

Mavericks, Mavens, and Mentors

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Leaders must shelter those challenging nonconformists and mavericks who make institutions uncomfortable ... that's your job. If you're uncomfortable dealing with intellectual ambushes from your own ranks, it'll be a heck of a lot worse when the enemy does it to you.

—Gen. James Mattis, *Call Sign Chaos*

If anecdotal evidence carries any weight, the U.S. Army may be nearing an inflection point related to how the public views it as well as how it perceives itself. This inflection point may be caused, to an extent, by the institutional loss of the ability to have honest, open, professional dialogue on important issues for fear of negative career and political fallout. However, there are important conversations that are happening behind closed doors, at the proverbial kitchen table, and on alternative platforms about public, politically and emotionally charged challenges related to recruiting as well as the increasing population of leaders opting out of command assignments.

Across the United States, public opinion of the U.S. military is falling in unprecedented decline. Internal to the Army institution, career paths and command positions, once indoctrinated into young leaders as the sine qua non of leadership, are being increasingly rejected. A common thread to these conversations is that there seems to be a growing encroachment on a “safe space” for the Army’s mavericks, mavens, and mentors to flourish.

I use the term “safe space” as a nod to what I believe is a growing movement of “magical realism” in our Army, and more generally, in our society. Magical realism is a literary term describing the use of imaginary elements or qualities woven into a real world. Magical realism blends elements of fantasy, “alternative facts,” and imagination with real life in an attempt to reveal, critique, and challenge our beliefs, much like a critical theory.

A consequence of this dynamic is a decay of objective truth, as described by a 2018 RAND Corporation study, *Understanding the Threat of Truth Decay*.



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According to the study, “truth decay” is caused by four overlapping trends. First, the study suggests that there are increasing differences in how individuals interpret objective facts. Second, there is an increasing conflation of fact and opinion in public discourse, particularly in partisan media outlets, wherein opinion and experiential knowledge masquerade as fact. Third, there is an exponential increase in the quantity of purported authorities of opinion versus fact, many with accessible and popular online platforms. Finally, there is diminishing faith in traditional authorities and sources of reliable, accurate information.

For the Army to fight truth decay, we must pay attention to objective facts, separate from our opinions, and we need to revisit what it means to be a maverick, maven, or mentor, and we must shelter and nurture their development and critical thinking within our profession.

Mavericks

Ask yourself these questions. Having come out of two decades of war, who are our mavericks today? Who are our independent thinkers? What is the status of our professional ethos? Who among our senior leaders are truly mavericks of the sort that drive real innovation and positive, meaningful change? Are there so few because our organizational culture expects or demands *too much* conformity?

Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines mavericks as unbranded range animals, like motherless calves. In the military, however, they are individuals that march to the beat of their own drum. They are the ones that do not always go along with the crowd. They stand out as critical thinkers. They possess a bit of genius and uncommon cognitive complexity. They can add a dose of truth, fact, or reality to a conversation that can sometimes cause friction, hurt feelings, or awkward discomfort; they “ruffle feathers.” They are a bit unorthodox. They are sometimes a lone voice of dissent. They are willing to “buck the system” for a cause in which they believe. They are willing to “fall on their sword” on principle.

I argue that there are few mavericks in the senior leader ranks. The system is structured to weed them out. Senior leaders rose to rank on merit for the first twenty years of their career, but merit plays much less of a role in career progression and promotion post-battalion leadership. Thus, mavericks tend to be identified at the midcareer, field-grade level, and hints of nonconformity can quickly trigger labels of “too outspoken” or “not a team player.” There is little to no room for those that “rock the boat” within flag-level ranks.

An argument could be made that today's mavericks are weeding themselves out voluntarily. They are “voting with their feet,” as we sometimes say. Their individual message is invisibly embedded in the growing numbers of junior and midcareer leaders opting out of key developmental leadership positions required for career progression. On a much wider scale, there is a correlation between trends in how the public views the military and the Army's inability to reach recruitment goals. The Army's recruitment and retention numbers are now a very public institutional concern. Observers may differ as to the reasons, but the outcome is the same, and the Army has a problem.

Mavens

Mavens are tactical experts on a particular subject or domain of subjects like doctrinal terms and references, supply management, or the military decision-making process. Some may consider them to be wonks, nerds, or freakish savants on a particular subject like weapons in the U.S. arsenal, or airborne operations, or how to perform preventive maintenance checks and services on every motorized vehicle in the motor pool. I do not think it includes the ability to quote every line of the movies *The Princess Bride* or *Dr. Strangelove*, or to understand the “airspeed velocity of an unladen swallow.”

Regardless, these maven-leaders are subject-matter experts. They can endlessly debate the definition of language in a mission statement based on current and legacy doctrine. They know and can recite the military capabilities of adversaries around the globe. They possess this knowledge and take pride in their “maven-ness” because they are passionate about what they do.

Like mavericks, mavens are a critical part of any large organization. They are sought-after members of a team because they are specialists, not generalists. They are interested in the language and details of a mission because language and details in military planning matter. They are often found in the bowels of a command headquarters, in the staff cubicles crunching numbers, taking care of administrative requirements for the command, deconflicting unit training calendars and resource requests, or writing the enemy estimate for an upcoming training event or mission. They are often taken for granted by leadership, overworked and underappreciated, always in pursuit of someone else's priorities.

Yet, mavens are a vanishing breed of tactical military leader because they are a vanishing character in American society. In an era of social media and “swipe left” mentality, scholars are finding that Americans, including those of us serving in uniform, no longer possess the ability to focus on details. We have shorter attention spans. We are vulnerable to distortions of truth. We are intolerant of complexity and diversity of thought. We no longer hold coherent beliefs. Everyone's opinion, no matter how ill-informed, matters. Idiocy can no longer be confronted, no matter how detrimental or damaging. For the

military, it can mean a greater focus on the operational art versus military science.

Mentors

How many mentorship programs across the Army have started, with great intention and fanfare, only to fail and wither away? Although the Army has sponsored multiple institutional-wide mentorship programs over the years, and has a regulation governing mentors and the mentorship process in Army Regulation 600-100, *Army Profession and Leadership Policy*, the dynamic of mentorship must be organic. It cannot be directed or mandated, or it would be doomed to fail. Rather, a mentor relationship is a grassroots, individual-to-individual relationship that starts by establishing trust, honest communication, accountability, and a demonstration of loyalty and respect.

Mentors often become and act as sponsors and advocates for junior leaders. They help younger, less-experienced leaders with career decisions, understanding assignment options, and how to navigate a bureaucracy and institution that can be intimidating and impersonal. Mentors invest in younger leaders, help them up the proverbial ladder, developing and coaching them over the course of an assignment, a career, or a lifetime.

Healthy mentorship relationships between senior and junior officers, however, is endangered in my opinion. Rather than individual relationships built on trust and meaningful communication, we increasingly try to communicate with the masses over social media with humor and cleverness. We carefully monitor our “views,” “likes,” “retweets,” and “reposts.” And, although social media and online platforms offer important, even critical, outlets for conversation and dialogue, they are missing an imperative component of interpersonal relationships—accountability. We snipe at and troll each other, sometimes deservedly, but we do it anonymously, behind a shroud of technology, a keyboard, and a catchy screen name.

Senior leaders that interact over social media do so with real personal and professional risk. Sometimes they may be on target with how they communicate over a tweet or online post. One wrong tweet or post, however, can negatively impact a career. In contrast, junior leaders may think interacting with senior leaders over online platforms is meaningful. A reply by a senior leader can excitingly signal that “I am being heard.”

Both parties may think that real communication is occurring. But I would argue, it is an empty exchange, a flash of interaction, devoid of a real relationship.

So Why Do We Have So Few Mavericks, Mavens, and Mentors?

Out of necessity, the Army is an institution made up mostly of conformist followers. While we may be hypercompetitive, ambitious, and value leadership, we mostly tend toward conformity and followership. In general, scholarship finds that our military community possesses shared beliefs and principles. We continually validate our culture by who we advance and promote—those that look and act like us. We share a common ethos within our military profession. We demonstrate internal cohesion and trust. We often see the world and our environment in a similar way. We follow orders. We follow our superior officers. We rarely deviate. We teach and train doctrine. Our professional military education teaches us what to think, not how to think. And, in our profession, particularly at the tactical level, these qualities can save lives.

Mavericks can stereotypically seem dangerous and brash. They challenge the status quo. They do not always conform. They do not necessarily want to be like the crowd. While some military officers talk about leading change, it is often only for change’s sake. This dynamic is often caused by short assignments wherein we are driven to show progress and improvement on a limited time horizon. In contrast, mavericks take action that may appear to “go against the grain” and may not be in alignment with a commander’s vision.

Mavens can seem weird and possess their own stereotype. They are often exceptionally smart, focused, intelligent, and maybe goofy and socially awkward. They are not the cool kids. They do not lead an Instagram life. They may not be active on social media with a cool screen name, capable of pithy comment, sarcasm, or cynical retort. They are not always the fastest runner or most athletic. They may not cut the perfect picture in a uniform. But they are often the intellectual workhorse. They are purpose-driven. They have focus. They are the ones to whom everyone comes to copy their homework.

True mentors are few and far between because our military culture does not do a good job of rewarding developmental leadership. We reward the good leaders

that get things done in the short-term, drive change, meet the commander's intent, and accomplish the mission. This means spending less time meaningfully developing leaders and making long-term improvements to an organization. As an institution, we can sometimes tend to reward the risk-averse leaders that are comfortable with maintaining status-quo—the caretakers. We do not necessarily reward great leaders that know how to build an organization from the ground up, establish long-term goals and objectives, create buy-in to an organizational vision and mission, and accept prudent risk for long-term reward.

So, when we see junior leaders express frustration as they confront the dueling contradictions of magical realism insinuating itself in society or the Army, and the realities of the military and our organizational culture, we need to stop and talk to them. But we must be authentic. Be honest. Show emotion. Admit mistakes. Tell embarrassing stories about your own failures

and insecurities. Share—in fact, *overshare*—your own personal experiences navigating an Army career.

Share anecdotes of when you were confused, insecure, frustrated, and discouraged by the Army and the challenges of a military career. Share the pain of a divorce. Share the regret of missing milestones and events in your children's lives. Then, take time to share the reasons that you persevered. Nurture relationships that have mutual accountability. Do not be surprised by or chastise a young leader that may not think, act, look, or want to be like you.

Are you a follower and conformist? Are you a maverick? Are you a maven? Do you possess the insight, empathy, and characteristics that would be valuable as a mentor to young leaders? If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, how can you use that trait to strengthen your unit? Your army? And, how do we get back to honest dialogue and conversation? ■

Military Review invites your attention to “Ignoring Failure: General DePuy and the Dangers of Interwar Escapism”



A tank of the North Vietnamese army flies the National Liberation Front flag 30 April 1975 at the Presidential Palace in Saigon, capital of South Vietnam. The fall of Saigon to communist forces marked the end of the Vietnam War. (Photo by Alamy)

Ignoring Failure General DePuy and the Dangers of Interwar Escapism

Eric Michael Burke, PhD

Some of the most dramatic consequences in war arise from the faulty calibration of an army's preparations, strategy, and tactics with the political and strategic particularities of a specific mission or foe. As Carl von Clausewitz famously warned, the

“first, the supreme, the most decisive act of judgment” for any senior leader is to accurately assess the evolving political nature and strategic character of a war, “not to take it for something, or wish to make of it something, which by the nature of its relations it is impossible for it

In this January-February 2023 *Military Review* article, Dr. Eric Burke offers a contrarian view asserting that many senior Army leaders of the 1970s and 1980s misinterpreted and promulgated the wrong lessons derived from the Vietnam War and the 1973 Yom Kippur War between Israel and Egypt. The lessons learned during the war in Vietnam provided the Army with an opportunity to seek mitigating solutions to its obvious shortfalls in anticipation of future conflicts involving modern ideological and insurgent warfare. Instead, however, the Army embraced an ossified and stovepiped approach to the nature of modern warfare that left it inflexible and unprepared for the great challenges of the twenty-first century that it would later face.

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