years, he still critiqued those who wished to appease the burgeoning Nazi threat. Essentially, Churchill was cultivating an ethos of dogged determination in the face of overwhelming odds. Consequently, this reputation lent credibility to Churchill's words when he gave his "we shall fight on the beaches" speech.

Keeping these sentiments in mind, contemporary leaders of warfighters must first gain credibility in whatever warfighting function they hope to lead. Relevant experience must be accrued, hardship must be suffered, and adversity must be overcome before leaders at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels



(Image from Michael Velenti, "The Mattis Way of War: An Examination of Operational Art in Task Force 58 and 1st Marine Division," Art of War Paper [Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College Press, 2014])

**Figure 1. 1st Marine Division Commanding General's Message to All Hands**

can exude ethos in their everyday interactions. The actions and words of contemporary military leaders at all echelons will only be taken seriously if those they lead know that the leader retains authoritative expertise. Consequently, leaders of warfighters must seek to continuously build their capacity for projecting ethos.

Second, pathos refers to the skill of tailoring arguments to evoke emotional responses in the audience. Spectators become influenced after the orator has correctly intuited a value statement that the audience finds compelling. For example, Sara Rubinelli suggests that "emotional appeals can influence the persua-

siveness of speeches because they touch upon aspects that influence human decision-making."<sup>7</sup> In this way, emotional appeals become the fulcrum that enables the leader to influence the audience. Consider the March 2003 "1st Marine Division Commanding General's Message to All Hands," as depicted in figure 1, and as penned by James Mattis before the invasion of Iraq.

Mattis expertly makes use of pathos while seeking to steel his Marines for seemingly imminent armed conflict. For example, as figure 2 portrays, he opens with "Saddam Hussein has tortured, imprisoned, raped, and murdered the Iraqi people; invaded neighboring countries without provocation; and threatened the world with weapons of mass destruction. The time has



Lt. Gen. James N. Mattis, commanding general of 1st Marine Division, speaks to marines of Regimental Combat Team 7 on 20 February 2003 at Camp Ripper, Kuwait, during Operation Enduring Freedom. (Photo by Lance Cpl. Kevin C. Quihuis Jr., U.S. Marine Corps)

come to end his reign of terror. On your young shoulders rest the hopes of mankind.”<sup>8</sup> These words evoke justified anger in the audience that can envision itself as a force for good seeking to undermine a dangerous despot. Furthermore, the 1st Marine Division will fight longer and endure more because they move into armed conflict believing that they are supporting the hopes of mankind. In this way, Mattis has woven pathos and emotionally charged rhetoric into his message while preparing his marines for war.

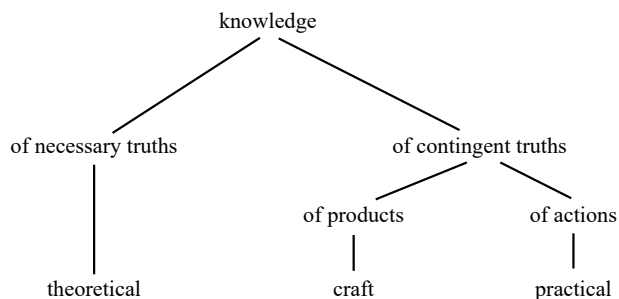
However, to be an effective purveyor of pathos, contemporary leaders must understand the emotional levers within those warfighters they are charged with leading. Once this understanding has been achieved, then leaders can tie purpose, direction, and motivation to the emotional centers of their formations.

Consider further how, at its core, armed conflict has always remained “a human endeavor.”<sup>9</sup> Formations at all echelons are built by human individuals who all retain individual emotional responses, decision-making processes, and value systems. Therefore, the leader is

responsible for crafting a message that galvanizes the entire formation toward one shared emotional feeling. In his book *War as an Inner Experience*, Ernst Jünger refers to this shared emotional feeling as *eros*, or the unified spirit common to all warfighters.<sup>10</sup> Jünger’s memoirs are full of illustrations that depict formations of combat power entering into and sharing common emotional experiences. Therefore, the aim of effective pathos in public oratory is to harness the potential common sense of purpose rooted in shared emotions. For this reason, contemporary leaders of warfighters would do well to recognize this fact and incorporate it into their daily interactions.

Lastly, *logos* leverages theoretical or observable logic, reasoning, and fact patterns to bolster the validity of an argument. Therefore, audiences are influenced by the overwhelming facts that an orator brings to bear in his or her rhetoric. For example, Thomas Johansen uses figure 2 to articulate how three types of logical knowledge (*logos*) can be interwoven into an orator’s argument to influence those who are listening.





(Figure from Thomas Johansen, "Aristotle on the 'Logos' of the Craftsman," *Phronesis* [2017])

**Figure 2. Logos Map**

Johansen distinguishes among theoretical (absolute truths), craft (what can be made), and practical (what can be done) knowledge while arguing that all three contribute to "the reasoning which works with desire to bring about an action."<sup>11</sup> Consequently, an orator uses these three types of reasoning to merge the audience's potential future action with his or her desires. Essentially, logos drives action through logic.

Perhaps the best example of logos within the strategic military context can be found within think tank organizations such as RAND Corporation or the Center for Strategic and International Studies. These types of organizations are adept at leveraging logic to influence policy decision-makers toward specific outcomes. For example, RAND's latest report, titled *U.S. Military Theories of Victory for a War with the People's Republic Of China*, combines all three types of logical knowledge while advocating for specific defense policy decisions revolving around the defense of Taiwan.<sup>12</sup> From a theoretical perspective, the report assumes that China will continue to seek to dominate Taiwan, resulting in a potential "conflict breaking out across the Taiwan Strait."<sup>13</sup> From a craft perspective, the authors compare American and Chinese military platforms that could rapidly be brought to bear in the event of a conflict within the Taiwan Strait. And lastly, from a practical perspective, the authors envision five separate variants of U.S. victory labeled dominance, denial, devaluing, brinkmanship, and cost imposition.<sup>14</sup> These five variants are potential routes the United States could take in the event a conflict over Taiwan unfolds. In this way, the report leverages all three modes of logos.

This same use of logos can be distilled down to the tactical and operational levels. Therefore, contemporary military leaders should make a deliberate effort to communicate logic, reasoning, and fact patterns to formations that hunger for purpose, direction, and motivation. After all, as Leonard Wong suggests, an all-volunteer force consisting of a professional well-educated population will want to understand why they are fighting.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, commanders who provide "the why" by blending logical reasoning into their orders are more likely to gain and maintain the trust of those they lead.

## Marcus Aurelius and Team Membership

Marcus Aurelius offers an altogether different approach from leaders who seek to directly influence through the spoken or written word. Writing as an emperor in ancient Rome from 161 AD to 180 AD, Aurelius favored leaders who were cognizant that they were only a small portion of the greater whole (*μελος*) while simultaneously seeking to constantly improve their own sense of virtue. In this way, organizational leaders could apply indirect influence on followers who recognized they were being led by an enlightened individual who has the interests of the whole ahead of the interests of the self.

Consider his thoughts on membership in a team. Aurelius declares "as several members in one body united, so are reasonable creatures in a body divided and dispersed, all made and prepared for one common operation ... I am a *μελος*, or a member of the mass."<sup>16</sup> Therefore, each member, no matter how affluent or powerful, is only a part of the whole, a smaller mechanism in the larger machine, a subordinate portion to the overarching organism. For Aurelius, leaders at all echelons must exercise moderation while dutifully acting out the role he or she has been assigned. Those who are unable to internalize this reality fall into prideful conceit and begin to subsequently act against the interests of the larger body.



Marcus Aurelius (Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

Different cultures throughout time have referred to this fall using a variety of words. For example, Anglo-Saxon *ofermōde* denotes overweening pride in oneself.<sup>17</sup> Ancient Greek recognized it as *ὑβρις*, or what contemporary listeners would interpret as hubris.<sup>18</sup> They all denote the antithesis of Aurelius's argument. Therefore, this is what contemporary military leaders must avoid if they wish to remain an influential portion of the greater whole. However, how does the idea of *μελος* translate into contemporary reality within the military sphere of influence?

Predictably, obtaining knowledge of Army doctrine offers an excellent route for those seeking to define a sense of purpose within the greater organization. Manuals such as Field Manual 3-96, *Brigade Combat Team*, and Field Manual 3-94, *Armies, Corps, and Division Operations*, offer large overarching models of Army organizations complete with duty position descriptions. Therefore, one could argue that officers who digest these manuals are better prepared to articulate how their team's individual efforts support those at higher echelons.

Furthermore, obtaining wisdom from those who have gone before can also be helpful in further clarifying one's own role in relation to the greater whole. For example, Jocko Willink and Leif Babin comment on the importance of checking one's ego while interacting with both subordinates and superiors. They state, "Ego clouds and disrupts everything ... ego can prevent a leader from conducting an honest, realistic assessment of his or her own performance and the performance of the team."<sup>19</sup> This statement is a modern manifestation of Aurelius's comments on *μελος*. Outsized egos block a leader's ability to correctly determine his or her role while interacting with subordinates and superiors alike. Therefore, modern military leaders must seek to maintain control over their egos while making decisions that affect their own team as well as the teams at echelons above and below them. In this way, they can more faithfully fulfill the function that has been assigned to them.

Likewise, Viktor Frankl's philosophy on meaning also reverberates the Aurelius *μελος* concept. For example, after suffering in four separate concentration camps during 1942 to 1945, Frankl came to believe meaning is "an unintended side-effect of one's dedication to a cause greater than oneself or ... the byproduct of one's surrender to a person other than oneself."<sup>20</sup> Again, one

sees the importance of willingly serving a greater cause. Therefore, for Frankl, purpose, direction, and motivation manifest themselves when an individual's efforts are aligned toward something other than self-interest.

Keeping these sentiments in mind, modern military leaders must strive to embody the *μελος* principle. Among other tasks, formations of combat power exist to shape, seize, or pursue. These tasks always serve a greater purpose within a larger scheme of maneuver. Effective leaders can successfully check their own ego while articulating how the current task at hand supports the efforts of the next higher formation. In this way, purpose, direction, and motivation are drawn from aligning current efforts with a higher commander's desired end state.

## Conclusion

Often, leadership is discussed using modern theories and rhetoric. However, as this article has shown, classical ideas can have an outsized effect on how current leaders can motivate adjacent team members. Aristotelian rhetoric offers a powerful device rooted in persuasive speech that provides the necessary influence to move the minds of warfighters. Ethos, pathos, and logos all contribute to generating meaning for those who are tasked with armed conflict. Leaders should strive to present an absolute proof to team members who are asked to operate with expertise during times of war. There can be no doubt as to how their actions support a universally held desired end state. This idea represents the article's direct form of leadership.

Conversely, Aurelius's *μελος* principle acts as an indirect form of leadership. Knowing one's place and fulfilling one's role in the greater whole is critical in a hierarchical organization such as the U.S. military. Tasks must be nested, main efforts must be supported, and egos must remain out of the way when making decisions that can affect thousands of lives.

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Therefore, to know one's place within the overarching scheme of maneuver and be able to explain that position to adjacent teammates is incredibly important when generating purpose, direction, and motivation. For all of the above-mentioned reasons, officers who

truly wish to improve their critical and creative thinking skills should engage with the ideas of Aristotle and Marcus Aurelius.<sup>21</sup> Yes, their texts may be old, but their classical thoughts on the role of influence still hold excellent value for the modern military leader. ■

## Notes

**Epigraph.** Shannon Haymond, "Enhance Your Leadership Through Influence," *Journal of Applied Laboratory Medicine* 1, no. 5 (March 2017): 598, <https://doi.org/10.1373/jalm.2016.021873>.

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10. Ernst Jünger, *War as an Inner Experience*, trans. Kasey James Elliot (Berlin: E. S. Mittler and Son, 1922), 32.

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