

Letter from the Editor in Chief

Read like Your Life and the Lives of Your Soldiers Depend upon It

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As spring quickly approaches and New Year's resolutions fall by the wayside, an important resolution leaders should make each year and strive to fulfill is to set ambitious goals for professional reading. As busy as life can get, it is critical that military professionals remain consistently devoted to a personal professional development plan. We should read as if our lives and the lives of our soldiers depend upon it.

For those with ambitions to join the general officer ranks, consider that military elites should exhibit an exceptionally strong and wide-ranging intellect that demonstrates a grasp of international relations, geography, and history, as well as a sophisticated understanding and comprehension of military doctrine, alliance relationships, national politics, bureaucratic politics, the interagency process, military-industrial relationships, leadership, culture, and current events. Senior leaders should understand the roles and responsibilities of the military services, service chiefs, combatant commands, and the joint staff. Although the Army's professional military education system may offer curriculum and electives that survey these topics, it is incumbent upon leaders to build personal depth through expanded professional reading.

It is clear that development of great leaders requires personal commitment, dedication, and sacrifice beyond mere residential attendance to professional military education programs. As rigorous as military curriculum

may be, however, it is still meant to create a baseline of skill and talent. Meeting the graduation requirements of a military school is expected, if not foreordained. Dr. Elliot Cohen, a highly respected academic, provides an excoriating critique of the military's education of potential strategic leaders, describing the war colleges as a "necessary tick mark" for potential flag officers with programs of study that are "virtually impossible to flunk out." He argues that "being selected for attendance is more important" than academic performance. And in a bow to the anti-intellectualism of many in the military, Cohen points out that attending military and civilian schools is often chided as "taking a knee," making others carry the burden of combat deployments, and potentially hobbling career progression.

In contrast, throughout history, the world's greatest philosophers, generals, and leaders have stressed the critical importance of developing warrior-scholars who possess the knowledge required to lead, fight, and win wars. Like the "Great Man Theory" of leadership, the legends of great military generals often speak of the personal devotion to study and professional development they undertook to prepare themselves to lead when destiny called. With near-superhuman devotion, they burned the midnight oil. After long days of physical exertion and training in the field, these heroic figures sacrificed countless hours to the monkish study of their adversary and the theory and practice of war. Gen. James Mattis famously stated, "If you

haven't read hundreds of books, you are functionally illiterate, and you will be incompetent, because your personal experiences alone aren't broad enough to sustain you." The message is clear: Whether a lieutenant or a general, countless assignments in tactical line units and combat experience are not enough to prepare leaders for the complex challenges of operational and strategic leadership.

In an interview with a recently retired U.S. Army four-star general and former combatant commander, the general stated that all the military professional development and education he received focused on preparing him to be a good division commander. Beyond division command, he felt ill-prepared to navigate his three- and four-star assignments. His message was that the U.S. Army develops the best brigade- and division-level commanders in the world. But are they prepared for the next level? In this general officer's opinion, the answer was "no."

A conversation with a former Training and Doctrine (TRADOC) commander provided further enlightenment. He described how one of the most dramatic steps in an Army officer's career is being promoted to general officer rank. Newly minted one-star generals have "done an exceptionally good job in their career to this level but just find it very difficult when they pin on a star because up until this point, they've been doing a lot of things that they've been doing all along, just on a larger scale." However, the transition to flag officer ranks requires a higher level of intellectual engagement, a quality that is not gained by merely scrolling through headlines on news feeds and social media.

The former TRADOC commander emphasized, "Some officers just aren't intellectually prepared to make the transition. ... We promote maybe forty out of 4,000. In that group of forty, you'll have maybe one or two [who] are capable and intellectually equipped to think and perform at the strategic level. You may not have any. And not every great division commander is meant to be promoted either. They just don't necessarily see the world strategically. ... We still

promote GOs to four stars that are 'frozen in time' as great brigade commanders."

Another senior executive officer weighed in to the conversation, opining that because brigadiers now have a star, they think they are the one. Their ambition outweighs and overshadows their capability. As a former chief of staff of the Army noted, the Army tends "to develop leaders more in the context of 'what to think,' not 'how to think.' We train leaders to think in a linear fashion, not holistically, and it hurts our flag officers when they reach three- and four-star level."

To ensure we maintain an intellectual edge and guard against shallow leadership and hollow intellectualism, we cannot be satis-

fied with educational programs that meet minimum requirements of academic rigor. The challenge of developing strategic leaders for the twenty-first century, however, does not rest solely on the military institution. As professionals, we have a personal responsibility to meet the intellectual demands of the future operational environment. If we truly believe that people are our biggest asset and soldiers are our most lethal weapons system, we have a personal duty to achieve cognitive superiority over our adversary. Meeting these obligations requires reading above and beyond the requirements of any military schoolhouse.

No doubt, personal preparation for leadership and conflict at all levels takes the form of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual fitness. The Army's system of training, education, and professional development, as good as it is, must be augmented by personally driven, individual development and initiative. For many, this translates into a personal and professional reading program that should be as religiously followed as our morning physical fitness regimen. It can begin with the simple survey of the Army chief of staff's recommended reading list or the Army University Press website. Our books and materials are free, downloadable, or can be shipped to you at no personal cost. However you design your personal professional development plan, reading must be a foundational element. Read like your life depends on it! ■



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